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## Violence and Gender in Duffy's "Queen Herod"

*Queen Herod* is taken from Duffy's *The World's Wife*, a collection which inverts gender roles to celebrate female characters and display the injustice of men's generalizations. This poem inverts the gender roles in the biblical story of the arrival of the Magi for Jesus's birth and the Massacre of the Innocents ordered by King Herod. Through this transposition, Duffy presents the men's atrocities originally, but then indicates that women can also act forcefully and compellingly to fight for strong beliefs.

Duffy displays women as cunning and deceptive as they hold a quiet agenda against men, and uses the generalization against men to demonstrate the injustice of the original stories. In the poem, the "Three Queens" arrive to see Queen Herod's daughter and give her qualities rather than material gifts—"Grace...Strength...Happiness." These capitalized abstract nouns are juxtaposed with the seemingly useless and disregarded material ("Silver and gold, the loose change") given to Jesus, referring to the gold, frankincense, and myrrh given in the Bible story. Duffy thus suggests that while men only desire limited material gifts, women desire useful, perennial qualities. Moreover, in *Queen Herod* the asyndeton of "with gifts...in exchange for sunken baths, curtained beds, fruit, the best of meat and wine, dancers, music, talk," leaving "till bitter dawn" mimetically at the end, connotes the extent of pleasure just for the Queen as the men were "fast asleep" and the great length of time she enjoyed her activities without being disturbed by the men. While "bitter dawn" could suggest how early into the morning she stays awake, it more likely suggests that she enjoys the time spent without men; when Herod and his men wake up, suddenly the day becomes "bitter" and the Queen must become violent and terse to deal with them. This change further emphasized by the arching of the stanza, mimetic of the night, as the night peaks with the longer "in exchange for sunken baths, curtained beds," without Herod, and returns to the tiresome day with the more blunt "those vivid three -/til bitter dawn" when Herod awakens.

The cunning evil of women is contrasted with the senseless brutality of men to highlight an image of females. The italicized list of antithetical nouns as direct speech from the Three Queens—"The Husband. Hero. Hunk. The Boy Next Door. The Paramour"—suggests that Queen Herod does not know the baby's future and accepts that he could be beneficial; however, to be entirely sure her daughter will not be harmed, she orders the death of "each mother's son." This command denotes the barbarism women can inflict for protection to reinforce that violence is not owned by men. Moreover, the juxtaposition of the harsh diction and sibilance of the men's actions in "hawked, spat, snatched the smoky jug" with the majesty of the women in "I watched each...Queen rise like a god," emphasizes the contrast of the disgusting men, compared to divinity through the simile, as the women become the dominant

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force over the pathetic actions of the men. This theme is reinforced in *Medusa* by the repetition of first person pronouns —“my...I”— with the recurrent use of synonymous verbs such as “hissed and spat” to imply that the women can be possessive and commanding.

Furthermore, Duffy ensures that the female characters are more intelligent than the men. The tautology of “They knew what they knew” emphasizes instinctual knowledge, as if this repetition is specific to the Queens, and hence implies that they hold a more reliable, absolutist intelligence. Also, the strong diction of “A peacock screamed,” in which a symbol of majesty is in pain, followed by the metaphor “The chattering stars shivered in a nervous sky,” suggests that the Three Queens can read the signs of nature, as omens for the massacre to come. This interpretation is supported by the simile “a new star pierced through the night like a nail,” referring to the prophecy of Jesus’ death by being nailed to a cross. These elements of the text reinforce the celebration of the female characters as possessing a knowledge beyond that of the male characters, as Queen Herod then uses her information to commit widespread terror by infanticide.

Duffy also presents the women in the poem as celebrating a strong female community, one posed against subservient men. The repetition of the imperatives “Do it. Spare not one” emphasizes the terse and total power of the Queen as she commands the entirely obedient men. This contrasts with the situation in *Salome*, however: while in the latter poem it is made clear that the woman actively killed the man —“I’d done it before”— to challenge the notion that such physical and violent actions are ‘masculine,’ in *Queen Herod*, Duffy highlights her feminist agenda by making the female character stand above the misogynist stereotypes and simply order the men to do what she demands. This supremacy is further illustrated in the repetition of first person pronouns —“my little child...my baby”— as it could suggest Queen Herod appears to own the child herself and doesn’t value the relationship with Herod and the daughter. Alternatively, it could imply that Herod actively does not care about his daughter and hence facilitates emotional disgust with the male character. This female-oriented theme is equally implied when it is the woman who orders the death of the sons. It seems that Queen Herod actively cares for the future of her daughter as “Herod’s fusty bulk” exists in passive contrast, emphasized by the horrific diction of “We waded through blood for our sleeping girls,” reinforcing the extent of what they are willing to go through to protect their family; the anaphora in “we Queens, we mothers” emphasizes a community of women in which men do not govern happiness.

However, Duffy does present Queen Herod as feeling guilty for her violent orders. The poem is a dramatic monologue written in free verse, which could imply that it is a flurry of the Queen’s conscience as she realizes that she had no reason for the infanticide and begins to confess. Here, “the chattering stars/shivered in a nervous sky” could be a metaphor to highlight the guilt and timidity of the Queen as she now cowers in the night. The pinched, staccato lines “Ice in

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the trees,” “my little child” and “The black Queen” nonetheless highlight a dark identity for the Queen as she commits these atrocious acts, and one feels pathos for the patriarch Herod as he appears to be able to do nothing to stop her. Duffy could suggest that in fact violence shouldn’t be owned by anyone, and the stereotype that women are gentle is not negative at all.

Duffy challenges the misogynist stereotypes taught in children’s stories and, by inverting the gender roles, suggests that when we reevaluate the events, we realize that we must still strive for an equal society. This inversion allows not simply for women to acknowledge that change must occur. When men who become defensive at the men’s subservience question Duffy’s poetry, they realize that the original texts unjustly make women subservient. As innocent and accepted the stories are on the surface, “beyond our lullabies, the hooves of terrible horses thunder and drum.”

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