

Research Article

Received: 25/02/2024; Accepted: 29/05/2026; Published: 30/06/2026

**Myth, semiotics and ideology:
Carol Ann Duffy's "from Mrs Tiresias" and "Medusa"**

Zümürüt Altındağ^a

^a English Language and Literature Major, Department of Western Languages and Literatures, Faculty of Arts
and Sciences, Kocaeli University, Izmit, Turkey

zumrutaltindag@gmail.com

Abstract

In light of the semiological decoding of myth proposed by Roland Barthes (1991) in *Mythologies*, this study explores Duffy's reduction of myth into systems of signification in the poems "from Mrs Tiresias" and "Medusa," published in *The World's Wife* (1999). By employing the Barthesian theories on myth as "semiological systems," this study offers qualitative research on Duffy's participation in the second wave feminist project of rewriting the patriarchal myths (Barthes, 1991). The study is based on both a content and semiotic analysis of these poems and demonstrates how Duffy reverses the chain of signification and discloses the alliance between ideology and phallogocentric discourse in the construction of myth that marginalises and oppresses women. Hence, based on the data inherent in "from Mrs Tiresias" and "Medusa," this research displays the ways poetry, semiotics, and ideology intersect and concludes that by deconstructing and reversing the chain of signification in rewriting these classical myths Duffy sets her oppressed woman speakers free.

Keywords: Carol Ann Duffy; rewriting myth; discourse; contemporary British women poets

1. Introduction

Many modernist poets treated myth as the logos and regarded the revival of myth as the miraculous remedy to the trauma of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. T. S. Eliot (1975) in his reflection on James Joyce's *Ulysses*, "Ulysses, Order, and Myth," celebrates myth as the unifying element, the transcendental signified, of the fragmented western world. However, in the contemporary poststructuralist world, the central role that Eliot attributes to myth is under attack. One of the major challenges to it is introduced by Roland Barthes (1991), who in his *Mythologies*, declares myth as a semiological system conveying ideological messages. Moreover, feminist critics, many women poets and writers reject the redemptive function of myth and problematise its alliance with the phallogocentric discourse. They regard myth as one of the numerous mechanisms that the masculinized mainstream literary tradition has invented to rationalise the subordination of women.

As Christa Knellwolf (2001: 197) in "The History of Feminist Criticism," observes, second wave feminist writers developed a subversive approach to the study of literature: "a revisionist engagement with literary history, a revision of aesthetic standards and a radical critique of the representation of gender roles as part of a larger critique of cultural self-definition". Rewriting myths is one of the fundamental dimensions of this "revisionist" project (Knellwolf, 2001: 197). The British poet and

playwright, Carol Ann Duffy (1999), with her poems in *The World's Wife*, is among the most ardent participants of this revolutionary endeavour, who aspires to liberate women from the ignominious dualistic representations in the Western literary and cultural history. Thus, considering Barthesian theory on myth, the paper studies two of Duffy's poems, "from Mrs Tiresias" and "Medusa," and explores the ways the poet reduces myth into a type of signification, which not only allows her to undermine their inherent phallogocentric messages, but also to create subversive female subjectivity.

2. Methods

This research utilises a qualitative approach based on Barthes's deconstruction of myths as well as a semiotic and thematic analysis of Duffy's subversive rewriting of myths in "from Mrs Tiresias" and "Medusa." By offering a close reading of the rewritten myths this study indicates the manner Duffy reverses the signification chains in the construction of the patriarchal myths and displays how ideology and phallogocentric discourse command language and woman's subjectivity. The research employs Barthesian semiological techniques and provides insight into Duffy's deconstruction of myth and the subversive mechanisms of rewriting that liberates her oppressed speakers.

2.1. Roland Barthes and Myth

One of the major contributions of Roland Barthes (1991: 107) to the deconstruction of myth as the logos is its reconceptualisation as "a type of speech" that is a kind of "language" that calls for "special conditions". Elaborating on Saussurean signification regarding the sign, the signifier, and the signified, he declares that myth operates as "two semiological systems": "the linguistic system" and "the mythical system" (Barthes, 1991: 113, 115). Fundamental to Barthesian theory on myth is the transformation of the linguistic structure into a mythical one since "the sign ... in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second" one (Barthes, 1991: 113):

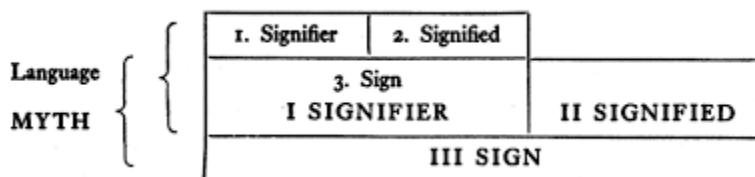


Figure 1. The Semiological System of Myth (Barthes, 1991)

To avoid confusion and to differentiate between these two signification chains in both systems, Barthes names the sign in the linguistic system as "meaning," which at the same time functions as the signifier in the "mythical system" and is called "form" (1991: 115). In the same manner, he uses the terms "concept" and "signification" for the mythical signified and sign, respectively (Barthes, 1991: 115, 113). Consequently, this is how in Barthesian theory, myth emerges as a "metalanguage" that is "a second language, in which one speaks about the first" (Barthes, 1991: 114).

The reformulation of myth as a linguistic structure allows Barthes (1991) to expose its bond with ideology and the dynamics of the historical era that led to its construction. According to Barthes, myth is "a type of speech chosen by history" and since "human history" operates through the conversion of "reality into speech," it has the ability to change "history into nature" (108, 128). Problematising myth's relationship with reality and truth, Barthes elaborates on its contractedness and maintains that myth "cannot possibly evolve from the "nature" of things" but it rather functions through the "deformation" of "meaning" in the "second-order semiological system" (108, 121, 113). Because in the mythmaking process, the linguistic sign, "meaning" is changed into the mythical signifier, "form," myth is characterized as "a language-robbery" (Barthes, 1991: 115, 131). Using its power to narrow down its

materials “to a pure signifying function,” myth conveys a particular ideological message rather than truth (Barthes, 1991: 113). Barthes manifests how myth, as the product of a particular historical background, is actually “a system of communication ... a message,” which has the ability “to pass from semiology to ideology” in order to serve “the interests of a definite society” (107, 128). Since in the in “the second-order semiological system”, “the form is always there to outdistance the meaning,” myth manifest itself as “a perpetual alibi” at the service of a particular ideology (Barthes, 1991: 113, 122). Consequently, myth emerges as “a value” rather than having the motivation to convey truth (Barthes, 1991: 122).

3. Discussion

3.1. *Carol Ann Duffy and the subversion of mythical signification*

With *The World's Wife*, Carol Ann Duffy (1999) is what Barthes (1991) calls as “the reader of myths” who is determined to “reveal their essential function” as part of their goal to transform reality and consolidate patriarchal ideological messages (128). As a remarkable decoder of myth, Duffy is highly conscious of the fact that myth represents a system of values, elaborates on the double nature of the “form” and treats “myth as a story at once true and unreal” (Barthes, 1991: 115, 127). Reflecting the special role Barthes attributes to poetry in the deconstruction of myth, in her poems, with her subversive treatment of language Duffy successfully “transform[s] the sign back into meaning” so that “not the meaning of words, but the meaning of things themselves” could be recovered and the constructed nature of myth could be disclosed (132-133). According to Broom (2006), in *Contemporary British and Irish Poetry: An Introduction*, the poems in *The World's Wife* give expression to the oppression and the desires of women who are associated with men popular in “history, mythology or fiction” (90). Like what Barthes proposes, by unravelling the semiological chains in the construction of myth, Duffy concentrates on the “linguistic system” to expose how myth distorts reality and has been employed as an indispensable tool at the command of phallogocentric discourse (113). She problematises the ways phallogocentrism has been passing myth for “a factual system” and demanding “the myth-consumer” to accept “the signification for a system of facts” (Barthes, 1991: 130). As Veronica House (2014) in *Medea's Chorus: Myth and Women's Poetry Since 1950*, observers for centuries myth has remained a phallogocentric domain because starting with the classical Greek poetry, “men who wrote mythological poetry fought to keep mythic production out of female hands and wielded a powerful exclusionary rhetoric that denied women a place in the creation and transmission of mythological poetry” (xvi). Demonstrating the consciousness that rewriting myths is beyond “rewriting old stories,” Duffy in her poems not only calls for a “cultural transformation,” but also questions “latent assumptions and drives modern culture to venture into new psychological landscapes” regarding the representation of women and their subjectivity (House, 2014: xvi).

3.2. *“from Mrs Tiresias”*

In “from Mrs Tiresias,” Carol Ann Duffy offers a radical rewriting of the ancient myth about Tiresias, a figure that occupies a significant position in the masculinised mainstream western literary canon. Following the example of Yeats and Joyce, in *The Waste Land*, Eliot (1975) employs “the mythical method,” as an alternative to the “narrative method,” to achieve a dialogue with the literary tradition and to establish a “continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity” (178). He argues that “the mythical method” is the right “way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (Eliot, 1975: 177). Therefore, in “The Fire Sermon,” he explores the logocentric function attributed to “the mythical method” by portraying Tiresias as the central motif that unifies his fragmentary modernist epic:

Tiresias, although a mere spectator and not indeed a “character,” is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest. Just as the one-eyed merchant, seller of currants, melts into the Phoenician Sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples, so all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias. What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem. The whole passage from Ovid is of great anthropological interest. (Eliot, 2001: 23)

According to the story in Ovid’s (1958) *Metamorphoses*, because of his crime against the coupling snakes, for seven years, Tiresias was turned into a woman, an act accrediting his position as the wise judge knowing how both women and men feel during the sexual act. Via allusions to Tiresias’s life as a woman, in the poem Eliot claims that all the women characters merge into a single woman. Hence, by foregrounding the wisdom attributed to Tiresias, Eliot aims to overcome the duality between man and woman and eventually to create a logos which aids him in his endeavour to merge all the crumbling pieces in his work and restore coherence to the western epistemology. However, a closer reading of both *The Waste Land* and the function attributed to the myth reveals that Eliot cannot go beyond the boundaries of the phallogocentric discourse. In addition to failing to recognize the distinction between sex and gender and their constructed nature, by employing such a totalizing frame, Eliot ignores the plurality of the female subjectivity for he confines its discussion to the perception of a man, who was actually cursed to be a woman for a relatively limited period of time. As a result, the poem concretizes the will among the modernist poets to consolidate “the male as intellectually superior to the female and as the only suitable audience for the intellectual discussion of classicism” (House, 2014: xix).

“from Mrs Tiresias” is a radical answer to all members of the mainstream literature and patriarchal myth makers that claim to offer true representations of women. It also echoes the premises of écriture feminism and *Hélène Cixous’s* (1976) call to women writers in “The Laugh of the Medusa” to “[w]rite your self. Your body must be heard” (880). Being inspired by the body, “from Mrs Tiresias” is the outburst of the “immense resources of [her] unconscious” and offers a revolutionary recounting of Tiresias’s metamorphosis into a woman through the eyes of his wife, a process which actually triggers Mrs Tiresias’s awakening to her true subjectivity (Cixous, 1976: 880). As pointed out by Kinnahan (2009) in “Contemporary British Women Poets and the Lyric Subject,” the poem demonstrates the poet’s “deliberated and self-conscious” innovations she introduces to the dramatic monologue to express the creation of Mrs Tiresias’s emancipation from phallogocentric constraints (194). To allow the reader to penetrate into the realms of Mrs Tiresias’s unconscious, Duffy experiments with both language and form. Exploring the potentials of free verse, she plays with lineation and stanza structure, makes abrupt transitions between the events, uses enjambment and a highly fragmentary syntax. The poem also challenges phallogocentrism by disrupting its causality and linearity by employing several anachronistic motifs that transform Tiresias from a figure that lived in the antiquity into a contemporary man who wears “a jacket in Harris tweet,” is a correspondent of “*The Times*” and appears “on TV” (8, 12, 67).

Carol Ann Duffy treats myth as “a type of speech” and challenges the way the linguistic structure evolves into a “mythical system” (Barthes, 1991: 107, 113). Like what Barthes proposes, while deciphering the myth, Duffy rewrites it so that both “the linguistic system” and the *second-order semiological system* could be decoded (113). In “from Mrs Tiresias,” the deconstruction of myth into semiological structures indicates that in the “linguistic system,” Tiresias as the sign signifies a man who spent seven years of his life as a woman (Barthes, 1991: 113). However, in the “mythical system” Tiresias as the “*meaning*,” is transformed into the “*form*” in the “*second-order semiological system*” and evolves into the mythical “*signification*” that signifies wisdom and is presented as an authority on

men's and women's desires (Barthes, 1991: 115, 113). Such a semiological treatment of myth both reveals its bond with patriarchal ideology and indicates how, in Barthesian terms, through the distortion of reality, history metamorphoses into nature. Consequently, as manifested in *The Waste Land*, in the masculinized literary canon, Tiresias as the mythical sign is revered for his wisdom, is endowed with the gift of foresight and can pass judgment on how both men and women feel during a sexual act.

Challenging the way the "mythical system" distorts "meaning" and changes history, in the poem Duffy problematizes the treatment of semiological values as truth values (Barthes, 1991: 113, 115). She displays an awareness of the "ambiguous signification" regarding the double nature of Tiresias in both the "linguistic system" and the "mythical system" as "sing" - "meaning" and "signifier" - "form" (Barthes, 1991: 127, 115). Therefore, she begins her poem with the "meaning": Tiresias is a human being, who was transformed into a woman (Barthes, 1991: 115). Rejecting the "mythical system" as "unreal," Duffy explores the potential of the linguistic signification and elaborates on the complexities such sex and gender shift introduces into the lives of Mrs Tiresias and her husband: "All I know is this: / he went out for his walk a man / and came home female" (Barthes, 1991: 113, 127; 1-3). Waiting for his return, as "he was late getting back," Mrs Tiresias, was "brushing [her] hair at the mirror / and running a bath" when she sees a strange image: "a face / swam into view next to [her] own" (24, 25-26, 27-29). Despite the fact that "[t]he eyes were the same," when she sees the "shocking V of the shirt were breasts" and hears "[her] name in woman's voice" she faints: "I passed out" (30, 31, 32).

As a Barthesian reader of myth, Duffy focuses on the "linguistic system" and uses Tiresias as its sign to question the ways mythical "signification" distorts reality and truth in order to convey messages that consolidate phallogocentric discourse (Barthes, 1991: 113, 115). Reflecting Cixous's (2010) critique of phallogocentrism in "Sorties," the mythical Tiresias has been one of the central figures indicating how "hierarchization subjects the entire conceptual organization to man" (230). Despite being victimized by the wicked female deity Juno (Hera), who blinds him for revealing the secret that women enjoy sex more than men, Tiresias is favoured by the male god, Jove (Zeus), who offers him "the gift of prophecy, an honour / That made the darkness of his doom much lighter" (Ovid, 1958, 74). As it is suggested by Cixous (2010) the myth privileges man, Tiresias, in the hierarchy, by identifying him with "activity" while condemning women into "passivity" and indicating that "[h]istory has never produced, recorded anything but": "Phallogocentrism" (230, 234). The poem, however, opens with the rejection of the identification of Tiresias with "activity," signifying logos, mind and wisdom and attacks patriarchal dualism and phallogocentric history (Cixous, 2010, 230). Because it focuses on the linguistic system, it both negates and mocks such divinely inspired insight and as it is implied by the title, relates the story from Mrs Tiresias's perspective. Tiresias's claims for foretelling the future, "[h]e liked to hear / the first cuckoo of spring / then to write to *The Times*," are undermined with the idea that there is nothing prophetic about it as Mrs Tiresias would often hear "it / days before him / but never let on" (10-12; 13-15). The poem attacks the identification of wisdom with a man, who because of his seven-year female experience could be the spokesperson for all women. After breaking up with his wife, Tiresias ironically represents himself as the authority figure, who appears "on TV" and enlightens "the women out there / how, as a woman himself / he knew how we felt" (67-70). Quite in parallel with Barthesian theory, the poem illustrates the distortion of meaning during the process of myth construction and the alliance between myth and ideology. The linguistic "meaning," Tiresias as human being, who was changed into a woman, "is always there to present the form" that conveys the phallogocentric message about the supremacy of the patriarchal Tiresias, the wise figure capable of philosophising on how men and women feel (Barthes, 1991: 115, 122). Consequently, as Barthes proposes, although the "concept" deforms "what is full, the meaning" by transforming its ties with history and reducing it into "gestures," the process of "distortion is not an obliteration" the "concept" needs the "meaning" but it is "half-amputated," "deprived of memory" but "not of existence" (121, 115).

The poem's subversion of the mythical "*signification*," also offers a critique on the constructed nature of sex and gender (Barthes, 1991: 115). It undermines the phallogocentric message that with his sexual transformation Tiresias would be naturally endowed with femininity. Ironically however, despite "the shocking V of the shirt were breasts" along with "woman's voice" and "his period," Duffy's Tiresias has no idea of what it feels to be a woman (31, 32, 43). As Broom (2006) suggests, "from Mrs Tiresias" demystifies "the idea that gender derives simply from the body – that if you have a female body femininity will come 'naturally'" (91). Being unable to orient himself in his new body, Tiresias takes refuge in phallogocentric norms defining women and chooses to imitate the patriarchal gender codes like "blow-drying his hair," wearing the clothes of his wife or doing shopping (40, 41). Such delusive acts in Teresa de Lauretis's (1987) words, in her *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Film, Theory and Fiction*, display that "gender is not a property of bodies or something originally existent in human beings" (3). His failure to create his own subjectivity is also highlighted with another stereotypical gender code that foregrounds the subordination of woman to the authority of man. After he and Mrs Tiresias break up, because now Tiresias identifies himself with passivity, he needs a patriarchal figure to survive: "entering glitzy restaurants / on the arms of powerful men" (61-62). Thus, the poem is a repudiation of the attitude that "people can simply pick and choose their gender identity – "one day I'll 'do' masculinity, the next femininity" (Broom, 2006: 91). It problematises both sex and gender as phallogocentric constructs and demonstrates that "[t]here is no such thing as 'destiny,' 'nature,' or essence," but that we are surrounded by "living structures" and "caught up, sometimes frozen within historicocultural limits" that prevent one from "think[ing] or even ... imagin[ing] something else" (Cixous, 2010: 234). Consequently, as Diane Elam (2007) in "Feminism and Deconstruction," discusses, Duffy's Tiresias forgets that sex and gender create "structures that are called natural only because we have forgotten they are structures" (210).

As a follow up to her deconstruction of the mythical "*signification*" and the problematisation of the alliance between myth and phallogocentrism, in "from Mrs Tiresias" Duffy offers the representation of subversive female subjectivity in its plurality (Barthes, 1991: 115). Undoing the distortion of reality in the "mythical system," the poet portrays the quest of subjectivity which takes place through Mrs Tiresias's celebration of her unique unconscious desires and her body (Barthes, 1991: 113). Her rebirth from the shadows of the patriarchal binary is initiated with the change in Tiresias's sex. The poem elaborates on the "cuckoo" as the symbol of the arrival of spring which at the same time signifies the end of her subjugation: "I'd heard one that morning / While he was asleep" (16-7). Undermining the classical myth, in Duffy's poem it is Mrs Tiresias, who is endowed with the insight to comprehend the implications of the natural phenomenon. She hears "the faint sneer of thunder," announcing both Tiresias's transformation and her emancipation from an oppressive marriage, which is highlighted with the feeling of "a sudden heat at the back of [her] knees" (20, 22-3). The poem not only rejects Tiresias as the authority to define female sexuality, but also reveals that he is a failure in the sexual act as the wife declares: "though I knew for sure / there'd be nothing of *that* / going on / if he had his way" (63-66). At the initial stages of their new life, she appears to comply with role of being the passive and submissive wife, who is confined to the domestic sphere, implied by the view that "[I]ife has to go on" and treated him with generosity while waiting for the restoration of their former life (33):

I put it about that he was a twin
and this was his sister
come down to live
while he himself
was working abroad. (34-38)

However, the alienation of wife and husband is intensified when Tiresias “started his period” as he spends “[o]ne week in bed” consults “[t]wo doctors” and takes “[t]here painkillers four times a day” (43, 44, 45, 46). The menstruation example points out that “being ‘feminine’ is a complex state that is the result of a long process of social enculturation *and* a long experience of particular kind of sexed physical embodiment” (Broom, 2006, p. 91). Although remarks like “his selfish pale face” and his rejection of her “*Don’t kiss me in public, / he snapped the next day, I don’t want folk getting the wrong idea*” add to the entrapment for she says “[i]t got worse,” they actually inspire her liberation which is announced with “[a]fter the split” (52; 55-57). She decides, as Cixous (1976) demands, to be “be a good fighter” who is ready to “kill the false woman who is preventing the live one from breathing” and becomes conscious of “the breath of the whole woman” who welcomes her body (880).

The formation of an alternative subjectivity is fulfilled in the last part of the poem where the exaltation of the new life and being is presented. Mrs Tiresias is liberated from the private sphere of the repressive home as she attends “a glittering ball” (78). Duffy portrays her as a figure who has welcomed the unconscious desires of her body and is complacent with her lesbianism. When she introduces her lover to Tiresias, “[a]nd *this is my lover*,” she “watched the way he stared / at her violet eyes” and could see his attempts to make sense of this new relationship (76, 81-82). Through the eyes of the lover, she imagines “him picture” the passion and the vitality of her new subjectivity symbolized by the “bite” of the lover, “her bite at the fruit of my lips” along with “[my] red wet cry in the night” (85, 86, 87, 89). By alluding to the myth of the original sin, the poem suggests that the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge can be tasted by two women, and it gives pleasure rather than causing shame. Consequently, with its subversive treatment of gender, the poem violates the established notions about who women are and what they desire. According to Jeffrey Wainwright (2003), in his “Female metamorphoses: Carol Ann Duffy’s Ovid,” Duffy reconceptualises Hera’s secret about female sexuality as “a lesbian one” (49). Mrs Tiresias’s celebration of her transformation is highlighted with a final confrontation with Tiresias when her lover “shook his hand / saying *How do you do*” (90-1). Even though she draws attention to the similarity between them regarding “the clash of their sparkling rings and their painted nails,” the scene contrasts the past with the present as she looks at “his hands, her hands” and expresses Tiresias’s failure to acknowledge her true desires and subjectivity (93, 92). Hence, undoing the equity between the female body and femininity, the poem draws attention to the idea that “there is no thematic identity to the category ‘women’” and calls for the appreciation of “the infinite possibilities of women: women will never be exhaustively represented, never be brought together under one, undivided concept of ‘woman’” (Elam, 2001: 208).

3.3. “Medusa”

The myth of Medusa is another example that phallogocentric discourse uses to consolidate its oppression of women and justify their confinement into silence and passivity. As House (2014) puts it, the modernist revival of myths involved the glorification of “a male-authored mythological literature in which women are, for the most part, either victims and mutes like Alcestis, Iphigenia, and Philomela, monsters and murderers like Medusa, Clytemnestra, and Medea, or beautiful deceivers like Pandora and Helen” (xix). In the classical myth, Medusa is portrayed as one of the “monsters called Gorgons, who lived on an island and were known far and wide because of their deadly power” to transform anyone “instantly into stone” (Hamilton, 1942: 200, 201). The beheading of Medusa takes place as part of the enmity between two patriarchal figures, King Polydectes and Perseus, who plot against one another and plan to use Medusa’s gaze as a weapon to destroy his foe. This power struggle ends with Perseus’s victory, who is aided by other defenders of phallogocentric discourse such as Hermes and Athena, cuts off the head of Medusa and uses it to destroy Polydectes. Both the act of beheading Medusa and the execution of Polydectes reinforce Perseus’s victory by foregrounding his alliance with reason.

Consequently, echoing Cixousian observations, the case of Perseus exemplifies how the history of western writing and culture is “confounded with the history of reason” and “has been one with the phallogocentric tradition,” which is “self-admiring, self-stimulating, self-congratulatory” (Cixous, 1976: 879). That is why, for centuries Medusa’s myth has been employed to consolidate the messages of phallogocentric discourse that women are evil and it is just and right to silence them through decapitation. However, in her “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Cixous (1976) rebels against such phallogocentric codes that entrap women “between two horrifying myths: between the Medusa and the abyss” and calls for a rebellious celebration of the body manifested in Medusa’s laugh: “You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing” (885). Reflecting the subversive approach of Cixous, Carol Ann Duffy in “Medusa” problematizes the myth that women are evil by drawing attention to the victimization of women and offers a Cixousian celebration of the power of her body to redeem herself from the constraints imposed by the phallogocentric discourse.

Barthesian method of treating myth as “a type of speech” by breaking down the Medusa myth into two semiological structures reveals the distortion of reality in the “mythical system” as the “*signification*” Medusa is identified with female evil that needs to be punished (Barthes, 1991: 107, 113, 115). However, a closer look at the “*deformation*” of “*meaning*” in the “*second-order semiological system*” displays the ideological bond between myth and phallogocentric discourse (Barthes, 1991: 121, 115, 113). According to the story narrated by Perseus in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, in the “first semiological system” Medusa, the “*meaning*” is the passive victim abused by two major figures identified with patriarchy, Neptune and Minerva, that is Athena (Barthes, 1991: 114, 115). Being one of the girls serving in Minerva’s temple, Medusa with the “glorious hair”, “was beautiful” and was “[p]ursued by many lovers and best of beauties” (Ovid, 1958: 117). However, her beauty is presented as the cause of her victimization, which is initiated with Neptune’s rape and is intensified with the punishment imposed by Minerva, who accused Medusa of “carelessness” and punished her by “turn[ing] her hair to snakes” (Ovid, 1958: 118). As it is mentioned by Habib (2005) despite being “a female goddess,” Athena [Minerva] is allied with the phallogocentric discourse and embodies “‘masculine’ attributes, as expressed in her conventionally represented fierce countenance, and her powerful frame, robed in the attire of war” (703). Nevertheless, through “a language-robbery,” the construction of “*signification*” involves the distortion of reality as it chooses to overlook Medusa’s former suffering and draws equity between her and evil (Barthes, 1991: 131, 115). Consequently, as required by the accord between myth and phallogocentric discourse, in the “*second-order semiological system*” Medusa, the “*meaning*,” becomes the “*form*,” who with the snakes on her head signifies pernicious feminine power and constructs the mythical “*signification*” Medusa, which for centuries has been employed for the perpetuation of the decapitation of women as a valid form of patriarchal punishment (Barthes, 1991: 113, 115).

Like in “from Mrs Tiresias,” in “Medusa,” Duffy treats the patriarchal myth as “a type of speech” and attacks the way it distorts reality about Medusa’s abuse (Barthes, 1991: 107). In line with Barthesian decoding of myths, Duffy rewrites it by focusing on the “first semiological system” which allows her to break the bond with the “*second-order*” and to voice her victimization prior to Minerva’s curse (Barthes, 1991: 114, 113). Hence, Duffy’s Medusa functions in the “first semiological order” as a linguistic sign that signifies the numerous ways the phallogocentric discourse has been employing to tyrannize and silence woman (Barthes, 1991: 114). In the poem, Medusa is portrayed as the ill-treated wife of an adulterous husband.

By elaborating on Medusa, the linguistic sign, Duffy rewrites the myth to question the patriarchal gender roles that confine women to the domestic sphere. The poem draws attention to women’s entrapment as submissive housewives who are doomed to accept adultery as the natural and inevitable outcome of their vanishing beauty and aging body. Moreover, Duffy questions adultery as one of the

liberties granted to man as the master of the public sphere. Despite the fact that she still loves him, she is tormented with the idea of betrayal: “It’s you I love, perfect man, Greek God, my own; but I know you’ll go, betray me, stray / from home” (13-16). In *A History of Twentieth-Century British Women’s Poetry*, Jane Dowson and Alice Entwistle (2005) propose that Duffy’s Medusa “is a lonely woman, who laments the loss of her looks and her man’s attentions” (139). Quite compatible with the conventional gender roles, at the initial stages of the poem, Medusa, the alienated wife, identified with passivity and home, chooses to accuse herself of her husband’s crime: “My bride’s breath soured, stank / in the grey bags of my lungs” (6-8). Therefore, with each breath she grows older and is much uglier as she painfully compares herself with the young and attractive agents of her husband’s betrayal: “and your girls, your girls” who like Minerva, function as forces reinforcing patriarchal maltreatment (39).

Duffy’s poem challenges the phallogocentric messages about gender roles and sexual double standard that not only allow man to have extra-marital affairs but go unpunished for such an immoral act. The fact that she refers to the husband as “Greek God,” who at the end of the poem arrives home with “a shield” and “a sword” demonstrates how Neptune and Perseus as the oppressors merge into one another (14, 37, 38). Duffy’s Medusa mirrors women’s entrapment within the patriarchal binary regarding “the construction of a private/public split” by confining “women to the ‘private’ realm of feeling nurturance, intuition, domesticity and the body, to clarify a ‘public’ realm of reason efficiency and objectivity as masculine” (Rice & Waugh, 2010: 144). Drawing attention to the different forms of oppression that women have been exposed to, the speaker voices the injustice against all abused wives who are not allowed to go beyond the domestic arena and seek justice. Rejecting the innate evil power in woman, the poem declares that the desire for revenge originates from the painful consciousness of being abused:

A suspicion, a doubt, a jealousy
grew in my mind,
which turned the hairs on my head to filthy snakes,
as though my thoughts
hissed and spat on my scalp. (1-5)

The metamorphosis of “the hairs on [her] head to filthy snakes” are the metaphoric representations of a mind tormented by “[a] suspicion, a doubt, a jealousy” (3, 1). The poem challenges the phallogocentric identification of the female body with monstrous impulses and urges her to recognize its hidden energy and urge to abolish the chains of patriarchy. Quite compatible with Cixous’s (1976) call that “[i]t is time to liberate the New Woman by coming to know her,” this marks the beginning of the subversive transformation of Medusa from a subdued victim into an assertive woman, who can claim her liberation and call for justice (878).

Following the appearance of the snakes on her head, Medusa reveals her determination to create an alternative female subjectivity. Rebelling against the submissive role of the angel in the house, she is determined to voice the despicable immorality that she has been exposed as she is “foul mouthed now, foul tongued / yellow fanged” (8-9). In addition to representing her suffering, the “tears in [her] eyes” are transformed into “bullet[s],” which allow her to recognize the power of her gaze: “Are you terrified?” (10-11). As a challenge to the classical myth, rather than being a curse, the power to transform things into stone is another miracle of her body that she gradually comes to recognize while raging against “[l]ove gone bad” (31). Medusa’s awakening to the liberating power of her body starts with the conversion of a “buzzing bee” that “fell / to the ground” into “a dull grey pebble” (18-20). This is how the call for justice as expressed in the wish “[s]o better by far for me if you were stone,” is actualized. The acknowledgment of the emancipatory power of her gaze is represented with her ability to turn each time a much bigger animal than the former one into stone: “a singing bird,” “a ginger cat,”

“a pig” (21, 24, 27). The full consciousness of her potential to set herself free is achieved in stanza six when she “stare[s] in the mirror” that “show[es]” her “a Gorgon” whose gaze this time turns “a dragon” into “a mountain” that “[f]ire spewed / from the mouth” (30, 32, 33-35). As a Gorgon she is the symbol of deadly power challenging phallogocentric domain.

Integral to its aim to create a subversive female subjectivity, the poem also attacks the way lyric “I” has been monopolized by phallogocentrism since for centuries lyric poetry has been ignoring female subjectivity. As the products of men, the poetic persona manifests “the masculine-based notion of subjectivity,” and claims to voice “a true, sincere unitary self” (Kinnahan, 2009: 180). While it is the male “‘I’ who imagines, observes, writes and makes culture,” women are assigned more passive roles such “as muse and inspiration to the (male) poet, as the subject to the (male) poet’s gaze” (Kinnahan, 2009: 179). Duffy challenges the conventions of dramatic monologue and opposes the subordination of woman to man as “the silent cultural object upon which the male operates to create both masculine self and art” (Kinnahan, 2009: 179). Thus, by rewriting the myth, Duffy gives expression to the creation of an alternative female subjectivity that transforms woe and degradation into emancipatory power that celebrates her bodily energy.

After concentrating on the emotional turmoil that has been taking place in Medusa’s mind, as a dramatic monologue the poem, at the end, implies the physical presence of the husband as the addressee. Being awakened to her new subjectivity and having gathered enough faith in herself and her body, Medusa is eventually ready to confront her subjugator:

And here you come
with a shield for heart
and a sword for a tongue
and your girls, your girls.
Wasn’t I beautiful?
Wasn’t I fragrant and young?
Look at me now. (36-42)

The poem is a subversive response to the phallogocentric discourse which has been rationalizing “the social control and containment of the female body” rooted in the claim that identifies women “with everything which is feared as irrational” (Rice & Waugh, 2010: 145). The adulterous husband arrives home equipped with “a shield” and “a sword” as the symbols of patriarchal oppression mechanisms and his determination to silence her; however, he confronts a disillusioned Medusa who is ready for a counterattack and undo his scheme (37-38). Hence, Duffy mocks such dysfunctional phallogocentric mechanisms to silence the new Medusa, the wakeful agent who is ready to set herself free. The idea that the poem associates “heart” with “shield” with is actually a reference to the frustrated wife’s love for the uncaring husband who turned a blind eye to the trauma expressed in the looks of his abused wife. The juxtaposition of “tongue” with a “sword,” on the other hand expresses her rebellion against being silenced via decapitation. The assertion of her own subjectivity is marked with the articulation of the abuse: “Wasn’t I beautiful? / Wasn’t I fragrant and young?” (40-41). This outcry at the same time puts an end to her eternal dumbness in the patriarchal literary canon “where woman has never *her* turn to speak” (Cixous, 1976: 879). Consequently, as an answer to Cixous’ call that “[y]ou only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing” Duffy’s poem ends with the subversion of the phallogocentric discourse (Cixous, 1976: 885). Jeffrey Wainwright (2003) argues that due to its allusion to Medusa’s decapitation in the classical myth the poem’s ending involves “apparent female power turned to tragic defeat (p.53). However, Duffy’s Medusa is more than just another perpetuation of the oppression imposed by patriarchy. Instead of causing her death, Medusa’s gaze is identified with Cixousian emancipatory laughter with its power to

redeem and liberate her from all the phallogocentric codes imposed on her: "Look at me now" (42). Thus, this final confrontation between her and the subjugator declares the rebirth of Medusa as a free subject, "the New woman" who acknowledges the power of her body and has the will and determination to recreate her own subjectivity (Cixous, 1976: 878).

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the analysis of "from Mrs Tiresias" and "Medusa" in light of the semiological study of myth by Ronald Barthes (1991) reveals Duffy's reduction of these patriarchal myths into special systems of signification codified by phallogocentric discourse. Challenging the mainstream masculine literary canon, Duffy problematizes the alliance between ideology and myth in the construction of reality. The Barthesian study of these poems displays how she deconstructs the myths about Tiresias and Medusa by treating them as two semiological orders functioning within the linguistic and mythical systems. Consequently, such a treatment of myth allows Duffy not only to decipher the ideological transformation of the linguistic sign into a mythical one, but also to attack the distortion of reality in the mythical signification that consolidates patriarchal norms. As a participant of the second wave feminist project of rewriting patriarchal myths, with her radical representations in these poems, she undermines Tiresias's identification with wisdom and logos as well as Medusa's codification as the female evil that needs to be punished. By challenging the bond between the linguistic and mythical systems, Duffy brings the ideological myth construction mechanisms to light. Thus, as the participants of alternative realities Mrs Tiresias and Medusa go through emancipatory processes which involve the subversion of the phallogocentric discourse and the rebirth of her heroine as the representatives of Cixousian "New Woman" who celebrate their unique unconscious desires, their bodies and their new subjectivity.

References

- Barthes, R. (1991). *Mythologies*. New York: The Noonday Press.
- Broom, S. (2006). *Contemporary British and Irish Poetry: an Introduction*. New York: Palgrave and Macmillan.
- Cixous, H. (1976). The Laugh of the Medusa. *Signs*. 1(4), 875-893. <https://doi.org/10.1086/493306>
- Cixous, H. (2010). Sorties. In P. Rice & P. Waugh (Eds.), *Modern Literary Theory: a reader* (pp. 229-236). London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- De Lauretis, T. (1987). *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Film, Theory and Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Dowson, J., & Entwistle, A. (2005). *A History of Twentieth-Century British Women's Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Duffy, C. A. (1999). *The World's Wife*. London: Picador.
- Elam, D. (2001). Feminism and Deconstruction. In C. Knellwolf & C. Norris (Eds.), *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: Twentieth-Century Historical and Psychological Perspectives* (pp. 207-215). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Eliot, T. S. (1975). Ulysses, Order, and Myth. In F. Kermode (Ed.), *The Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot* (pp. 177-178). London: Faber & Faber.
- Eliot, T. S. (2001). *The Waste Land*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.
- Habib, R. (2005). *A History of Literary Criticism: From Plato to the Present*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing.
- Hamilton, E. (1942). *Mythology*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.
- House, V. (2014). *Medea's Chorus Myth and Women's Poetry Since 1950*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

- Kinnahan, L. A. (2009). Contemporary British Women Poets and the Lyric Subject. In N. Alderman & C.D. Blanton (Eds.), *A Concise Companion to Postwar British and Irish Poetry* (pp. 176-199). Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Knellwolf, C. (2001). The History of Feminist Criticism. In C. Knellwolf & C. Norris (Eds.), *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: Twentieth-Century Historical and Psychological Perspectives* (pp. 193-205). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ovid. (1958). *The Metamorphosis*. New York: The Viking Press.
- Rice, P. & Waugh, P. (Eds.). (1996). *Modern Literary Theory*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Wainwright, J. (2003). Female metamorphoses Carol Ann Duffy's Ovid. In A. Michelis and A. Rowland (Eds.), *"Choosing Tough Words": The Poetry of Carol Ann Duffy* (pp. 47-55). Manchester: Manchester University Press.