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# 'So don't give me a line from a poet that's dead': Revisionist strategies in the sonnets of Patience Agbabi and Carol Ann Duffy

Master's thesis in English  
Supervisor: Dorothee Birke  
June 2022



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## **Abstract**

This thesis analyses the sonnet works of Patience Agbabi and Carol Ann Duffy through the theory of literary revisionism. Through analysing a representative selection of sonnets from the respective poets' poetry production, this thesis theorises three revisionist strategies which Agbabi and Duffy use to pay homage to the sonnet tradition, claim the tradition for themselves as marginalised writers, and critically revise the sonnet tradition by exposing or subverting the conventions which have facilitated its nature as an androcentric and Eurocentric medium. Additionally, this thesis argues that Agbabi and Duffy revise the sonnet tradition on the level of form and content, theorising a connection between structural and thematic properties in the sonnet genre.

Keywords: the sonnet, tradition, Patience Agbabi, Carol Ann Duffy, revision, feminist theory, queer theory

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# **'So don't give me a line from a poet that's dead': Revisionist strategies in the sonnets of Patience Agbabi and Carol Ann Duffy**

**Master's thesis**

**Iida Tervo, NTNU**

To ask whether a given modern poem counts as a sonnet—to ask the question in modern terms—is to ask what we learn by calling it one.

—Stephanie Burt and David Mikics, *The Art of the Sonnet*

Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different.

—T.S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood*

The topic of this thesis is the sonnet poetics of two contemporary British poets, Patience Agbabi and Carol Ann Duffy. Alongside a technical analysis of the form and content of a selection of representative sonnets by these authors, the primary interest of this project is to investigate the connection between poetic form and content through the following questions: what are the techniques through which Agbabi and Duffy achieve this revision of the sonnet form and genres in order to represent marginalised experiences and identities, and what similarities and differences can be found in their respective approaches to revising these traditions? Both Agbabi and Duffy engage with venerated and precisely defined forms and genres, situating themselves within the poetic tradition in which formal choices make unavoidable reference to the established poetic canon. This thesis makes the argument that often, this intertextuality is intentional on the two poets' parts.

As contemporary poets, Patience Agbabi and Carol Ann Duffy "engage with the sonnet's discourses ... overturning them in their own perspectives, in terms of class, race, ethnicity, religion, gender or sexuality" (Birkan Berz 3). This thesis investigates the revisionist literary strategies which Agbabi and Duffy employ to revise the sonnet genre in terms of formal and thematic conventions, and how they both challenge and contribute to the canon of British sonneteering by addressing historical and contemporary notions of what kind of authors may interact with which forms and which registers. As women poets who occupy various and intersecting marginalised identity

positions—both poets are queer, and in Agbabi’s case, self-identified bi-racial and Nigerian-British—Agbabi and Duffy are interacting with the sonnet tradition from the sociological position of the ‘other’. Formal properties in the sonnets of Agbabi and Duffy become vehicles for *meaning* with their inescapable social and historical contexts. Agbabi and Duffy contest the idea of poetics as a site of male desire and subjectivity by hijacking and reappropriating these forms and using them to communicate the experiences of marginalised speakers.

The larger research context for this inquiry spans the history of the European sonnet poetics—the development of tradition, form, and canon—and how academic perception of the poetic canon and great historical poets still shape our understanding of what makes poetry technically accomplished, and how these factors impact how we read modern (marginalised) poets. Additionally, Agbabi and Duffy are situated within a queer, female and, in Agbabi’s case, black British poetics. Each of these dimensions introduces a layer of analytic complexity, and both poets have been widely analysed for their technique, themes of gender relations, queer love, and race in their oeuvre, but the academia on feminist revisions in the sonnet context. This thesis takes its place among these works—inspired by these works—as a comparative analysis between Agbabi and Duffy allows for an intersectional feminist approach, combining examinations of gender, sexuality, and race through the sociological concept of privilege.

The supporting argument is structured into four parts, including a general introduction into the literary tool central to these analyses, revision. Chapter one introduces the sonnet and considers feminist revisions through gender relations in the sonnets “The Exchange” (*Bloodshot Monochrome*, 2008) by Agbabi, and “Human Interest” and “Terza Rima SW19” (*Standing Female Nude*, 1985) by Duffy; chapter two is interested in queer revisionist strategies—or *queering* the sonnet—and in the third chapter, the thesis returns to the sonnet’s macrostructures in an exploration of the various ways Agbabi and Duffy position their poet-speakers as “the other” within the historically male, cisheterosexual, and white-European-dominated (Hayes 1; Widdowson 167; Macaluso and Macaluso ix) parameters of the sonnet tradition in order to create revisionist narratives in their sonnet oeuvres. Each chapter has its self-contained argument and logic, connected through re(-)vision, the adaptation studies concept denoting “approaching literary classics, genres, and paradigms by revising their most problematic aspects” (Schwanebek 185), relevant for revising “areas of cultural production where the prestige of a canonised classic rests on questionable ideologies, mechanisms of exclusion, and imbalanced power relationships” (ibid.). Instead of analysing such canonical texts to uncover the ideologies, exclusions and power relationships, this thesis focuses on the *counter-canonical* revisionist strategies in the sonnets of Agbabi and Duffy to show how the two poets “appropriate and consciously engage” with the poetic conventions of the sonnet genre (Jurado 34). The argument will therefore be that the revisionist work has already been done by Agbabi and Duffy, and this

thesis is an exploration of the various revisionist strategies which they employ in their sonnet-writing. Each poem under analysis is presented in its original typesetting for their respective editions in the form of supplementary figures.

The motivation for limiting this inquiry to sonnets and works which are closely connected to sonnets is twofold. The sonnet form constitutes its own sub-genre of lyric, providing precisely defined parameters for analysis. Few other poetic forms supply the reader or poet with such deeply conventionalised rule sets to either abide by or subvert; 'none is more recognisable' (Burt and Mikics 5). The study of sonnets thus constitutes its own specialised branch of poetics, lending further support to the sonnet's lasting popularity. The technical—or formalist, as it has sometimes been called (Birkan Berz 9)—impulse in sonnet writing is one which is conceived as a limitation and a welcome challenge both by its practitioners and its scholars. The somewhat contested definition for what kind of lyric constitutes a sonnet is discussed later. The choice to analyse the sonnet works of Patience Agbabi and Carol Ann Duffy specifically was motivated by the historical and geographical proximity, both being contemporary British woman sonneteers and separated by only ten years in age. They face similar challenges as they navigate the sonnet genre, but additionally, how the two poets are positioned with regards to the British sonnet canon provides an interesting opportunity to compare the revisionist approaches they use in their sonnet writing. Duffy, with her appointment as the United Kingdom's Poet Laureate from 2009 to 2019, is considered by some critics to be writing "inside and against tradition" (Jurado 34)—in many readers' minds part of the British poetic 'canon,' however ephemeral the conception may be, but simultaneously revising the sonnet genre to portray experiences and criticisms, such as "motherhood, women's sexuality, and queer desire" (Jurado 33-34), thematically foreign to the tradition. Agbabi, while recognised within Britain, is certainly the less 'canonical' of the two poets and, thus situated outside of, or *against*, the British poetry canon, works entirely in the realm of the counter-canonical.

### **'Much more than simple imitation'—revision as a literary strategy**

The literary theory underpinning this thesis is literary revisionism. Its spelling varies between revision and 're-vision,' as it appeared in Adrienne Rich's landmark essay, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" (1976). Rich's original definition, albeit at the time expanded to advance her personal and political feminist agenda, is still most useful for conceptualising the core tenets of the practice: "Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical dimension" (Rich 18). Deeply interwoven with and drawing from the larger theoretical contexts of intertextuality and adaptation, revision—which Schwanebek favours over Sanders' proposed term

'literary appropriation,' even several decades later (Schwanebek 185; Sanders 7)—is characterised by Schwanebek as the critical tendency of "contemporary authors to adapt well-known texts in a manner that brings problematic subtexts to light" (Schwanebek 185). Sanders, like Schwanebek, acknowledges the "rewriting impulse" as something inherently personal and/or<sup>1</sup> political: "[W]hat is often inescapable is the fact that a political or ethical commitment shapes a writer's...decision to re-interpret a source text," going on to dismiss the structuralist theory of the 'death of the author,' deeming authorial intent less easily dismissible than Barthes and Foucault might suggest with their theory (Sanders 2-3).

Adaptation necessitates the existence of a cultural *canon*—indeed, Sanders deems its mention "inescapable" in the context of revision (8, 45). Chapter three includes a systematic introduction and then deconstruction of the concept, but it will be foregrounded here briefly. Logically, for revisions to exist, one needs something *to revise*—a pre-existing topic, literary device, or entire narrative (Sanders 45). The relationship between 'source' and adaptation, however, is less hierarchal than such an arrangement might suggest: revisions, in order to create what Sanders calls the "pleasurable aspects of reading into...texts their intertextual and allusive relationships with other texts," often re-imagine texts of "more cultural authority," they also in so doing serve to "perpetuate the existence of a canon" and "contribute to its ongoing reformulation and expansion" (Sanders 7-8; Schwanebek 185). Literary revisions, then, are one mechanism through which pre-existing works' position within the canon is solidified, or sometimes established.

The latter characteristic, more so than the former, is what gives revisionist productions their political associations—it is precisely the sort of work which is wrought on the arenas of feminist, postcolonial, queer, and poststructuralist theory. A foregrounding assumption of revisionist work is that the existence of a canon does not only tell us which traditions or styles, or authors are, or have long been, in favour, but also "who are at various times excluded from it, or...consigned to its margins" (Sanders 10, 13). Therefore, Sanders characterises revisionist literary strategies as "offering a revised point of view from the 'original,' adding hypothetical motivation, or voicing the silenced and marginalised" (14). Peter Widdowson also explores revision through the power disparity between—and the strategies employed to reduce said disparity between—dominant and marginalised cultures:

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<sup>1</sup> Liz Yorke summarises the philosophy of 'second wave feminism,' "the personal is political," first articulated by American feminist Carol Hanisch in an essay of the same name, thusly: "The commitment to the personal as political led lesbians towards the expression of their self-exploration as a political act. So too, the experiencing of previously suppressed desires became a political act against patriarchal oppression. Female personal experience was to be set against the transcendental and universal value accorded the masculine subject." (Yorke, Liz. "British Lesbian Poetics: A Brief Exploration." *Feminist Review*, 1999, vol., 62, pp. 78-90.

[Revision] as a literary practice...means the 're-writing' of texts which have been constructed and owned by another (usually dominant) interest such as cultural, patriarchal, or imperial/colonial power...'Re-visionary' writing, then, is a crucial component of 'the literary' as a contemporary 'counter-culture of the imagination', which in 'writing back' to historical texts, and to the historical conjunctures which shaped them, re-writes Authorised History by way of revising its 'master-narratives'.

[Revisionist works] invariably have a clear cultural-political thrust, especially on behalf of those exploited, marginalised and silenced by dominant ideologies, in demanding that the political inscription and cultural complicity in oppression of past texts be revised and re-visioned as part of the process of restoring a voice, a history or an identity to the erstwhile oppressed.

(168-169)

Widdowson presents the reader with additional hallmarks of revisionist productions, several of which, at their core, are already described by Rich's original expression of "looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes" (Rich 18), but notably, among such otherwise stark prescriptions as the 'original' text being politically inscribed and culturally complicit "in oppression," Widdowson also characterises revisionist texts as something that both "repossess" and "liberate" the 'original,' allowing it to be seen anew—presumably, also, as something not quite as inscribed and complicit (168-169).

The relevance of revision as a literary strategy as it relates to this thesis arises from the ability to read the sonnet tradition as a poetic canon unto itself. As one of the oldest—if not *the oldest*—of the European poetic forms, with a form which has remained relatively unchanged for six hundred years of sonneteering, the sonnet rightfully inhabits the position of a "British 'high art tradition'" (Ramey 311; Spiller 2). There is no doubt, then, whether the sonnet tradition in its entirety qualifies as a canonical 'text' with its own generic conventions both formal and thematic—"cross-cultural, often cross historical...appear[ing] across the boundaries of cultural difference and...handed on, albeit in transmuted and translated forms, through the generations" (Sanders 45). Of course, like so many other 'originals,' in its inclusions as well as in its omissions, the sonnet tradition holds within it a world of 'political inscriptions' and 'cultural complicities' for revisionist interventions, be they feminist, queer, postcolonial or poststructuralist in nature. This much is acknowledged by sonnet scholars as well, evident from such statements as the following, on the generic nature of the sonnet: "the sonnet ha[s] a history—and to write a sonnet [is] to participate in a line of poets, stretching back for centuries, who ha[ve] taken up the form" (Burt and Mikics 21); "the [sonnet] form is something inherited, that it brings with it the rules of the past; indeed, it sometimes signifies the past" (24); and "what seems at stake in writing the

sonnet today is a tension between truth to materials—the aesthetic imperative for a poem to be written in a certain form—and a (post)modernist critique of representation” (Birkan Berz 3).

The “rewriting impulse,” to use Julie Sander’s words, to characterise the act of taking up the storied form in modern times (2), has most often been a feminist or a post-colonial one, both as it pertains to the great volumes of contemporary sonnets by woman poets as well as literary criticism committed to examining the sonnet tradition from new angles, although revision is “by no means the sole prerogative of feminist authors” (Schwanebek 185-186). Schwanebek describes the sites for revisionist practices as “all areas of cultural production where the prestige of a canonised classic rests on questionable ideologies, mechanisms of exclusion, and imbalanced power relationships” (185). In the following chapters, I hope to answer some of the questions which arise from the characterisation of the sonnet tradition as one such historical space of questionable ideology, exclusion and imbalanced power relationships—namely a space of white, cisheterosexist male privilege. What are some of the ways that marginalised poets challenge the rubrics of pervasive androcentrism when they take up the form? What can they accomplish by doing this—what have they already accomplished? The primary interest of this thesis is in uncovering and analysing these tactics and not nearly as much in conducting feminist or queer analysis of the sonnet genre works of Agbabi and Duffy; my base assumption is—and it is now and again confirmed by interviews and afterwords by the poets themselves—that their revisionist (feminist, queer, and others) strategies are employed knowingly, purposefully, that their revisionist projects are, indeed, feminist, queer, and postcolonial criticism *in themselves*, in poetic form. In this way, the following constitutes a literary review through the lenses of feminist and queer criticism, and sociology.

## Chapter 1

### **Gendered desire, gendered violence: feminist revisions of the sonnet**

And there were all those poems about woman, written by men...These women were almost always beautiful, but threatened with the loss of beauty, the loss of youth—a fate worse than death ... A lot is being said today about the influence that the myths and images of women have on all of us who are products of culture... [A woman who tries to write] goes to poetry or fiction looking for *her* way of being in the world, ...she finds the image of Woman in books written by men. She finds a terror and a dream, she finds a beautiful pale face, she finds La Belle Dame Sans Merci, she finds Juliet or Tess or Salomé.

—Adrienne Rich, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision”

Adrienne Rich’s writing was not abstract, nor was it originally about adapting one’s understanding of just any text. Rich was a feminist writer, and in her essay “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” (1972), she is taking an explicitly feminist position. Woefully obvious is it today that—in no small part thanks to the feminist writers like Rich and her contemporaries—the literary canon and the practice of writing were for hundreds and hundreds of years, a male space, and its reproductions of women penned and painted and sung by men. One of the core tenets of early feminist writers such as Rich was the societal importance of cultural representations of different social groups—any group, but in this case, women (or perhaps simply anybody but men, and men who are not traditionally masculine, to use a purposefully ephemeral description)—to the socialisation of real-life women, and cultural expectations of how a woman ought to act or think, what they ought to feel or want, and when.

The narratives written by actual women about women (or, sometimes, for women) were few and far between—these needed to be uncovered from places of neglect and suppression to begin forming a female canon of literature. But moreover, crucially, Rich and the other feminist critics of the 1970s and 1980s began reviewing the existing literature canon through “new eyes” (Rich 18), to “know the know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold on us” (19). The sonnet form, albeit not a singular text, nor reducible to an all-encompassing example of the tradition of sonneteering, nevertheless



offers a set of conventions and characteristics which lend themselves well for feminist criticism, chief among those the tendency toward being what Wieland Schwanebeck describes as “patriarchal project[s] with a distinct social dimension,” with “only limited use for women” (184-5).

The act of engaging with “[the sonnet] tradition in new and meaningful ways, without either fully subscribing to the problematic history of the genre or abandoning it together” (Schwanebek 193) describes precisely what Rich recommended in her essay: in order for the woman subject—and female subjectivity—to “survive” (Rich 18) within the thousand-year-old male-dominated field of literature, one must revise it for feminist subtext and reappropriate its conventions. This chapter focuses on three sonnet texts which I argue adopt this as their approach, using the sonnet form to narrate female subjectivities. Patience Agbabi’s “The Exchange” (2008) and Carol Ann Duffy’s “Human Interest” and “Terza Rima SW19” (1985) appropriate the formal and thematic conventions in sonnet writing by working within the sonnet structure and revising it to their own ends, but they subvert the gendered dynamics of Petrarchan love lyric by making explicit the implicit danger and violence in the quintessentially Petrarchan depiction of the unrequited, unattainable object of male sexual desire. “Terza Rima SW19” narrates an encounter, down to the “slight smile” on the female in response to male desire. In “The Exchange,” the speaker poet narrates a similar romantic meeting gone awry where the volta marks the disappearance of the female, on the level of the sonnet text as well as ontologically. Finally, “Human Interest” is a first-person narrated dramatic monologue of a man who murdered his wife after (supposedly) discovering her infidelity—the sonnet is a satirical take on the human-interest news story, drawing parallels about the normalisation of intimate partner violence toward women.

By ‘saying the part we do not say out loud’ and depicting the female beloveds of the sonnets as dead or conspicuously—uncomfortably—missing with allusions to blood and violence, Agbabi and Duffy revise the conventionalised tendency of particularly Petrarchan love lyric to portray only the besotted and lovelorn male point of view of the story. They play with the trope of male desire and the reduction of the female love interest into an object by forcing the reader to consider the consequences of normalising and tolerating these narratives. Rather than reinforcing the idea of the languishing male sonnet speaker as the voice of the Petrarchan sonnet genre, Agbabi and Duffy subvert the trope, revealing a void-like negative space where female subjectivity ought to be and thus revealing this thematic trope to be a site of literary production “where the prestige of a canonised classic rests on questionable ideologies, mechanisms of exclusion, and imbalanced power relationships” (Schwanebek 185). At the same time, the poets revise the *structural* tropes of the sonnet genre by subverting expectations about the degree of narrativity as well as rhyming and meter, creating a formal allegory to the ideological and literary revision.

## The sonnet: 'a shape where strong emotion might make sense, where lyric invention might still take place'

The formal and technical aspects of the sonnet—assigned such descriptions as “monumental” and “rigid,” and “metrically [feudal]” (Birkan Berz 5; Spiller 12)—are some of the sonnet’s most easily recognisable characteristics. Generally, fourteen lines long, most traditionally (although not as much in contemporary sonnets) featuring one of several conventionalised rhyme schemes, and iambic pentameter for a meter. However, being a poetic form with a history stretching back six hundred years, the sonnet has established itself as a poetic *genre* with conventions and associations which go beyond just its formal properties (Burt and Mikics 5): themes, tropes, ‘canonical’ pioneers, and intertextual relations. The sonnet has a legacy defined in large part by its most accomplished, or simply most famous, writers: Petrarch and Dante, Wyatt and Shakespeare, Milton and Keats—all the way to the Black sonneteers of the Harlem Renaissance and today’s contemporary sonnet writers (Vendler VI; Burt and Mikics 20; Schwanebek 186). In the hands of these writers, the sonnet came to be recognised not only for its number of lines or its rhyme pattern, but for its function which stemmed from the things *signified* by the usage of the form—anything from “chivalric loyalty or a gesture of affection” and recalling the torments of unrequited love, à la Petrarch and Dante, to Wyatt’s witticisms and the epigrammatic end couplet, to the Elizabethan poets’ “erotic anecdote, moralizing, intimate confession, and satirical grace notes, to Milton’s “urgent political topicality” (Burt and Mikics 8-13; Birkan Berz 2).

The basic formulation, for contemporary writers more a guide than a strict formal requirement, for a sonnet is made up of three components, which Michael Spiller names “proportion, extension, and duration” (Birkan Berz 3). ‘Proportion’ refers to the division of its fourteen lines into an *octave* and a *sestet*, the octave often consisting of two quatrains, and the sestet of either two tercets (in so-called Italian sonnets), or a quatrain and *distich*, or a rhyming couplet (in English variations) (ibid.). This proportionality, according to Spiller, has implications for the content of the sonnet as well, and he cites the sonnet form’s musical inspiration as its source: in addition to the *volta*—Italian for *turn*, signalling a change in thought or direction within the sonnet’s internal logic—the break between the octave and the sestet “seems to have been a musical requirement: a melodic unit was given out repeated once, and then made way for a new...phrase” (Spiller 4). Lyrically, the alteration becomes syntactic, “beget[ting] conceptual alteration” (ibid.). Practical examples of this tendency can be found in Shakespeare’s sonnets, for instance, where he spends the octave building the basis of his argument (marked in the below sonnet, “Sonnet 104,” by *italics*), the following quatrain on a *variation* on the argument—much like, musically, one builds a variation on a theme; **bolded** in the below poem—

and the final couplet acts as a conclusion, recapitulating the argument in a condensed manner (underscoring below):

*To me, fair friend, you never can be old,  
For as you were when first your eye I ey'd,  
Such seems your beauty still. Three winters cold,  
Have from the forests shook three summers' pride,  
Three beauteous springs to yellow autumn turn'd,  
In process of the seasons have I seen,  
Three April perfumes in three hot Junes burn'd,  
Since first I saw you fresh, which yet are green.*

**Ah! yet doth beauty like a dial-hand,  
Steal from his figure, and no pace perceiv'd;  
So your sweet hue, which methinks still doth  
stand,  
Hath motion, and mine eye may be deceiv'd:  
For fear of which, hear this thou age unbred:  
Ere you were born was beauty's summer dead.**

William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 104"

The octave establishes the sentiment that the poet speaker's (beloved) friend looks as beautiful to him as he did three years ago when they first met, implying that any amount of time could pass without him seeming any less beautiful to the speaker. Then, as is customary, the transition to the sestet marks the *volta* of the sonnet, and the poet speaker 'switches gears,' conceding that in fact with time's passing, while his beloved's beauty has not *diminished*, it has matured with time, relative to time; although the beloved has aged and will age, these inescapable changes do not take away from his beauty. Finally, in the closing couplet, the speaker summarises the message of the sonnet more abstractly: he addresses future generations to announce that the peak of beauty—his beloved—lived and died before they were ever even born.

From this example by Shakespeare, we may abstract the typical rhyme pattern for the English variety of the sonnet, rhyming *abab cdcd efef gg*, in so-called 'open' rhyme pairs (Burt and Mikics 8, 14). In contrast, the typical configuration for an Italian or Petrarchan sonnet is 'closed' quatrains, rhyming *abba abba* in the octave and typically a variation of *cde cde*, *cdcdcd* or *cdedce* in the sestet (ibid.). Among contemporary sonneteers, these rhyme schemes are

not as standard unless the poet is making a very explicit intertextual reference to either Petrarch or Shakespeare or signalling to a specific poem.

Spiller's second attribute, 'extension,' refers to the extension within lines, "being in ten- or eleven-syllable lines," which in English sonnets translates most often to iambic pentameter, eleven syllables equating to an extra 'feminine' syllable and sometimes read through certain feminine or soft associations (Spiller 3). Shakespeare, in "Sonnet 104," employs iambic pentameter, but the convention is, much like the popularised rhyme schemes, less frequent in contemporary sonnets. Contemporary sonneteers prefer instead to choose a combination of 'proportion' and 'duration,' meaning the customary sonnet length of fourteen lines, to explicitly evoke the form (ibid.). Duration, particularly, is a formal property which inadvertently sets "constraints upon the sorts of things one can think, or say, or be in [the sonnet]" (ibid.), which is to say that it is another property which unites form and content. Spiller theorises the connection thus:

The sonnet extends to fourteen lines, providing 140-54 syllables in all. This seems to be rather more, in most modern European vernaculars, than one requires for the simple expression of a feeling or state of mind, but rather less than one would like for a full discussion of that feeling or state of mind. It is certainly too short for narration: a sonnet can present a narrated event, but it must be highly compressed if anything at all is to be said about it. (3-4)

While this is a highly theoretical statement, sonneteers who wish to revise such conventions nonetheless forge narratives within these confines. I analyse two such examples, "The Exchange" by Patience Agbabi, and "Terza Rima SW19" by Carol Ann Duffy, in chapter one, positing that marrying strong narrativity and the formal limitations of the sonnet form is in itself a revisionist strategy. Spiller comments on the "infringe[ment] of his three parameters—proportion, extension and duration—thus, when considering the veritable line drawn in the sand to separate sonnets from non-sonnets: "Any poem which infringes *one* of these parameters will remind us of a sonnet quite closely; a poem which infringes two will be more difficult to accommodate, but we will probably try to establish some procedure to account for the deformation"—as I do, on several occasions with several 'near-sonnets' which I nonetheless prescribe *as* sonnets—"and a poem which infringes all three will not be recognisable as a sonnet at all...*unless there is contextual pressure*" (3; emphasis mine).

However useful a tool for classification and comparisons, the formal properties of a sonnet are nonetheless most useful when examined in context; to reiterate Burt and Mikic's sentiment from the epigram to this chapter, "[t]o ask whether a...modern poem counts as a sonnet...is to ask what we learn by calling it one" (21). While the sonnet's most obvious identifying feature may be

its form, the *tradition* in which it is steeped is arguably of equal importance. The sonnet has undergone many changes of appearance and of content according to what has been topical in its social-political context; its Petrarchan roots and later Shakespearean associations, with all they entail, permeate the historical-literary context in which the sonnet as a form must be placed. Sonnets, while “all alike in form,” can and were “used to talk about anything at all” (Spiller vi, 2). Academics acknowledge the rich literary-historical aspect of the uses of the sonnet, and how its historical uses and contexts converge with the formal to create a genre carrying both thematic and formal implications. Modern and contemporary writers, whether sonneteers or commentators, “can choose among overlapping, competing, and often incompatible versions of what the sonnet as such, by virtue of its literary history, “means”” (Burt and Mikics 20). To partake in sonneteering means more than contending with the limitation of fourteen lines divided according to this conventionalised pattern or that; more than contending with iambic pentameter – it means contending with a “highly gendered tradition where the male speaker-poet yearns after an often unattainable female beloved” (Seiler-Garman 6). It means employing, in terms of word associations, “the quintessential form of the love poem” (2). It means lighting intertextual signal flares for the reader to say, “this poem can stand on its own, but it is not the only one of its kind. Now watch it transform with this knowledge”. Adrienne Rich’s ‘re-vision’ now serves as a cornerstone concept for the study of how the literary canon shapes and, is in turn shaped by the literary works that come after (Sanders 8). Contemporary poets who choose the sonnet form as their medium, especially those from marginalised groups such as underrepresented genders, ethnicities, and sexualities, contribute to a body of work which has been described by scholars as “reshaping” and “updating” the sonnet (Seiler-Garman 18), “Petrarchan revisionism” (Estrin 345), “appropriating” the sonnet (Lanone 4), and “re-possessing” the sonnet (Salet 12). Carole Birkan Berz explains that

rather than shun the sonnet completely, many contemporary poets engage with its generic, as well as formal identity against the backdrop of a former ‘metrical feudalism’. (In other words, they engage with the sonnet’s discourses through parody and satire, overturning them in their own perspectives, in terms of class, race, ethnicity, religion, gender or sexuality. (3)

Just as new sonnets become enriched by re-visioning them through the historical context and significance of the sonnet form, the sonnet tradition itself is constantly influenced by new texts within it.

## Male subjects, female objects: the implicit violence of male sexual desire in "Terza Rima SW19" and "The Exchange"

"Terza Rima SW19" (see fig. 1) was first published in one of Duffy's earliest poetry collections, *Standing Female Nude* (1985), infamous for the poem "Education for Leisure" which was removed from the United Kingdom's GCSE syllabus as controversial for its depiction of knife crime. "Terza Rima SW19" is one of a handful of sonnets sprinkled around the collection, notable for its explicit allusion to terza rima<sup>2</sup>, the rhyme scheme and meter it employs, while still arranging the poem to include a couplet ending, an acceptable but unusual feature for a "pure" terza rima poem. The other half of the poem's title refers to a London postal code which is brought up later in the sonnet as well, the Wimbledon Common, where the sonnet's events are set. While nothing else is said about the socio-economic status of either character in the sonnet, placing the characters at Wimbledon Common has the effect of setting a peaceful and rural scene next to one of London's richest and cleanest suburbs—a place that is low on crime, with attractive private schools and wealthy, even famous, residents. These associations seem relevant when they are so quickly overturned in the course of the sonnet, with the hunting kestrel serving as an allegory for the interaction between man and woman.

The poet speaker situates themselves at the scene and above the scene, giving the impression of being closer to the flying kestrel than the couple below by giving primacy to the bird's eye view. They open the sonnet by establishing the parallel with the kestrel hunting for its next meal: "Over this Common a kestrel treads air / till the earth says *mouse or vole*. Far below / the two lovers walking by the pond seem unaware" (Duffy 17). The epistemological uncertainty implied by the couple *seeming* unaware is a sign which reappears throughout the poem—the couple *may* know about the hunting kestrel, which becomes a stand-in for the male lover in the couple 'hunting' for the woman's affections; in the same vein, the woman *may* be convinced that the man loves her ("The kestrel flies / across the sun as he swears his love is true / and, darling, forever" (17)), or that the relationship, once initiated, could last past year one or two ("He loves me, loves me not, with each deft throw. / It could last a year, she thinks, possibly two / and then crumble like stale bread" (ibid.)). She *may* write later ("she might write or he might phone" (ibid.)), although the implication, then, is that she does not go home with the man.

The "two lovers...by the pond seem unaware," but not only of the kestrel's hunt but of their relationship with one another, and by far the more uncertain one out of the two. "She feeds the ducks. He wants her, tells her so /

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<sup>2</sup> Terza rima is the brainchild of Dante Alighieri and pioneered in Britain by Geoffrey Chaucer, where lines rhyme *aba bcb*, with the general principle that the middle rhyme of a tercet becomes the rhyme pair for the first and third lines of the following tercet.

## Terza Rima SW19

Over this Common a kestrel treads air  
till the earth says *mouse* or *vole*. Far below  
two lovers walking by the pond seem unaware.

She deeds the ducks. He wants her, tells her so  
as she half-smiles and stands slightly apart.  
*He loves me, loves me not* with each deft throw.

It could last a year, she thinks, possibly two  
and then crumble like stale bread. The kestrel flies  
across the sun as he swears his love is true

and, darling, forever. Suddenly the earth cries  
*Now* and death drops from above like a stone.  
A couple turn and see a strange bird rise.

Into the sky a kestrel climbs alone  
and later she might write or he may phone.

Fig. 1. "Terza Rima SW19" by Carol Ann Duffy (*Standing Female Nude*, 1985, p. 17)

as she half-smiles and stands slightly apart" (ibid.), the speaker narrates, underscoring the decisive language of the man by portraying the woman's body language as distant and nonreciprocal, smiling the "half-smile" of a woman trained to placate instead of outrightly reject a man. Her thoughts on the matter are made explicit as she plays a game—again, familiar, if not essential, to the female socialisation, where the love of a boy or man is so highly prized as to develop childhood games around it—of 'loves me, loves me not,' but with pieces of bread instead of ox-eye daisies as is customary. Whether because of practical concerns or the depth of her (or his perceived) feelings, she does not see the relationship lasting past its second year. The poet speaker does not elaborate on whether this could change, or indeed, whether it is changed by the man's declaration of love—a declaration that comes with an ominous symbolic undertone of the kestrel briefly covering the sun before diving for its prey, characterised by the speaker as "death drop[ping] from above like a stone" (17).

The woman is associated more closely with the ducks, mice and voles by virtue of textual proximity, while the imagery of the kestrel comes up in tandem with the man, too frequently to be coincidental. There is a grim implication, then, in the game of association between death-kestrel-man. The identification of the woman with/as the ducks and man with/as the kestrel draws a parallel between the bird of prey's relation to the duck(ing) as its prey. Carrying the man-as-kestrel comparison, the kestrel carrying its prey in its beak becomes a "strange bird" as it takes back to the sky—unrecognisable, unfamiliar—mirroring the way the man's desire for his walking companion estranges him from her: "He wants her, tells her so / as she half smiles and stands slightly apart" (17) on lines 4 and 5 signals not only physical distance but psychological distance as well following his confession.

On lines 12 and 13 "A couple turn and see a strange bird rise / Into the sky the kestrel climbs alone" further emphasises the ambiguity about the unity of the two: the "two lovers" from line 3, with an implicit definite article—a specific pair of lovers—turns into an indefinite "a couple," which could refer to the man and woman the speaker observed until now, or some other couple. Either way, the epistemological uncertainty grows stronger when read through the hunting kestrel-man parallel; for a moment before the sonnet's conclusion in line 14, even the woman's *ontological* state is in question, as the kestrel, associated with hunting and death, finds its mark, implying that its narrative foil in the man does so as well. The kestrel "climbs into the sky alone" (ibid.), its dead prey no longer counted as company, but closing line seems to reel back the comparisons and the relationship to its state before the walk: "and later she might write or he might phone" (ibid.), confirming that the woman does survive the walk, the courtship, and possibly the relationship.



The uneasy associations between the man, kestrel, and death, and woman, ducks and prey animals persist, however, seemingly enforced too many times to be coincidental. The poet speaker places these two narratives parallel to signify *similarity*, parallelism which goes beyond the temporal. Duffy, it seems, is crafting a point about gender relations: she depicts a man who confesses his (sexual) desire for the woman outright, a woman preoccupied with emotional connection, who nonetheless does not clearly tell him no; saying 'no' to a man who fancies you, Duffy seems to be saying, is not as simple as that, subtly exemplified in the way Duffy anthropomorphises the character of "the earth" in lines 2 and 10-11. Another character closely connected to the woman—by mythological and popular culture, through the common associations of women with 'Mother Nature' and all its healing, revitalising, life-giving properties—is the earth, and the two times Duffy has 'the earth' speak is to identify the prey animals with the woman character. In the first instance, on line two, this dynamic can be argued by process of elimination: the reader can already identify a connection between the man and the kestrel, which leaves "mice and voles" as a symbolic match for the woman. But moreover, it is the character of the earth who dictate's the kestrel's behaviour ("till the earth says *mouse or vole*" and "Suddenly the earth cries / *Now*" (17)), reminiscent of the way male desire and its destructive consequences are all too often explained through *female* behaviour of dressing, acting, or speaking a certain way. Michael Kimmel (2005) decodes the tendency to 'victim-blame' eloquently:

Think of the terms we use in this culture to describe women's beauty and sexuality. We use a language of violence, of aggression. A woman is a "bombshell," a "knock-out," a "femme fatale." She's "stunning," "ravishing," "dressed to kill." We're "blown away," "done in." Women's beauty is experienced by men as an act of aggression—it invades men's thoughts, elicits feelings of desire and longing against their will, makes men feel helpless, powerless, vulnerable. *Then, having committed this invasive act of aggression, women reject men, say no to sex, turn them down.* Rape is a way to get even, to exact revenge for rejection, to retaliate. (190; my emphasis)

It is no wonder, then, that following the cry of "now" from the earth—a homonym for "no" in spelling, if not quite a homophone—is the cue for the kestrel to go in for the kill. Duffy's meaning is subtle, but clear: she works inside a space of unchecked male desire—the sonnet—but refuses to stay quiet about the violence implicit in said male desire. The structural subversions foreground the thematical, and in marrying Dante's and Chaucer's terza rima with the fourteen-line sonnet, she defies expectations of how much narrativity a sonnet can contain (the amount is evidently enough for two separate, albeit symbolically connected, narratives). The terza rima, too, is used to marry content and form, creating a "combinatorial effect of effects, rhymes surging

forward and overlapping at the same time" (Stefanile 117) which facilitates the dual narratives of the promenading couple and hunting kestrel. Duffy likewise creates "a sense of expectancy" both as it pertains to the predictable dual *forms* of sonnet and terza rima which is mirrored in the poem content: the reader might expect the woman to end up like the prey animal, riding the symbolic parallel to its end much the same way one expects the middle rhyme of terza rima to reappear in the next tercet (*ibid.*)—just like the "middle rhyme...is foregrounded in the tercet that follows, and *then* disappears," (*ibid.*), Duffy, too, baits the reader with the foregone conclusion of the interconnected fates of the prey animal and woman, only for the parallel to be denied—for it to disappear—in the sonnet's conclusion.

Patience Agbabi's "The Exchange" (see fig. 2) from *Bloodshot Monochrome* (2008) is highly similar in thematic terms. It is also as much a revision of the sonnet form as it is of its conventional subject materials, underscoring the symbiotic function of form and content in relation to one another. The speaker poet of "The Exchange" is external, and the style narrative instead of lyric. Supporting the narrative nature are the 'stage directions' supplied as metatexts, indicating the location and time of date for the two 'scenes,' divided into the octave and sestet respectively; the 'stage directions' play with the formal proportionality of the sonnet, making the allusion to the tradition explicit, reading "INT. RESTAURANT"—indicating, simply, that the scene happens inside a restaurant—"8.06 p.m.," and then "INT. BUS (MOVING) - 6.08 p.m.," referencing the number of lines in an octave and sestet (Agbabi 63). Much like the speaker of "Terza Rima SW19," Agbabi's speaker poet chronicles a romantic meeting, potentially an extramarital affair, between a man and woman. In "The Exchange," however, the danger inherent in erasing female subjectivity/the objectification of the 'beloved' is presented more plainly: by the sestet, set in a moving bus and rife with violent imagery of blood and severed appendages, the woman is erased from the sonnet entirely. Where in the octave there is overflowing desire—erotica inscribed between the lines, a tension that threatens to overflow off the page—in the sestet there is a copious absence. The speaker forgets the woman; Agbabi writes her out, but writes *in* the void she leaves behind, the "black hole in his off-white shirt" (63).

Like Duffy, Agbabi challenges narrative constraints in subverting the Petrarchan expectation of lowered dramatic potential (Spiller 3-4), all the while adhering to fourteen lines, iambic pentameter, and a close approximation of an Italian rhyme scheme. It appears that Agbabi continues to set up formal expectations about form simply to subvert them: her poem is an intentional mix of sonneteering and screenwriting. The poet speaker gives the reader little in the way of explanation—the sonnet form does not afford them such privilege. The narration starts in *medias res*: present tense, scene, action; a man and a woman at a restaurant; the clock shows six minutes past six in the evening; the woman is sweating, a choker around her neck, which evokes verbal associations of

## THE EXCHANGE

INT. RESTAURANT – 8.06 p.m.

His tongue speaks brandy but his voice is hoarse.

Catches her eye, reverts from man to beast.

Her choker feeds on candlelight, its beads  
are sweat. He struggles to pronounce the hors

d'oeuvres which arrive pulsating, rare.

They eat each other's hearts, a Roman feast  
of Russian dolls. Then exchange the ghost  
of a smile as she strips her wedding finger bare.

INT. BUS (MOVING) – 6.08 p.m.

A man stumbles upon the step, eyes bloodshot,  
clutched to his chest an anarchy of blood  
burning a black hole in his off-white shirt.

Only a lover's supplication would  
prize open his locked hands, expose his guilt.

A severed finger, the bright stench of gold.

Fig. 2. "The Exchange" by Patience Agbabi (*Bloodshot Monochrome*, 2008, p. 63)

sexual subcultures. The man has begun drinking before the scene ("His tongue speaks brandy" (63)), his voice is hoarse from the drink or an excess of emotion, and he is implied to want the woman, sexually or in some other predatory, or bestial, manner: "Catches her eye, reverts from man to beast" (ibid.). From the outset, the dynamic between the pair is strange; it seems odd that, at a restaurant and over dinner, the man would need to "catch" his date's eye, not to mention the odd characterisation of either is physical or mental presentation turning bestial once he does. The speaker gives no explanation for the woman's profuse sweating—"Her choker feeds on candlelight, its beads / are sweat" (ibid.)—and thus the reader is left to theorise: is she sweating because she is flushed from being so attracted to her date in turn? Is she sweating because she is nervous? Is the restaurant simply too warm, and if so, why is her date also not sweating?

A genre-conscious sonnet reader will know that the Petrarchan tradition is characterised by unattainable beloveds and torturous, one-sided love. Explicitly, the attraction, if not quite affection, is coming from the side of the 'he' in the poem. We may then theorise that absence of explicit attraction from the side of the woman does not, in a Petrarchan sonnet, imply implicit attraction; moreover, the same cultural scripts which Duffy criticises in "Terza Rima SW19" are helpful in understanding why Agbabi does not portray explicit rejection either—and why a "no" is sometimes a "half-smile" or "stand[ing] slightly apart" (Duffy 17), or "a ghost / of a smile" (Agbabi 63). Kate Manne, in her broad examination of gender dynamics in *Entitled: How Male Privilege Hurts Women* (2020), cites social (and systematic) gender inequalities and (unsurprisingly, given the title of her book) male entitlement to 'consent' (within quotations, for no consent acquired through systematic social pressure can ever amount to true consent):

This lack of desire [to engage in sexual activity with a man] at the core, this sexual Milgram experiment, this obedience to a culturally designated authority figure in the relevant domain—it goes beyond sex, too. Most obviously, it extends to other forms of manhandling that may or may be sexual but are nonetheless proprietary and presumptuous... The relevant inequalities are a product of patriarchal culture, and the subsequent threats and punishment levelled at girls and women who resist and challenge the will of male authority figures. Hence this particular form of internalized misogyny: the shame and guilt women often feel for not protecting a man who mistreats us. (72-73)

The sexual symbolism which comes in in the second quatrain of the octave underscores the sexually charged nature of the meeting and also the woman's ambivalence. The speaker makes a point of describing the couple's appetisers with highly associative words such as "pulsating, rare" in line 5, and the figurative language spins a web of erotic associations (Agbabi 63). While the

pronunciation of the "hors d'ouvres"—a curious choice for an end rhyme, as it does not rhyme, exactly, but is more a visual pair, or perhaps relying on the assumption that the word is pronounced incorrectly in order to form a rhyming pair with "hoarse"—is made a point of, this is not what the pair is said to eat. Possibly, the speaker is making oblique fun at the man's expense, juxtaposing the high society flare of speaking French, or at least using French for foods which could just as easily be called by their English names, and then failing to quite do it right.

"They eat each other's hearts," the speaker recounts further, "a Roman feast / of Russian dolls" (ibid.). It seems unlikely that what is being described is a literal feast of hearts. The eating of hearts, then, makes for a violent allegory: bloody, messy, involving the cracking open of ribcages; it implies an all-consuming finality, as well as emotion, which, while (heart-)felt, is brutal, animalistic – cannibalistic, even, but at least implicitly mutual at this stage. What connection Roman feasts—consisting of three courses; extravagant, adhering to specific rules of progression and etiquette depending on whether a feast was public or private—have to the narrative is an intriguing question. While the appetisers are explicitly mentioned in the text, there is no mention of the main course of the dessert, both necessary parts of a Roman feast. Perhaps the reader is meant to understand that the hearts are the main course, following the "hors d'ouvres"—Roman feasts were often entirely excessive, expensive, and shocking courses, particularly among the rich, and hearts certainly fit this description. The dessert, however, is entirely off the page, which again makes for a sexual innuendo: the woman removes her wedding band for it, after an entire octave of rather erotically charged diction—perhaps the dessert is not culinary at all. Perhaps the woman takes her wedding ring off in preparation for a "dessert" which has little at all to do with actual food.

Of course, with a "feast of Russian dolls," the symbolism grows ever stranger. Russian dolls are a type of nested doll: upon opening one you discover another smaller one inside, until you get to the smallest doll in the core. Possibly the hearts like Russian dolls, layered, and hiding inside them something else than that which is immediately obvious. If so, it bespeaks duplicity, or multiplicity, of the diners' hearts. Perhaps each of them occupies only a single 'layer' of the other's heart. Perhaps the metaphor refers to them removing layers of one another's hearts until they see the truth of them: the smallest, best-hidden part at the centre. Perhaps they know exactly what to expect – after all, we are not surprised when we see a nesting doll and discover the smaller dolls nesting within. Possibly the nestled dolls and the systematic unmasking of truths is an allusion to the social mechanics of getting to know one another or keeping some masks on and taking some off—the speaker does not disclose whether, in this feast of hearts, either party gets to the core of things. But the associative game of 'layers' can go various places: layers of clothes, layers of skin, layers of intimacy, all circling back to the erotic reading of the octave. Infidelity is another easy guess, from line 8: "she strips her wedding finger bare" (ibid.)—for what

reasons does one have for removing one's wedding ring in public—and popular culture depicts the act most often before adultery as a symbol for the forsaking of marital vows.

The form is no doubt crafted to compliment the content of a poem: the sexual tension is punctuated by Agbabi's rhythmic devices and use of figurative language to allude to physicality. The man's voice is already "hoarse;" between the surface narration, words such as "choker," "feeds," "pulsating," "feast" and "strip" evoke eroticism (67). The tension built by the rising rhythm and its abrupt cut-off of lines 2, 3 and 4 are in themselves a functional mirror for the game of bait and switch and delayed gratification played by the man and woman, its initial resolution in lines 7 and 8 another for the resolution of the sexual tension between them. Of course, Agbabi's rhymes are not limited to end rhyme. Already in line 2 and 3, Agbabi sets up a building urgency with the internal rhymes of *beast / feeds / beads* which give the lines a sense of speeding up toward resolution until they are instead abruptly cut off by the enjambed ending, "its beads / are sweat." She repeats a similar trick in lines 6 and 7, rushing the narrative with almost litany-like repetition of internal rhyme: "They eat each other's hearts, a Roman feast," and again, "of Russian dolls...the ghost" in line 7 (*ibid.*). Here, the rhythm does not falter to a stop, however, but keeps rising in line 8 with the two extra syllables and anapaest substitutions. The volta comes in cleanly at the end of line 8 where the scene completes, driven home with a pair of anapaest substitutions for iambs at the start of the line which serve well to heighten the narrative tension into a climax – a loaded twelve syllable line in a poem of iambic pentameter – before it peters out into a hard pause at the end of the octave.

Everything changes after the volta, which is expected; what is not as expected is the violence—the total change of direction, from heat, sensuality, and eroticism to the jarring movement of a bus in motion, "stumbling" steps and "bloodshot eyes" (67). The scene is positioned at 6.08 p.m., presumably the next day, although there is no definite way to know. "A man stumbles upon the step, eyes bloodshot," the sestet starts, and the reader presumes this is the man from the octave as well (*ibid.*), and here Agbabi's revisionist begins in earnest: the speaker omits the woman—and at this stage it seems appropriate to identify her as the 'unattainable beloved' of the Petrarchan sonnet tradition.

This is also where Agbabi makes her statement about the romanticisation, idealisation, and objectification of the female beloved in the sonnet genre—characterised by writing "about greatly idealised, disembodied young women, who usually only [exist] on the page" (Schwanebek 184); "a tradition where the male speaker-poet yearns after an often unattainable female beloved" (Seiler-Garman 6)—a feature accepted at face value but with harrowing implications when examined outside of poetics and applied in real life. Where romanticisation and idealisation are both ways to deny agency and subjectivity, objectification becomes the appropriate term to describe the

overarching principle of the depiction of aforementioned “disembodied young women” (Schwanebek 184). Sáez et al. have summarised the effect of interpersonal sexual objectification for (heterosexual) intimate partner violence. “Commonly perpetrated by men,” and a “common interpersonal experience in the lives of women,” Sáez et al. summarise the immediate effects of interpersonal objectification: “treating someone like an object involves instrumentality, denial of autonomy and subjectivity, perceived inertness and fungibility, as well as violability, and ownership” (1434). Both Agbabi and Duffy are experts at expressing this practical finding in abstract terms in their fiction—in the way the female characters in “Terza Rima SW19” and “The Exchange” suppress their feelings and step aside in order to facilitate the desires of men. Importantly, Sáez et al. establish a connection between “objectifying perceptions of women” and intimate partner violence:

[M]en in heterosexual relationships were more likely to sexually pressure and coerce their partners if they objectified them. In a similar vein...objectifying perceptions of women are predictive of more positive attitudes toward violence against women, suggesting a strong association between violence against women and the notion that women are objects ... Importantly, men who objectify women are more likely to engage in psychological, physical, and sexual violence toward their partners, suggesting that men’s perpetration of sexual objectification plays an important role in [intimate partner violence] perpetration. (1435)

Michael Kimmel likewise theorises the sentiment (which Manne reiterates in *Entitled*): that “[g]ender inequality is reinforced by the ways we have come to assume that men are more sexual than women, that men will always try to escalate sexual encounters to prove their manhood,” and Sáez et al. concur that “IPV is an all too common occurrence in the lives of women, sexual objectification—seeing and treating a target as an object for the use of the perceiver, is one of the most widespread demonstrations of gender discrimination, in which women are the primary targets” (Kimmel 5; Sáez et al. 1431).

In “The Exchange,” the female character, by the events of the sestet, ‘steps aside’ entirely. The implication is not that the stepping aside has been voluntary, but rather violent and forced: “clutched to his chest an anarchy of blood // burning a black hole in his off-white shirt”; “Only a lover’s supplication would / prize open his locked hands, expose his guilt / A severed finger, the bright stench of gold” (67). The woman is missing from the sestet because she *cannot be* present for the sestet—she has been silenced, possibly killed for refusing to *self-silence*. Agbabi takes the concept of the sonnet

tradition's female character's ontological uncertainty one step further from Duffy's "Terza Rima SW19," driving home Schwanebek's point of the "idealised, disembodied young women, who usually only exist[s] on the page" (184): the woman is, indeed, allowed to live on only if they can embody the impossible standard. Agbabi's woman, failing this, is disembodied in the most literal sense, made to disappear from the sonnet *and* ontologically.

Despite its title, the only exchange mentioned in the text itself is the "exchang[ing] of a ghost of a smile," but this is unlikely to be the exchange that the poem's title is referring to. Other things are being exchanged, textually and subtextually. At the restaurant – the setting indicated by the stage direction, "INT." for indoors, followed by the location and time – money is exchanged for food and drink; the man and woman likely exchange words. They exchange hearts, in line six: "They eat each other's hearts, a Roman feast" (Agbabi 67). They exchange a look in line two, one that has apparent consequences for how the evening will turn out. The exchanges after the volta are conditional and perhaps implied, in the past. He would exchange a lover's supplication for the opening of his hands and the exposure of his guilt – guilt about what is unclear, but not incredibly hard to guess, given the context. I argue, however that the title refers to the metastructural exchanges between men and women for which the sonnet is a synecdoche: the implied exchange of desire for violence; the exchange of the idealisation and objectification of the Petrarchan beloved for a sense of male entitlement that ends in blood. An 'exchange' semantically implies a symmetry—most exchanges in everyday life, like that of money for goods or services, are perceived to be equal; few, especially monetary, exchanges are really that, given the late-stage capitalist social contexts and orders which enforce multiple forms of inequality by limiting access to information and choices. Feminist writers, likewise, conceptualise heterosexual relationships through (unequal) exchanges: the emotional labour of (particularly, but not exclusively) cohabitating heterosexual partnerships falls on the woman, with "emotional labour" defined as the "[f]ree, invisible work women do to keep track of the little things in life that, taken together, amount to the big things in life: the glue that holds households, and by extension, proper societies, together" by Tracy Moore (2018). Manne, in *Entitled*, characterises (with the support of endless research articles) male-female partnerships as unequitable (127). This is the unequal exchange referred to by Agbabi's sonnet title: whatever a woman (or *the* woman, in Agbabi's sonnet) receives in exchange for her emotional labour (such as the placating, self-silencing behaviour described earlier in this chapter), for looking good, for withstanding sexual advances which, as established, are not reciprocal, the man receives proportionally more.

And so it goes, on the level of the sonnet's narrative, on the overarching level of Petrarchan love poetry, on the level of real-life male-female gender relations. This is the exchange Agbabi is referring to: tied up in perceived but deceptive "equal exchanges," Agbabi makes a synecdoche of the sonnet about nonreciprocity. Man wants woman. Woman does not want man; woman



## Human Interest

Fifteen years minimum, banged up inside  
for what took thirty seconds to complete.  
She turned away. I stabbed. I felt this heat  
burn through my skull until reason had died.

I'd slogged my guts out for her, but she lied  
when I knew different. She used to meet  
some prick after work. She stank of deceit.

I loved her. When I accused her, she cried  
and denied it. Straight up, she tore me apart.  
On the Monday, I found the other bloke  
had bought her a chain with a silver heart.

When I think about her now, I near choke  
with grief. My baby. She wasn't a tart  
or nothing. I wouldn't harm a fly, no joke.

Fig. 3. "Human Interest" by Carol Ann Duffy (*Standing Female Nude*, 1985, p. 34).

does not live up to the ideal. The Petrarchan flavour of interpersonal objectification leads to reduced humanisation and empathy toward women (Sáez et al.), which leads to an increased probability of intimate partner violence (sexual, physical, psychological) toward women (ibid.); increased potential becomes actualised potential. In addition to working the sonnet form technically to modernise it and make it her own, Agbabi has chosen to subvert the sonnet tradition thematically by making the typically implicit consequence of unchecked male desire—violence, or entitlement, eloquently expressed by Manne, Sáez et al., and Kimmel—explicit with the sestet’s literal blood.

### **“Human Interest” and the explicit violence of male sexual violence**

If “The Exchange” is a subtle expression of the violent consequences of normalising the Petrarchan-style objectification of women, Duffy’s “Human Interest” (see fig. 3) from *Standing Female Nude* (1985) dispenses with subtlety altogether. “Human Interest” is, in the style of the two other poems in this chapter, a spin on the convention of the (Petrarchan) love sonnet which incorporates self-directed cautions against heedless love and crafting an internal conflict resulting in professions of doomed and undying affection. Certainly, and innocuously enough, a possible reading of “Human Interest” is a take on modern doomed love and a criticism of (hetero)romantic relationships, and in this manner, a way to conform to, or maybe appropriate the Petrarchan sonnet. But more than that, I argue that this is a poem with the same thematic core as “Terza Rima SW19” and Agbabi’s “The Exchange”: Duffy and Agbabi both give voice to ‘the part we don’t say out loud’—the part about how romanticising and idealising women—typical not only of the sonnet tradition but real-life doomed love as well—must always end in disappointment, and what can happen when that disappointment bubbles over, when those ridiculous expectations are not and cannot be met.

Unlike the two other sonnets featured in this chapter, “Human Interest” does not seek to revise the sonnet through structural means, and thus the speaker is a traditional Petrarchan tortured poet relating his doomed love in first person. The confessional proper begins in line three, with “She turned away. I stabbed. I felt this heat / burn through my skull until reason had died” (Duffy 34), where the reader first understands that the sonnet monologue is more than *confessional*: it is a *confession* in the sense we know the word in criminal confessions. This contextualises the preceding lines 1-2 as well, where the speaker relates the length of his criminal sentence: “Fifteen years minimum, banged up inside” (ibid.). Whatever associations a reader might have about the Petrarchan love-confessional mode, a confession about *murdering* one’s beloved is not typically one, and thus, already in the first quatrain, Duffy subverts

expectations about the sonnet's narrative: it is markedly less easy, now, to think of the speaker poet as a tortured, wounded, lovelorn individual with the context that his 'affection' for his beloved has resulted in her death by his hands.

In the same vein, an average reader would welcome, if not expect, introspection and self-criticism to follow an opening quatrain like this, but none is forthcoming. Duffy's intent, then, is *satire* on the sonnet genre: the informed reader knows to expect expressions of love, guilt, praise for the beloved; the informed reader harbours expectations with regard to conventional Petrarchan sonnet content. It is precisely this irony—the reader expectations juxtaposed against the speaker poet's chosen course—which marks the revisionist tendency in "Human Interest." What follows instead are self-*justifications*: an unwelcome rationalisation of a violent and fatal outburst resulting from the beloved's transgressive action of simply not reserving her affections for the speaker alone: "I'd slogged my guts out for her," the speaker begins in line 5, "but she lied / ...She used to meet / some prick after work. She stank of deceit. // I loved her. When I accused her, she cried / and denied it. Straight up, she tore me apart." (34). At this point, it is unclear whether these 'transgressions' on the part of the beloved are even real or if the speaker imagined such an affair, which makes the resulting killing even more horrifying, if not particularly surprising, given the statistics on intimate partner violence at the close, or attempted close of a relationship<sup>3</sup>. And perhaps initially, the reader might consider the exposition in lines 10 and 11 proof of the beloved's guilt—"On the Monday, I found the other bloke / had bought her a chain with a silver heart" (*ibid.*)—but on closer inspection, finding a *necklace* bespeaks no guilt. The speaker could not have known where the necklace came from, yet he presents his side as truth, as proof of his partner's indiscretion. A careful reader, however, is not as easily misled, and thus the cognitive dissonance sparked by the attempt at courting reader sympathy (in the style of a human-interest article), and the implicit equating of a post-murder self-pity party to conventional Petrarchan love lyric, deepens.

By the closing tercet, the reader has caught on: there will be no real grief. The speaker's confession is performative, insincere, employing a human-interest register and the Petrarchan rhetoric and form of unrequited love to self-justify: "When I think about her now, I near choke / with grief. My baby," (*ibid.*), the speaker laments, skipping conveniently past the fact that he himself is the reason he must "grieve," and that said grief was entirely unavoidable, had he

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<sup>3</sup> R. Emerson Dobash and Russell Dobash (1992): "Men commonly hunt down and kill wives who have left them... Men kill wives as part of planned murder-suicides... Men kill in response to revelations of wifely infidelity; women almost never respond similarly, though their mates are more often adulterous" (p. 81); Kimmel (2005): "[T]he research is clear that violence against women increases dramatically following divorce or separation, the research that found comparable results excluded incidents that occurred after separation or divorce. About 76% of all assaults take place then, with a male perpetrator more than 93% of the time" (p. 193).

had a handle on his aggression and entitlement. "She wasn't a tart / or nothing," he closes, pre-empting his imaginary audience's negative opinion of his beloved—pre-empting it, because this is no doubt how he would conceive the situation from an outside perspective, as though his (supposedly) unfaithful beloved is the one at fault—but remembering to bring the narrative back to himself for the ironic closing (*ibid.*). "I wouldn't harm a fly, no joke," he professes, in direct opposition of everything the reader already knows, and assuming that despite all that, he is entitled to such a suspense of disbelief.

For rhyme and stanzaic organisation, the poem is without a doubt calling upon the Petrarchan sonnet: its end rhyme scheme reads *abba abb acdc dcd*, with a volta at the end of line 7. The faithful adherence to Petrarchism is one reason why it is an unusual—and nearly certainly a purposeful choice—to subvert the stanzaic pattern like Duffy has; this is precisely what Estrin calls "Petrarchan revisionism" (345). The poem conforms to a familiar Petrarchan style in structure and even in content: it may not be the most obvious take-away, but the killer still laments a love that is unattainable. He may also be the reason that it is unattainable, but the speaker would clearly like the reader to pay less attention to this. Despite the grim outpouring about his late lover's alleged indiscretions ("she lied / when I knew different. She used to meet / some prick after work. She stank of deceit" (Duffy 34), the narrator still manages fondness for her: "When I think about her now, I near choke / with grief. My baby. She was no tart / or nothing." (34). The poem starts out as a very regular iambic pentameter, but already on line 6, the meter falls into disrepair—Duffy has employed internal caesuras before then, too, to complicate the meter, but here the effect becomes extreme.

If one thinks back to the dramatic function especially Shakespeare had for iambic pentameter, maybe this makes sense – iambic pentameter is a formal register, reserved usually for well-read and sophisticated characters, or if not that, then for monologues of special importance for the narrative. There must be a reason for the introduction of iambic pentameter only to dispense with it after one and a half stanzas. In general, the speaker's diction strongly implies a working-class background, full of British slang such as "slogged my guts out," "straight up," "bloke," "tart" and "no joke" (34). Iambic pentameter with its associations of elegance and well-spokenness doesn't particularly suit a speaker who has just stabbed his wife to death in a fit of rage. Thus, the very first line also almost reads like a quote from a sentencing or a lawyer, not authentically the words of the speaker. When we consider the title, it lends further context to what kind of monologue this is: a human-interest story is a journalism term describing a piece of soft news, typically an in-depth interview designed to shed light on an event through a profile of a person involved within it. This dramatic monologue, indeed, reads much like an interview given for its titular human-interest piece. Helen MacGill Hughes characterises human-interest stories as "revelations of private life and those inconsequential items" which "[inform] people about one another" (73). The human-interest story has, historically, a

specific target readership, originally engineered—that is, purposefully “written up like fiction,” “told in the language of the street” (MacGill Hughes 74)—to attract “new classes of readers” for newspapers (ibid.). Duffy’s choice to combine the human-interest story specifically with the sonnet form becomes all the more important when one considers that this target group was specifically a certain type of man: “artisans and mechanics,” “the man of labor,” and “the small merchant” (ibid.).

It does not seem coincidental that Duffy’s speaker could be characterised as one such man, particularly as it courts the sympathies of the intended target audiences of human-interest stories. Once again, the interests and voices of women—obviously, the dead victim’s voice, but also those whom the fictional poet speaker might be trying to reach or convince—are painfully insignificant and deafeningly silent. Duffy’s point in crafting these careful juxtapositions of what the speaker believes to be true and what the audience has ironical, conflicting knowledge about, is about male entitlement and the sonnet form as a “patriarchal project with a distinct social dimension,” where there is “only limited use for women” (Schwanebek 184-5). Unlike in “Terza Rima SW19” and “The Exchange,” Duffy reverses the script in making the violence toward women entirely explicit—where the other two poems subtly hint at the consequences of interpersonal idealisation and objectification of women, Duffy portrays these consequences explicitly in a perpetrator’s confession, laying bare the implicit mechanisms through which this violence, although very real, is concealed, minimised, and normalised in patriarchal societies. Male sexual desire and sexual violence toward women are terribly intertwined: a large portion of toxic masculinity and the male sexual entitlement which stems from it is about sexual dominance.

Michael Kimmel (2005) quotes an interviewee from a study conducted by Tim Beneke where participants were asked to describe circumstances under which they might commit rape:

A lot of times a woman knows that she’s looking really good and she’ll use that and flaunt it and it makes me feel like she’s laughing at me and I feel degraded . . . If I were actually desperate enough to rape somebody it would be from wanting that person, but also it would be a very spiteful thing, just being able to say “I have power over you and I can do anything I want with you” because really I feel that they have power over me just by their presence. Just the fact that they can come up to me and just melt me makes me feel like a dummy, makes me want revenge. They have power over me so I want power over them. (227-228)

When something (someone) does not submit, the Western world does not, as a culture, have healthy outlets for male rejection, but instead maintains a patriarchal-misogynist system which feeds on power imbalances and trivialises gendered violence. For a man to write about (sexual) violence toward women would be to speak with the voice of the aggressor—yet such accounts exist in the literary canon. Vladimir Nabokov, for instance wrote and published such works: *Lolita* (1991), *The Enchanter* (1939 [1985]), which he refers to as the pre-*Lolita*, and *Ada* (1969), and at worst, are celebrated (again, Nabokov's *Lolita* is an 'undisputable' literary classic, alongside *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis, another first-person narrated novel about a monstrous man. The speaker of "Human Interest" is so similar, in fact, with Nabokov's Humber Humbert—the prototypical unreliable narrator of *Lolita*—that it is possible to posit an intertextual reference.

However, when a woman writes on the topic, even with the voice of a male speaker, there is a new irony present: nearly every woman has occupied the position of victim (Sáez et al. 1434). These discussions—an interview about murder or assault—have theoretical potential to be carried out by either party (the victim or the perpetrator), but in a system where the typical victim is female and the typical perpetrator is male, one narrative is worth more; one narrative will be taken more seriously than the other. This, I believe, is a purposefully ironic feature of Duffy's "Human Interest"—the framing of the poem as a piece of the human-interest story genre. A woman has been brutally killed, but a fictional media outlet still goes forward with an interview of the killer—not the victim's family and loved ones, not the police, not even the killer's family, but the killer himself. Horrifically reminiscent of the news headlines after American school shootings where front pages protest the good nature and childhood manners of a formerly "good" or "quiet" type, gendered domestic violence in the West is at once a taboo topic and yet entirely normalised: "so deeply woven into the fabric of daily life that we accept violence as a matter of course—within families, between friends, between lovers. Most victims of violence know their attackers; many know them intimately. Nearly one in five victims of violence treated in hospital emergency rooms were injured by a spouse, a former spouse, or a current or former boyfriend or girlfriend" (Kimmel 187-188).

The desensitisation to gendered violence as a part of romance begins on school yards and continues all throughout adolescence and early adulthood when media romanticises narratives of extreme jealousy and controlling boyfriends, reframing troubling behaviours as devotion. Its pinnacle is the (fictional) situation Duffy presents the reader with: the reader—of the poem as well as the fictional news story—is invited to sympathise with the killer who is allowed to tell his story. He is allowed what female victims of domestic and sexual violence are so often not: a platform to speak; something else than outright dismissal and devaluation.

Voice and silence are therefore important concepts for all three poems in this chapter—who gets to speak and whose voice matters for the narrative are important questions to ask of all three poems. In the heavily gendered sonnet tradition, the speaking subject is not conventionally a woman, and this feature is acknowledged and incorporated in these three sonnets by Agbabi and Duffy, yet in ways that undermine the status quo of female silence in unexpected ways. Instead of giving these women voices, Agbabi and Duffy problematise the normative and ever-present male voice instead. In these sonnets, explicitly voiced male desire is associated with intimate partner violence; in “The Exchange” and “Human Interest,” this violence is also realised. Agbabi and Duffy establish a continuum between idealisation-objectification-violence, a pipeline whose existence in the real world is further evidenced by the research presented by Sáez et al. and Kimmel. The poets both caricature the normalisation of violence (toward women) by featuring a human-interest piece with a murderer on it, and a blood-covered man riding a bus at daytime, his female date suspiciously missing. Their revisionist project aims to make the reader uncomfortable by establishing a link between violent gendered crime and the seemingly ‘innocent’ Petrarchan poet speaker who admires his beloved from afar. Voice and silence emerge as prominent concepts in the next chapter as well as the argument moves from gender relations to theorising gender itself.

## Chapter 2

### Queering the sonnet: queer revision in *Bloodshot Monochrome* (2008) and *Rapture* (2005)

People have to share everything they do these days,  
from meals, to nights out, to selfies of themselves half  
naked in a mirror. The borders between public and  
private are dissolving

—Bernardine Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other*

This chapter explores how Agbabi and Duffy revise the sonnet tradition by portraying alternative configurations of genders and sexualities, instead of adhering to the archetypal male poet-speaker and their feminine object of desire/affection. Western society has, since the nineteenth century and the introduction of “the homosexual” as an identity category, been organising the personal narratives of social identities through binaries (Hall 1; Valocchi 753). Queer theory is interested in studying and deconstructing such binaries which persist—or, rather are generated and enforced in society through “social institutions such as schools, clinics, mass media, and even social movements,” (Valocchi 756) to mention a few examples—and what the supposed categories reveal about what is normative in a society (Valocchi 752-753). Examples of these binaries include male/female, masculine/feminine, heterosexual/homosexual, public/private, and other, more specialised categories especially as sub-binaries of larger categories, such as represented/unrepresented, and closeted/out.

#### **“Human experience is just not that easily categorised”: queerness, binaries, and the closet**

*Queering* as a concept and a practice has much overlap with the practice of literary revision, which makes it a natural companion for an analysis of revisionist texts: “the verb to queer has become one that has positive potential: it is often used to mean a process by which some phenomenon ... is *reevaluated* [sic] *and reread* in ways that break down what is “normal,”” queer scholar Bruce Henderson writes (15; emphasis mine).



Queer theory differs from theory focused on gay or lesbian subjects in that it “foregrounds the constructed nature of the sex, gender, and sexuality classification systems,” revealing the “incoherence and instability” of “the reality of sexed bodies and gender and sexual identities” (ibid.). Stephen Valocchi further explains that

[q]ueer theory focuses on the “deviant” cases, or the anatomies, genders, sexual practices, and identities that do not neatly fit into either category of the binaries or that violate the normative alignment of sex, gender, and sexuality. It also pays attention to how the dominant taxonomies fail to capture the complexity of individual gender and sexual subjectivities and practices even among those who may define themselves in terms of those dominant taxonomies. (753)

A central concept in queer studies is *heteronormativity*, which is used to express “the set of norms that makes heterosexuality seem natural or right and that organise homosexuality as its binary opposite” (Valocchi 756). Heteronormativity expresses the ways in which heterosexuality and cultural scripts associated with it—such as marriage between a cisgender man and cisgender woman, or the social expectation to procreate, as well as the societal incentives to do so, in the form of parental leave and benefits systems, to mention a few—are naturalised in society through the unconscious normative quality afforded to them (ibid.). The effect of heteronormativity—the prevention of “homosexuality from being a form of sexuality that can be taken for granted or *go unmarked or seem right in the way heterosexuality can*” (ibid.; emphasis mine)—is central to this analysis as well.

Although Valocchi uses ‘homosexuality’ in the above argument, he expands on the insufficiency of the term for expressing the full range of the sexual or gender practices alternative to heterosexuality:

individual desires, practices, and affiliations cannot be accurately defined by the sex of object choice ...modes of embodiment such as sadomasochism, leatherplay, intersexuality, and trans sexuality, for example, cannot be reduced to the categories of homosexuality or heterosexuality (754)

The problematisation and deconstruction of not only the binaries of male/female and heterosexual/homosexual, but also *homosexuality itself* allows for representations of nonheteronormative identities in ways that are not centred around definitive labels for different subcategories of gender and sexual expression. Rather, useful concepts are theorised from experiences relevant to

the multiple gender and sexuality identities which live under the umbrella term of queerness.

Calling back to the concept of heteronormativity, and the processes through which an identity category becomes unmarked and normative, queer theorists have supplied terminology to explore knowledge relating to marked categories such as queerness and how these knowledges are characterised. One such concept employed in this chapter to identify queer representations is “the closet,” theorised first by Eve Sedgwick in her pioneering queer studies work *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990). The closet, in queer studies, stands for different dynamics of knowledge about identity categories relating to sexuality and gender; it is used to describe the extents to which information about different marked identity categories is disclosed, intuited, withheld, or ignored (Sedgwick 68). Susan Talburt highlights the oppositional forces—notably not conceptualised as binaries, but rather as dimensions, or positions along spectrums—which contribute to “an unknowability of [queer] experience”: knowledge/ignorance, voice/silence, and visibility/invisibility (Talburt 529).

Theorising queerness through knowledge has a two-fold purpose for this analysis. Firstly, conceptualising queerness as oppositional to heteronormativity, yet otherwise ‘unknowable’ and resistant to internal divisions, opens avenues for queer interpretation and analysis in sonnets where there are notable ambiguities relating to gendering or sexing of speaker poets or other characters. Secondly, by theorising queerness mainly through the concepts of “voice, visibility, knowledge, and ignorance” (Talburt 537), queer theory creates an effect of semiotic confusion where the sign for the signified meaning (in this case, queerness) is less frequently actual visible expression of queerness (for example homosexual physicality, or transgender characters), and more often the absence of definitive expressions of sexuality, heterosexual or otherwise. Therefore silence, secrecy, or simply carefully modulated knowledge of a character’s sexuality begin to instead signify queerness.

Olu Jensen has expressed this effect of defamiliarisation through nondisclosure and liminal knowledges with the term ‘the queer uncanny,’ after Sigmund Freud’s theory from a 1919 essay titled “The Uncanny,” where Freud used it to denote “liminal position[s]” and the “problematization [sic] of ‘reality’ in terms of ideology” (Olu 1, 2). The *queer* uncanny, then, according to Olu, confronts the (constructed) ‘reality’ of heteronormativity (2). The connection between Freud’s theory and the queer is three-fold. Culturally and epistemologically, queerness is placed “‘on the edge of’, ‘at the back of’, ‘in opposition to’ and even ‘underneath’ heterosexuality” reproducing the dynamic of Freud’s *unheimlich/heimlich* (2). Additionally, the effect described by the term “uncanny”—the “making strange and uncomfortable as we know it”—is a feature of both queer theory and what Olu calls “a queer aesthetic, drawing on both repetition and the carnivalesque” (2), evoking the literary concept of defamiliarization as well as a counterpoint for what is naturalised in society (i.e.,

heteronormativity, maleness as universality). Finally, the uncanny as something secret which has nonetheless become known has much overlap with Sedgwick's 'closet' (2-3).

The concept of secrecy/unspokenness/the unsayable/the unsaid is employed here as a major signal for queer coding of a text, particularly in the sense that the binaries of open/secret and spoken (or speakable)/unspoken function as allegories for normative/nonnormative without designating further binary identities to the latter categories. The aim of this chapter is to follow queer theory tenets by positing that Agbabi and Duffy make visible a non-binary, nonnormative, instable, and incoherent, indefinable queerness by resisting the language of precise gendering and precise binary identity categories in their sonnet genre works.

These alternative sonnets include women who love women, the nondisclosure of the gender of the beloved in love sonnet sequences, and gender non-conforming femininity. The poems featured in this chapter are representative of Agbabi and Duffy's wider revisionist tendencies to write narratives about queer experiences through use of historically and conventionally male and heteronormative forms, thus contributing to for a more diverse British poetry canon. *Rapture* and *Bloodshot Monochrome* are both sonnet collections – one of Spiller's key features for identifying a sonnet—or a poem deliberately invoking the sonnet tradition—is its place within a collection or sequence of sonnets (Spiller 3). Therefore, this chapter features poems which are not "pure" sonnets on account of their form but nonetheless have a clear relevance to the sonnet tradition.

### ***Bloodshot Monochrome* and queer revisionism**

Patience Agbabi's sonnet "Step" (see fig. 4), published in her collection *Bloodshot Monochrome* (2008) exemplifies some of the tropes which I argue are central to queer writing, and especially to queer revisionism: explicit queering of a 'canonically' unmarked character and relationship, as well as the rhetoric of the binary of 'closeted'/ out. Thus, it functions well as a practical introduction to this chapter's themes.

"Step" is a formally traditional sonnet, featuring three quatrains and an ending couplet as well as end rhymes, albeit not in any conventionalised pattern configuration. As well as drawing on the sonnet tradition—through form, of course, but also by its thematic aspect of forlorn, unattainable love, for the poet speaker's object of affection is long dead—the poem is a revisionist take on the 18<sup>th</sup> century fairy tale about Snow White, popularised and edited to its best-known form by the Brothers Grimm in 1819. The story has analogues in similar

fables across the globe: particularly in the archetypal character of the Evil Queen, who also the speaker of Agbabi's poem, who features in many derivative works and remains a popular target of feminist revisions.

While the Brothers Grimm did not name her, authors throughout history have given her names, typically drawing heavily from mythologies and the symbolism therein, to further flesh out her character. Agbabi, too, has named her Evil Queen: the first line, carrying on the enjambed imperative from the title, reads a command addressed to Imelda from her queen: "*Step / into my shoes, Imelda, said the dead queen*" (56). Already in the first line, the nameless and unsympathetic evil queen is named and positioned as an intimate of the queen that came before her, Snow White's mother. Agbabi gives her an origin story, too—a prequel, of sorts, a common formula in revisionist writing—by including the dead queen's instruction to Imelda and tracing Imelda's path from the fateful command to the beginning of the hunt for Snow White. This imperative, of course, works on several levels: the narrative reveals that Imelda literally stepped inside the queen's glass coffin, but a reader who is able to identify the sonnet's intertextual relationship with the Snow White fairy tale knows that Imelda followed the queen's orders figuratively, too, by marrying the king and becoming the next queen in line.

While this command from the "dead queen" provides background information for a re-telling of the Evil Queen's rise to and fall from power, it also immediately positions Imelda as an unreliable narrator. As is typical for a sonnet, the narration is that of a first-person speaker poet, Imelda herself, which already suggests a partial account, but one must immediately suspect something strange when Imelda recalls the dead queen issuing commands. A hallucination or Imelda's warped interpretation of an objective happening – in a story with no other magical components save a True Love's Kiss, the reader must ask whether the queen really did mean for Imelda to take her place *as queen*, or whether the queen really was communicating anything at all. By the poem's end, we may argue that the dead queen meant not following in her footsteps as queen, but following in her footsteps to the coffin, which Imelda also then does—or alternatively does. The sonnet's ambiguous ending will be revisited in later paragraphs.

In the second line, Imelda recounts stepping into the coffin literally ("so I set my foot in her glass coffin" (56)), where she sees, presumably, the dead queen's beautified body which, at least in Imelda's wizened hindsight, serves to foreshadow the fate of the queen's daughter: "glimpsed a powdered, rouged, mascaraed premonition / of her daughter, rigid with my Cox's poison" (56). This is the second instance of suspect narration; it should not be possible, before the events of the Grimms' Snow White, for Imelda to know what fate will

**STEP**

*into my shoes, Imelda, said the dead queen*  
so I set my foot in her glass coffin,  
glimpsed a powdered, rouged, mascaraed premonition  
of her daughter, rigid with my Cox's poison.

The queen and I were lovers. We told no one.  
She died in childbed. Every day I'm broken  
to sense her killer mocking my reflection.  
The mirror never lies. Neither does passion.

I'm granite cold during my confession.  
They call me witch, harlot, slave to fashion  
and sentence me to dance in wrought-iron  
shoes hell-got from the oven. So I step

into my deathbed, lined with scarlet satin,  
studded with broken glass, next to my queen.

Fig. 4. "Step" by Patience Agbabi (*Bloodshot Monochrome*, 2008, p. 56)

befall Snow White—or herself—especially as the 1819 version features three murder attempts, any one of which could have been successful, yet Imelda shares in the reader’s ironic knowledge that it is the poisoned apple which gets Snow White in the end. Imelda cannot recognise her queen’s body and its visual likeness as a premonition of an event which has just happened, which further complicates the temporal placement of Imelda as the speaker. Imelda appears to both be recounting the story after it has happened but also narrating a present tense account, as if “looking back” after the story’s end and—in entirely revisionist fashion, to quote Adrienne Rich once more—and re-narrating her story from a new perspective; her “new critical direction” here could be posthumous clarity (Rich 18).

The following quatrain concludes the Evil Queen prequel, as it were, and this is the part of the sonnet where the bulk of Agbabi’s queer revisionism is located. Its subversions are formal and thematic: in conjunction with her confession of a secret sapphic love affair with the queen, the speaker employs parataxic curtness which stands at odds with the entire rest of the poem, sometimes sparing no more than four words per sentence: “The queen and I were lovers. / We told no one. / She died in childbed” (56) and “The mirror never lies. Neither does passion” (ibid.), contrasted with the two other quatrains where single sentences run on for four lines each. Sonnets are seldom very narrative in nature due to their length (Spiller 3-4), but with short and precise sentences, Agbabi shows narrativity is nonetheless possible: in order for Agbabi to relay the story of Imelda the Evil Queen in a way that is revisionist – that humanises her, that truly does re-vision her – she needed to revise what is conventionalised about the sonnet form as well. There is no ‘poetic rule’ against parataxis, of course, but its effect and purpose, sandwiched between two lyrical quatrains, is clearly to disrupt: to disrupt the sonnet form, and to disrupt heteronormativity.

The three simple sentences with which Imelda flips the script of “Snow White” are fired like bullets; their form is an absolute compliment to their message. In a departure from queer media in which coming out is frequently depicted as a complicated and fraught interaction (Beck 249-251; Fuoss 166-168; Zaikman et al. 211-212). Imelda discloses the fact with such bare-boned simplicity that the poem seems to almost criticise the monumentality and nonnormativity endemic to coming-out culture. Imelda’s statements invite no question or argument. They are definitive. However, just as much in keeping with queer media—whose queerness is only too often excavated from historicist forays into authorial intent or autobiography, or adversely, from formalist subtext only—the secrecy of Imelda and the queen’s affair is significant.

In the second half of the quatrain, Imelda reveals more contextual clues which identify her as the Evil Queen: the reference to the magicked mirror central to the story of Snow White and the dwarves, which originally functioned only to highlight the Evil Queen’s vanity, shows her lover’s killer—her daughter.

While the sonnet reframes Imelda's murderous aggression toward Snow White as agony over her late lover's death—"Every day I'm broken / to sense [the queen's] killer mocking my reflection. / The mirror never lies." (56)—it says nothing about whether it was vanity in this case, too, that led to Imelda's constant asking of the question that summoned Snow White's likeness to torment her. Perhaps Snow White's beauty, while also a painful reminder of the girl's late mother, was a convenient upside to avenging the queen on her "killer" in a (rather extended) fit of "passion" (56); maybe the sonnet constitutes a retroactive self-justification for the gruesome attempts on Snow White's life that nonetheless came to nothing.

The third quatrain ties together Imelda's version of events with the original story: "They call me witch, harlot, slave to fashion / and sentence me to dance in wrought-iron / shoes hell-got from the oven..." (56), referencing Snow White and her prince's original method for executing the Evil Queen. The sonnet takes on a new nursery rhyme quality in employing iambic pentameter and closed end rhymes (for all lines but the last of the quatrain, where the rhyme is leonine and instead of at the end of the line), as if to further highlight the joining-up of the well-known children's fable and Imelda's revisionist account. The conclusion is stanzaed into a couplet, although technically it begins already on line 12 and runs on, and circles back to the old queen's opening command at the start of the sonnet: "...So I step / into my deathbed, lined with scarlet satin, / studded with broken glass, next to my queen." (56). This is yet another point in the sonnet where Imelda's position as a speaker is obscured: if her method of execution was death by dancing in hot iron shoes, likely she would not be allowed to lie down next to the previous queen some seventeen years—in keeping with the Brothers Grimm timeline—after her death. Is this perhaps where the *ghost* of Imelda, potentially the speaker all this time, figuratively steps into her deathbed, finally completing the task of "stepping into the shoes" of the late queen?

Another interpretation is yet possible—one where Agbabi more rewrites than revises the story of Snow White; one where Imelda, seventeen years before her death by hot iron shoes, looks upon her queen and lover in her royal glass casket and has a premonition of not just Snow White lying poisoned in a coffin, but of Imelda's own life to come; the torment of meeting Snow White in the mirror each day, feeling "broken"; the failed assassination attempts and, finally, humiliation and death. It seems entirely plausible that lines 2 to 12 do not happen anywhere but in Imelda's imagination, and Imelda never becomes the Evil Queen and steps instead into the glass coffin to go to death peacefully beside her lover, thus circumventing her own "premonition" (56). This, too, is a revisionist take on Snow White: it is active resistance of the role of villain prescribed to the older woman/stepmother, as well as active resistance of the trope where "women [are] almost always beautiful, but threatened with the loss of beauty, the loss of youth—a fate worse than death" (Rich 21). The violence in Snow White is directed entirely at women, in that the Evil Queen wants Snow

White murdered and her organs—sometimes her heart, sometimes her lungs and liver—to eat, then attempts to asphyxiate and poison her stepdaughter and is finally humiliated and murdered as punishment. It is a gruesome tale of female vanity, envy, and woman-on-woman violence, sexist and ageist in tone. For Imelda to choose peace—and yes, death, but on her own terms—beside her beloved instead is subversive on multiple levels.

This chapter posits that the 'coming out' of Imelda is not only a revision of the story of Snow White's evil stepmother-queen, and, through displacing male desire as a central thematic concern, the sonnet as well, but of queer literature, too. Susan S. Lanser, in her book *The Sexuality of History: Modernity and the Sapphic, 1565-1830* (year), theorises that "blatant [queer] representations ... may be harder for us to parse than their more closeted counterparts" (20), expressing the reverse logic by which readings of "closeted" queer desire—and the dimensions of secrecy, the forbidden, the "unpresentable" (20) as thematic constructions—have become the signposts for queerness itself, rather than occupying the grey area of plausibility (or "amenability" as Lanser puts it (16)). Moreover, female homoromanticism and -sexuality has too often been consigned to the margins of anything "queer," "homosexual" or "sexuality," the resulting queer theory has been regrettably androcentric, and "allegedly gender-inclusive or gender-neutral terms" nonetheless end up focusing "more heavily on men" (Lanser 5). Centring female homosociality, then, as Lanser does as a scholar, and Agbabi as poet, is updating more than just the sonnet or the story of Snow White.

This is not to say that less blatant expressions of queerness, such as employing the codes of secrecy and closeted desire, become any less relevant by comparison. On the contrary: secrecy and 'closetedness' are highly conventionalised codes used to signify queerness in times and social climates where being explicitly 'out' would be unfavourable or even dangerous. On this, Judith Butler asks the following:

[F]or whom is outness an historically available and affordable options? Is there an unmarked class character to the demand for universal "outness"? Who is represented by which use of the term, and who is excluded? For whom does the term present an impossible conflict between racial, ethnic, or religious affiliation and sexual politics? (19)

Moreover, strategies such as omitting gender from romantic or erotic sequences defy "the normalising mechanisms of state power to name its sexual subjects" according to categorical binary divisions such as male/female, married/single, heterosexual/homosexual, or natural/perverse" (Eng et al. 84). The term "queer" has never, and can never, have a stable referent, Butler argues, if it is to accomplish the disruption and deconstruction of heteronormative and binary social hegemonies: "If the term "queer" is to be a site of collective contestation



...it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage..." (19). Following this logic, and in the interest of queering sonneteering, it does not seem necessary to disclose explicitly the genders of neither the speaker poet nor potential addressee nor lover; queering does not, and never has, required specific gender categories for its mechanisms.

### **Explicit binaries versus the implicit nonbinary**

With Butler's philosophy in mind, possible to argue, then, that nondisclosure may sometimes in fact be 'queerer' than explicit binary homosexuality. One such example of queering without making explicit the genders of the speaker poet or the sonnet's addressee is "In Invisible Ink" (see fig. 5) by Agbabi, also featured in *Bloodshot Monochrome*. A sonnet as well as visual poetry—and another instance of Agbabi's formal revisionism, its title stylised in grey colour, as well as the first letter of each line which together spell out "IN INVISIBLE INK" also—the poem marries form and function. Consisting of fourteen lines and divided into stanzas with a length of two, then nine, then three lines to correspond with the number of letters in each word in the title, the sonnet addresses an unnamed and ungendered *you*, and reads like subtly erotic love lyric. The speaker poet constructs an analogy for a secret and unseen romantic relationship with the concepts of tattooing with invisible ink, and Braille writing. There is an additional dimension of jealousy and resulting uncertainty to this relationship, causing the speaker poet to worry about—or at least imagine—someone else "touch-typing" the secret marks they have drawn into their lover's skin with a figurative needle (57).

The opening couplet functions, like many of Agbabi's sonnets, theatrically with a sense of *mise-en-scène* to position the reader in relation to the sonnet's events: "Imagine the tip of my tongue's a full / Needle and your back's my canvas," the speaker tells the addressee, functionally creating an image of the tongue/tattooing needle traveling the length of the beloved's back/the canvas (57). The setting is at least physically intimate, then, if not explicitly romantic. The tongue-needle-metaphor grows to insinuate a possessiveness—a kind of claiming hidden from the rest of the world. The next stanza is nine lines long and introduces the themes of secrecy, spellbinding, and jealousy: "I'll tattoo you a secret if you promise / Never to read it aloud, break the spell / Vibrating its delicate, intimate Braille," the speaker promises, referring to the scarring which results from tattooing—the only evidence of a transparent tattoo, and a stand-in for the encounter, or relationship. A tattoo without ink and words with cannot be written but nonetheless leave a trace are a symbol for the relationship. There are many reasons for which something is

not referred to by its name, or written, or presented. Maybe there is not a word for a relationship such as the speaker's and their beloved; maybe the word or the relationship configuration is taboo; maybe words say too much or too little about their relationship.

Interpretations like these place the relationship outside of what is socially normative. The hidden text—the raised skin of a tattoo without ink—stands in for non-normative subtexts, in the speaker poet's world requiring more than sight—for example, knowledge, or thorough tactile investigation—to see. Lanser describes queer readings of such texts as “turning the “unpresentable” into the represented...so that the scholarly reading in effect stands in for the text by speaking the text's silences,” and looking for “recurring themes and images, and...language, tropes, and practices” (20, 21). She attributes much of the success of queer theory as a discipline to “exposing what is coded and covert” (20). Agbabi is playing with the concepts of the unpresentable and the represented, in giving the study of them an analogy in her sonnet: the queer studies reader is not interested in only what is visible—i.e., written in visible ink—but also in raised skin which indicates a meaning conveyed without the use of ink.

The claiming inherent in the figurative tattooing—so thorough that the speaker describes treating the wounds with acid (“It'll remain laced in your skin. Even fierce / Sunlight won't betray my lemon juice.” (57)) to set the small incisions—is at odds with the veil of secrecy laid over it all. These are the rituals which officiate the relationship, the physical intimacy expressed through the language of marking (one's territory?) and tattoos, and “words” which call to mind marital vows in their context (“But we'll have words, you'll set fire to my love / Letter by letter...” (57)), and while they mimic familiar scripts of marital ceremony, vows and consummation, they nonetheless need to be conducted in secret. This does not seem like a choice, either, from the peculiar description the speaker poet gives of imagining “somebody / Else, touch-typing the keyboard of your spine, / Imagine our secret smouldering skin and bone.” (57); wishing spontaneous combustion upon another lover seems a touch violent for a voluntary polyamory.

“[O]ur secret” (57) reminds the reader again of the secrecy of the speaker and lover's relationship. However, with the figurative pairs or tongue/needle and tattoo/(a particularly claiming?) sexual act, the secret need not in fact include a relationship at all beyond the act in question. Thus, the tattooing—which again is code for a sexual encounter—can be interpreted to also stand in for sexual desire—the *abstract* sexual encounter, or the theoretical potential for one—and particularly sexual desire which needs keeping secret. The secret is not necessarily that the speaker and their lover are acting on their sexual desires, but that the desire exists at all, and the most they can do to express it outside each other's confidence is in invisible ink, in code. Once more,

## IN INVISIBLE INK

Imagine the tip of my tongue's a full  
Needle and your back's my canvas.

I'll tattoo you a secret if you promise  
Never to read it aloud, break the spell  
Vibrating its delicate, intimate Braille.  
It'll remain laced in your skin. Even fierce  
Sunlight won't betray my lemon juice.  
In less than a fortnight the scar will heal  
But we'll have words, you'll set fire to my love  
Letter by letter and I'll imagine somebody  
Else, touch-typing the keyboard of your spine,

Imagine our secret smouldering skin and bone.  
No. Don't say a word. My blind eye  
Knows how to head my tongue, how to forgive.

Fig. 5. "In Invisible Ink" by Patience Agbabi (*Bloodshot Monochrome*, 2008, p. 57)

the queer studies concepts of the closet, closetedness and secrecy are relevant in contextualising the function and meaning of the secret rituals in Agbabi's poem.

The sonnet ends like it begins, with the speaker addressing their beloved directly. "No. Don't say a word," they chide, presumably to stop any 'off-screen' objections. The sonnet, it is useful to recapitulate, is ultimately a thought exercise between the speaker and their beloved, beginning with the speaker's imperative to "imagine" a scenario, which gives the sonnet its narrative frame, then continues with the speaker's imaginary encounter—"tattooing" the lover's back with their tongue, the wound "healing," another touching the lover's back and the pre-existing relationship between speaker and lover "smouldering skin and bone" (57). It is then that the speaker's lover possibly tries to interrupt, and the address resumes from the imaginary to the real present.

This shift back in temporality/reality marks the sonnet's volta, reading, "No. Don't say a word. My blind eye / Knows how to head my tongue, how to forgive." (57). As well as the silencing of any objections raised by the preceding thought experiment, the concluding lines express the speaker's forgiveness, addressing the themes of possessiveness and jealousy present earlier in the sonnet. If there are other lovers aside from the speaker, the speaker can forgive the addressee for them. While certainly the more common expression might read "heed my tongue," and the substitution of "head" for "heed" is an element of wordplay on Agbabi's part, giving the sentiment a different meaning. "My blind eye" is likely a way to express that, in order to forgive and keep their beloved, the speaker is willing to turn a blind eye to the other lovers and let this wilful ignorance command their tongue. Instead of blame or even the passive-aggressive figurative tattooing described earlier in the sonnet, the speaker can instead choose to forgive. In a similar vein, the final three lines invoke Psalm 39 of the Christian bible through their wording, concerning "hope and despair simultaneously," as well as "the transience and troubles of life" (Brueggeman 194). Of particular relevance to Agbabi's sonnet are verses 1-3 of the psalm:

1. I said, I will take heed to my ways, that I sin not with my tongue: I will keep my mouth with a bridle, while the wicked is before me.
2. I was dumb with silence, I held my peace, even from good; and my sorrow was stirred,
3. My heart was hot within me, while I was musing the fire burned: then spake I with my tongue

The psalm itself is concerned with the themes of sin and forgiveness, but most notably, it features many of the same words and concepts precisely: taking

heed, sinning with one's tongue, silence, fire, and holding one's peace. Agbabi never explicitly uses the word "sin" in her sonnet to describe the acts or dynamics between speaker and beloved, but the sonnet recycles so much of the psalm's vocabulary that it is difficult to believe the connection coincidental. The intertextual addition of "sin," however, adds possible context to the rhetoric of secrecy in Agbabi's poem. The Bible is often cited to defend the persecution of non-monogamous, non-heteronormative romantic and sexual configurations, and such views have historically been prevalent in the cultural contexts where Agbabi writes and is read—predominantly the West. There is hardly a shorthand for "queer" more universally understood than "non-normative," "secret" or "sinful".

### ***Rapture and the queer unspoken / unspoken queerness***

Having established the themes of secrecy and the unspoken as conventionalised vehicles of queer meaning in text, it becomes possible to analyse less explicitly non-normative texts through these codes. Several examples of such ambiguous but nonetheless queer-coded sonnets can be found in Carol Ann Duffy's 2005 sonnet collection *Rapture*. The following analyses accept the queering inherent in the nondisclosure/non-assignment of gender as a foregrounding assumption and instead focus on analysing the use of the codes of secrecy and the unspoken in Duffy's sonnets as further evidence of queer revision.

One poem featuring *the unspoken* as its central theme, along with the romance which characterises all poems in *Rapture*—the collection charts the progression and recession of a love affair—is "Chinatown" (35; see fig. 6). In this poem, the speaker poet reminisces about a visit to her city's titular Chinatown on Chinese New Year, recalling its sights and sounds. The poignant silence and "unspoken" in this sonnet are framed through the tradition of making wishes and resolutions for the new year which, in the speaker poet's case, remain unspoken. The unspoken wish for the beloved's returned affections creates the internal tension and tragedy within the sonnet, turning the memories of New Year into a lament for lost love. Chinatown itself as a location also becomes a stand-in for the unrequited love of the beloved, the ambivalent feelings associated with it expressed through the speaker's love for the sound of "Chinatown"—"Writing it, I see how much I love the sound / Chinatown, Chinatown, Chinatown" (35)—while she recounts the melancholic memory associated with the location.

The first stanza continues with the speaker disclosing the necessary contextual information—the proverbial scene-setting for the sonnet: "We went down, the day of the Year of the Monkey, / dim sum and dragons bound." The quatrain introduces the only resemblance to a rhyme pattern *sound-town-down-*

*bound*, which persists in slight variations through the first two stanzas with *down* appearing as a leonine rhyme in line three, a strategy Duffy uses again in the second stanza. It may well be intended as a misdirection: although the sonnet begins with a quatrain and a simple closed rhyme scheme, the formal divergence from any conventionalised sonnet structure is immediate after the first four lines. After this, the familiar end rhymes appear only sporadically, and the fifth line is typeset as though it were the severed half of line four, a line break where a caesura within a line might typically be. Such misdirection mirrors the narrative arc of the poem as well, with the sonnet's first quatrain in no way alluding to its sorrowful conclusion. Just as the opening quatrain may lead a reader to think that "Chinatown" is going to be an end-rhymed, conventionally structured sonnet, its themes also seem to preface not a melancholic, failed love affair, but rather a joyful celebration in Chinatown on New Year.

This pattern, unconventional in sonnet writing, repeats for the rest of the stanzas, and thus the line count for the entire poem is seventeen instead of a traditional fourteen. However, due to its positioning in a collection of sonnets, and the way the caesuras in lines 4, 9, and 13 are expressed as line breaks but otherwise as though the following line were a part of the previous line, it seems natural to treat the poem as a sonnet. Seiler-Garman describes the poems in *Rapture* as "drawing on the tradition of sonnet sequences, a tradition defined by strict structure and gendered power dynamics," but adds that Duffy also "include[s] and subvert[s] themes and tropes" in her "playing with the prescribed structure" (7).

Just as the formal aspects take a turn in the next stanza the content begins to hint at unhappiness. In the lines 6 to 8, the speaker already foreshadows the silence of "love," hinting at the never-expressed feelings mentioned more explicitly later in the poem: "The fireworks / were as loud as love, if love were allowed / a sound" (35). What the speaker appears to be saying is that the feelings she felt for the addressee were of similar vibrancy and volume to the New Year's fireworks, but the figurative fireworks in her heart were never "allowed" to go off. She goes on to paint a similarly wistful image with incense smoke: "Our wishing children pressed their incense // ...the smoke drifting off / like question marks over their heads" (35), expressing the uncertainty surrounding the situation, equating the chance, or willingness, to speak her feelings to her addressee to incense smoke which drifts off and fades out of sight.

The volta is located at the end of line 11, shifting the speaker's tone to more reflective rather than recollective, and incorporating regret: "If I had said / what I'd wished, if I had asked you to tell me the words, / shifting up from your heart // for your lips to sift" (35). The speaker enters the realm of the quintessentially Petrarchan tortured speaker (Seiler-Garman 27), consumed by *what-ifs* about a moment already past. The words which the speaker wishes to

## Chinatown

Writing it, I see how much I love the sound.  
Chinatown, Chinatown, Chinatown.  
We went down, the day of the Year of the Monkey,  
dim sum and dragons bound.

Your fair head  
was a pearl in the mouth of the crowd. The fireworks  
were as loud as love, if love were allowed  
a sound. Our wishing children pressed their incense  
into a bowl of sand

in Chinatown, the smoke drifting off  
like question marks over their heads. If I had said  
what I'd wished, if I had asked you to tell me the words,  
shifting up from your heart

for your lips to sift,  
at least I'd have heard their sound uttered by you,  
although then nothing we'd wished for in Chinatown,  
Chinatown, Chinatown, would ever come true.

Fig. 6. "Chinatown" by Carol Ann Duffy (*Rapture*, 2005, p. 35)

hear may well be *the* three words, an Anglophone trope and shorthand for “I love you,” or simply something to the same effect. The speaker confesses here, in a roundabout manner, the content of their own New Year’s wish: for their beloved to tell them that they wish for the same; in other words, for their feelings to be returned.

The sonnet ends with a sorrowful repetition of the refrain of “Chinatown, Chinatown, Chinatown,” recapitulating the tragedy of the Chinatown visit in the final three lines: “at least I’d have heard their sound uttered by you,” the speaker laments, referring to her own wish for her beloved to say the words expressing reciprocated affection, even if they were just ceremony and not equally felt (35). The speaker is painfully aware of the falsity in a confession of love prompted this way—via New Year’s wish, with the excuse of tradition—which hints at why she did not, in the end, ever vocalise her wish: “although then nothing we’d wished for in Chinatown, / Chinatown, Chinatown, would ever come true” (35). Implied in these closing lines is the fact that the speaker would have been asking her beloved to lie, and that even if her beloved had said the words, the real wish—for the beloved to also return the feelings genuinely—would not have been fulfilled either way. In using the plural, “nothing we’d wished for in Chinatown,” the speaker recognises again her beloved’s own implicit wish to *not* confess romantic feelings; had the speaker voiced her wish, she would have gone against both their wishes in prompting an insincere confession.

“Chinatown” is queered through the use of the trope of “unspokenness” in two ways. Firstly, “the unspoken” in this sonnet consists very evidently of the speaker poet’s unexpressed romantic feelings toward the beloved. The speaker implies that the reason for her own silence is the fact that these feelings are unreciprocated, which in itself is an experience shared by many queer people situated in heteronormative culture settings where queer people may find themselves attracted to people who, on account of gender or sexuality identifications rather than personal preference, do not or perhaps cannot return the attraction. The attraction which then goes unexpressed but is nonetheless usually known through an epistemological mode of the “open secret”—theorised by D.A. Miller, “a secret that everyone hides because everyone holds” (Miller 205)—is bound up with Sedgwick’s conception of the closet, and outness, and the binaries of voice/silence, visibility/invisibility, knowledge/secret.

Secondly, Duffy’s resistance to specific gender categories in the case of the speaker poet’s beloved is not only potential lesbian revisionism of the sonnet dynamic of speaker poet and his unattainable female beloved, but also queer revisionism. By removing the certainty about the beloved’s gender, Duffy opens the door for multiple and mutually contested readings ranging from speaker-beloved configurations of female-male, and female-female to female other. The ambiguity denoting the beloved plays into the same deconstructive



## Quickdraw

I wear the two, the mobile and the landline phones,  
like guns, slung from the pockets on my hips. I'm all  
alone. You ring, quickdraw, your voice a pellet  
in my ear, and hear me groan.

You've wounded me  
Next time, you speak after the tone. I twirl the phone,  
then squeeze the trigger of my tongue, wide of the mark.  
You choose your spot, then blast me

through the heart.

And this love, high noon, calamity, hard liquor  
in the old Last Chance saloon. I show the mobile  
to the Sheriff; in my boot, another one's

concealed. You text them both at once. I reel.  
Down on my knees, I fumble for the phone  
read the silver bullets of your kiss. Take this ...  
and this ... and this ... and this ... and this ...

Fig. 7. "Quickdraw" by Carol Ann Duffy (*Rapture*, 2005, p. 30)

tendency which queer theory employs toward the binary constructions of gender and sexuality.

Another poem which uses communication, and the problematised binary spoken/unspoken, is "Quickdraw" (see fig. 7), also from *Rapture*. "Quickdraw" is structured similarly to "Chinatown," numbering sixteen lines instead of a typical fourteen but invoking the sonnet through its Petrarchan theme of a languishing, infatuated speaker poet, and by mimicking a conventional sonnet in the way that the surplus lines are extreme caesuras instead of entirely natural line breaks. The sonnet describes the tension of a love affair conducted through mobile and landline telephones, which is further complicated by the metaphor of a Western shoot-off. Where the "unspoken" in "Chinatown" could be located easily in the simple speech act and its absence, "Quickdraw" problematises the speech act as well, creating sub-categories of communication: between speaker and addressee, there is physical distance, bridged with telephone; telephone communication is further divided into phone calls ("You ring, quickdraw, your voice a pellet / in my ear" (30), voice messages recorded for later ("Next time, you speak after the tone" (ibid.)), and text message ("You text them both at once" (ibid.)), all of which disrupt the positional and temporal linearity of communication. This disruption of linearity, further complicated by the medium: words become pellets and bullets ("I fumble for the phone / read the silver bullets of your kiss" (30)), messages become shots through the heart ("You choose your spot, then blast me / through the heart" (ibid.)); communication becomes a Mexican stand-off, a contest of power relations ("And this love, high noon, calamity, hard liquor / in the old Last Chance saloon" (ibid.)). Through the complication and disruption of communication—evoking the binaries of voice/silence and secret/knowledge, where something is either expressed (and heard) or not, or knowledge is either departed (and known) or not—Duffy is effectively queering the epistemology of the romantic relationship portrayed in "Quickdraw."

Duffy's choice of parable is also notable. She likens mobile phones to pistols, and conversations to shoot-offs, using the language of cowboys and Westerns to dramatize the sonnet narration. Somewhat paradoxically, particularly in American culture, the trope of the gay cowboy has been a symbol of masculine queerness since the birth of the American cowboy (Herron-Wheeler). While for many, the cowboy represents an all-American folk hero, embodying "the most precious values in [the United States]," Chris Packard argues that the figure of the cowboy is at the same time inherently queer:

[I]n the often all-male world of the literary West, homoerotic affection holds a favoured position. A cowboy's partner, after all, is his one emotional attachment ... Affection for women destroys cowboy *comunitas* and produces children, and both are unwanted hindrances to those who wish to ride the range freely.

In other words, the cowboy is queer: he is odd; he doesn't fit in; he resists community; he eschews lasting ties with women but embraces rock-solid bonds with same-sex partners; he practices same-sex desire. (3)

By choosing the cowboy culture as her metaphor, Duffy is signalling queerness with a common queer trope, but also complicating the configurations of gender and desire in the sonnet. The cowboy is certainly a queer figure, but he is without fail a symbol of *masculine* queerness—or at the very least, the mythological figure of the cowboy is a vessel for many components of heteronormative masculinity. This in itself may be the intended criticism inherent in casting the female speaker poet in the role of the cowboy: a critique of rigid conceptions of what constitutes a “masculine” trait. Another way to interpret the use of the cowboy is again a queering of gender: Duffy's speaker poet throughout *Rapture* is female, but a combination of masculine tropes and female identity creates an amalgam which resists heteronormative binaries of gender expression. The speaker poet and her lover become indefinable through an oversimplified either/or binary, embodying symbols of femininity and masculinity, and in the beloved's case, gender ambiguity and masculinity. By incorporating the figure of the cowboy as well as the intertextuality of a Western in her sonnet, Duffy is mixing more than genders—she is mixing genres, therefore queering not only sexuality and gender within the poem, but the sonnet as a genre.

### **Queering gender: non-conforming femininities, and queerness**

Much of this chapter so far has focused on the exploration of sexuality as the primary dimension of queer revision, but as the above analysis of “Quickdraw” exemplifies, sexuality and gender are never very far apart. The interconnectedness of gender and sexuality is acknowledged by queer theorists; not in that “gender of object choice,” as Eve Kosofsky expressed it, is a sufficient way of categorising sexualities (Sedgwick 35), but in that conceptions of one's gender are inseparably tied up in one's conception of sexuality, whether it is expressed through desire—or the lack thereof—toward anyone, regardless of gender, i.e., in cases where particular modes of practicing sexuality matter more than any gendered dimension of one's partner(s), or through desire experienced

toward specific configurations of gender categories (Sedgwick 30). Judith Butler expresses the connection thusly in her 1993 essay "Critically Queer":

Whereas it is important to emphasize that forms of sexuality do not unilaterally determine gender, a non-causal and nonreductive connection between sexuality and gender is nevertheless crucial to maintain. Precisely because homophobia often operates through the attribution of a damaged, failed, or otherwise abjected gender to homosexuals, that is, calling gay men "feminine" or calling lesbians "masculine," and because the homophobic terror over performing homosexual acts, where it exists, is often also a terror over losing proper gender ("no longer being a real or proper man" or "no longer being a real or proper woman"), it seems crucial to retain a theoretical apparatus that will account for how sexuality is regulated through the policing and the shaming of gender. (27)

Here, Butler expresses some of the mechanisms which create an effect of queerness in Duffy's "Quickdraw". In addition to borrowing from the tropisms of male queerness, Duffy attributes "masculine" qualities to the female speaker poet, further complicating the gender-sexuality matrix. It is important to note that, while Butler associates "abjected gender" with homophobia, such characterisation only seems appropriate as it pertains to being an object of unwelcome and limiting prescriptions of gender and sexuality. There is much pleasure to be found in wilfully "abjecting" one's own gender expression insofar as it increases unity between one's gender experience and physicality, theorised by Ian McCormick through the concept of pleasurable transgressive desire<sup>4</sup> Though theorised by Butler through homophobia, the following analysis of "Shift" from *Bloodshot Monochrome* by Patience Agbabi, gender non-conforming femininity is, when reclaimed and owned, a place of positive—pleasurable—queerness rather than a site of homophobic oppression.

"The Shift" (see fig. 8) recounts the relationship between a "director" and his wife. The poem is fourteen lines long and divided in Petrarchan fashion into an octave and a sestet where the divide also marks the volta, clearly invoking the sonnet despite the absence of a typical rhyme scheme. The sonnet is more narrative than lyrical, in a style favoured by Agbabi and a key feature in her revisionist take on sonneteering; the speaker is outside the relationship they chronicle instead of in first-person like Petrarchan sonnets often are. Missing are also the typical Petrarchan concerns of unattainable love and an idealised

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<sup>4</sup> From "Sexuality and Contemporary Literary Theory" by Ian MacGormick, published in *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory, 4th ed.*: "Both Sinfield and Dollimore, and others working within a tradition of gay cultural materialist criticism, have drawn attention, in new ways, to the example of Oscar Wilde. In Wilde, Dollimore discovers a transgressive aesthetics: Wilde's experience of deviant desire. . . leads him not to escape the repressive ordering of society, but to a re-inscription within it, and an inversion of the binaries upon which that ordering depends; desire, and the transgressive aesthetic which it fashions, reacts against, disrupts, and displaces from within. Such a shift beyond binary oppositions marks the transition from gay to queer theory."

## THE SHIFT

He used to finish off her sentences  
and buy her clothes that labelled her the wife  
of a director. Both the cars were his.  
He'd drink whisky as an aperitif,  
and pat his belly as if he'd given birth  
to four fine sons. Until the hour  
they called her from that hospital up North  
and she drove there hundred miles in second gear.

She mows the lawn now, uproots weeds like the whiskers  
that dominate her chin, wears shapeless slacks,  
translates his faint, infantile gestures  
into cups of tea and sandwiches, and smokes  
Golden Virginia. When he goes, she'll curse  
the stiff confinement of her one, black dress.

Fig. 8. "The Shift" by Patience Agbabi (*Transformatrix*, 2000, p. 77)

beloved—if anything, the wife and director are endlessly available to one another, but it is only after the director suffers a stroke which renders him intellectually and emotionally unavailable to his wife that she finds true happiness.

The octave first describes the relationship before the director-husband's stroke. Agbabi creates an image of a man who is both entitled and possessive—traits consistent with toxic masculinity; “He used to finish off her sentences / and buy her clothes that labelled her the wife / of a director” (77)—but simultaneously described through the entirely feminine-coded act of giving birth (“He'd drink whisky as an aperitif, / and pat his belly as if he'd given birth / to four fine sons” (ibid.)). It is also implied later in the sonnet that the husband was the one out of the pair who cared what the wife looked like, which also subverts gender expectations, serving to queer not only the wife, but the husband as well. Very notably, the couple's life before the incident which rendered the husband-director “infantile” in mentality, as narrated by the speaker in the octave, is characterised entirely through the husband's actions, the husband's choices: he finishes off her sentences and buys her clothes according to his tastes and his agenda, not affording her even the agency to dress as she likes or choose her words—“Until the hour / they called her from that hospital up North” (77).

The volta marks a change in temporality, but also in the couple's way of life, which looks very different from before. While the unwelcome prescription of *femininity* was never made explicit in the octave, it is nonetheless implied that the lifestyle and role which the director-husband prescribed the wife was not welcome—it restricted her self-expression verbally and visually. It is telling, then, how both her appearance and the role she occupies in the domestic sphere change once the husband is no longer able to dictate her (gender presentation): she “mows the lawn now, uproots weeds like the whiskers / that dominate her chin, wears shapeless slacks” (77)—indicating not only that she has taken up the activities around the house which are traditionally masculine-coded, but also that she rejects feminine presentation by opting for “shapeless” clothes and allowing her chin hairs to grow undisturbed. She has taken up—or at least begun openly—smoking (“and smokes / Golden Virginia” (77)).

The final two lines—“When he goes, she'll curse / the stiff confinement of her one, black dress” (77)—condenses the heart of the sonnet into one sentence. The black dress is a synecdoche for all the performances which make up femininity; the director-husband's funeral, implied by the colour of the dress and the expression “when he goes,” is a stand-in for the one thing which still keeps the wife attached to the “stiff confinement” of performing femininity—at least in the way her husband always required her to. There is no particular reason to read sexuality into the sonnet, nor is there a particularly good reason *not* to—either way, what Agbabi is certainly doing is complicating gender expression and relations by venturing the strict binary divide of

masculine/feminine. Neither husband nor wife colour entirely within the heteronormative lines of the gender colouring book: the husband is interested enough in fashion—granted, likely insofar as it confirms his status as a successful man to have a well-dressed, feminine wife—to choose his wife's, and Agbabi specifically chooses to liken his rotundness to pregnancy; the wife, post-Hospital, moves fluidly on the femininity-masculinity spectrum by still tending to her husband, performing the role of nurturing homemaker, while also choosing aspects of masculine performativity in appearance.

It is precisely this conceptualisation of masculinity/femininity as a spectrum/gradient rather than binary which allows for a queer interpretation of what is, on paper, a relationship between a man and woman. Reading the couple queerly through gender expression naturally opens sexuality as a category to be queered. Additionally, queer theory is, as previously explained, not interested only in deconstructing the binaries of sexuality and gender. In "The Shift," another subjectivity whose shift could well be analysed through queer theory is the husband's: how is the shift in his subjectivity constructed in this sonnet, and is it deconstructive or binary—is it more or as complex as the binary categories of able-bodied/disabled? How does belonging to each category in turn interact with the categories of masculinity/femininity, if at all? These are important questions, and such intersectionality is central to queer theory, if outside the scope of this analysis.

## Chapter 3

### Revision and the canon: Agbabi and Duffy as marginalised voices

I found the form but  
I made up the content  
Each new sonnet  
a plot against the sonnet

—Thom Gunn, *Boss Cupid: Poems*

Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower, and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people. But stories can also repair that broken dignity.”

—Chimamanda Adichie

This chapter transitions from close reading to attempt a more general examination of the revisionist tendencies of Agbabi and Duffy within the contested arena of the sonnet tradition to sketch similarities between the poets’ revisionist strategies. So far, the two previous chapters have explored single texts through the lenses of feminist and queer theories to highlight the ways in which the sonnets of both Agbabi and Duffy embody some of the main features of feminist and queer writing. I have established commonalities between the topoi of both poets as they pertain to two theoretical directions of interest and pointed out ways in which they revise tropes about love, gender relations, gender roles and sexuality, sometimes re-imagining existing narratives—such as the Evil Queen from *Snow White*—to accomplish this. This final chapter looks at the sum of these parts, and what it means for the sonnet form to become the vehicle of revisionist writing. This chapter argues that Agbabi and Duffy, as writers who belong to a number of overlapping and interactive marginalised identity categories, revise not only narratives about womanhood, gender, and sexuality, but the Western Anglo-European sonnet tradition as well.

This chapter first identifies key concepts related to the formation of this argument—tradition, explored through the concept of canon and canonicity; identity as it pertains to plurality and intersectionality; and othering, as in the mechanisms through which some identities become ‘othered,’ which is to say



valued differently from that which is considered normal and natural in a society. Several of these concepts are familiar in that they have been the subject of analysis in the two former chapters; patriarchy and heteronormativity, for example, are one of the many mechanisms which 'other' bodies who do not belong to the category of (traditional) man or heterosexual. Identities have similarly been discussed in chapter two, and the manifold expressions of gender and sexuality are two overlapping and interactive categories which, alongside other such categories, function in complicated ways to situate a body within a society. So far, these analyses have focused on problematising and deconstructing specific binary categories. This chapter carries on the principle of deconstruction, but here, the deconstruction focuses on the more abstract pairs of *canonical/non-canonical* and *self/other*.

### **Canonicity, representation, and privilege**

'The canon' is a much-contested notion in literature studies, but the ideas about the role of canon, provided by scholars nonetheless run parallel to one another. From T.S. Eliot—on "the importance of the relation of the poem to other poems by other authors, and suggested the conception of poetry as a living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written"—to Peter Widdowson—canonical works as "formative textualising narratives that have been central to the construction of 'our', that is to say, European-male, consciousness" (167)—and Julie Sanders—"Adaptation and appropriation are dependent on the literary canon for the provision of a shared body of storylines, themes, characters, and ideas upon which their creative variations can be made" (45)—to Macaluso & Macaluso—"the term "canon," as used in reference to the literary canon, connotes legitimacy, authority, truth" (xi). The canon is defined through dimensions such as historicity, intertextuality, and perceived value. Likewise, on the advent of the multiple social and literary revolutions of the 20th century, including but not limited to categories such as class, gender, race, and sexuality, the consensus of scholars regarding 'canonical' Anglo-European literature is that it is—perhaps entirely unsurprisingly to practitioners of sociology—"consisting disproportionately of works by or about cis-heterosexual white men" (Hayes 1; Macaluso and Macaluso ix).

A 'canon'—in this case literary, although the term has its origins in religious canonisation—is *formed* as much by socially dominant value and norm systems as it in turn reinforces them. *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* defines 'canon' as "a real or notional list of great works, those discussed in the major studies of lit. hist. and crit. and taught in schools and colleges as elements of proper education" (186). Therefore, a critical examination of what is largely considered 'canonical' literature or poetry tells us much about who or

which groups are represented in the most easily accessible and most highly valued texts (186-187). John Guillory describes the processes by which something becomes canonised in this 1993 book *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* in terms of the education system and its function of “distributing” or “regulating access to” cultural capital (vii).

While Guillory correctly theorises the connection between class and access to cultural capital, he is nonetheless mistaken to assume that class is the “proper social context” (viii) for analysing canon formation. *Class* is not an identity category which can be theorised in isolation from other vectors of identity, nor can it be considered simply a sum of the myriad identities which determine a person’s standing in a social-economic matrix in societies where some identities are normative and others marginal. Class interacts with other social categories in various ways, for which the most useful expression is privilege, the “conscious and unconscious benefits people accrue simply by being a member of a group that has historically had social and economic power” (Henderson 118). Privilege theory, then, is described in the *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory* (2009) as

an approach to explaining and rectifying inequality and oppression. The main tenet of this theory is that those who are socially privileged are rarely explicitly self-conscious of the nature of their privilege or willing to examine their privilege because they see their state as natural and normal (798),

and at its core, it proposes that privilege is

tied to conditions of social identity that define people because of their birth, mainly race and sexual assignment (meaning in the United States, White and male). In this formulation, privilege is not earned, but rather is ascribed based on the race and sex assignment given at birth and then elaborated on through social interaction. (798)

The assumptions about identity which underline these descriptions of privilege and its origins are based on identity as “intersectional, multiple, contingent,” and “requiring that it acknowledge different aspects of any given person,” and context-dependant, in that “one part of identity may be more salient or significant than another” depending on the situation (Henderson 60). In a dichotomy which closely resembles those I have introduced and problematised in previous chapters of this thesis—such as heterosexual/non-heterosexual, and male/not male, white/not white—the description of privilege also implicitly involves “contrastive” categories of the in-group and the out-group (Henderson 122). Guillory’s argument for class as the determining factor for a person’s

access to “linguistic” and “symbolic” capital hinges on various institutions reproducing “the structure of social relations, a structure of complex and ramifying inequality” (6), yet he barely acknowledges the intersectional nature of “social identity” (5); in truth, privilege and its possession are more complicated processes than that, as Linda L. Black and David Stone explain: “Dichotomous categorizations of privilege diminish an understanding of its intersections, intricacies, and influence” (243).

Guillory likewise questions whether the “desire to ‘open’ the canon was antithetical to the radical politics preached by such critics, or that it did not alter fundamental problems of societal exclusion” (Hayes 2), unironically positing (despite earlier fashioning literary works as “the vector of ideological notions” (ix)) that the “unequal representation” of different social identities within whatever is perceived to be the Western canon is “an imaginary politics, a politics of the image,” whose “political effects in the social domain” are difficult to determine, if at all real (8). Guillory wrote in the early 1990s—nearly thirty years ago now—but it ought not be necessary to foreground an analysis of literature with the base assumption that *culture is a site where societal norms are both reproduced and challenged*, which makes the relationship between cultural production and the social domain entirely interactive in nature<sup>5</sup>. Aside from the false assumption that cultural representation has no (easily) discernible effects on the real, Hayes argues—in direct response to Guillory, one might add<sup>6</sup>—that “academics engaged in the teaching of literature in institutions of higher education, are the gatekeepers of a literary canon which wields a significant social and economic power” (7).

This is the *practical* aspect of representational politics, not in the least limited to the school system: exposing a cultural work, or works, to the processes involved in the ‘canonisation’—such as its inclusion in school curricula, circulation among critics, or increased demand prompting re-prints and less expensive editions which then improve availability, be this demand due to scholarly consideration or the committed promotion of commercial media (Hayes 7)—of marginalised and de-centred voices and subjectivities is nothing if not in line with Guillory’s notion of “mobiliz[ing] [sic] the potent force of the imaginary” (37). Moreover, identifying with, and forming an identity consisting of, implicit—that is to say, not visible on the body—social categories to begin with requires the knowledge of such categories existing, exemplified by a quote by Sinfield: “gay men often used to say that, initially and in some instances for years, they had believed themselves to be the only one in existence” (Sinfield ix). With state after state in the United States proposing and passing so-called “Don’t Say Gay”

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<sup>5</sup> See for example Dakers (2018) *Representation in Media*, pp. 5-17: “Representation has a simple meaning: to stand for or symbolize. In society and media, representation means how race, gender, sexuality, age, class, size, and ability are shown or symbolized. Media is powerful. It reflects the dominant beliefs and values of our culture. It also influences values as well.”

<sup>6</sup> Guillory’s critique decries a certain bourgeois effort towards ‘representation’, made evident in debates on the canon, which remains unconcerned with radically overhauling the entire economy of cultural capital which creates tangible inequalities in society. (Hayes 14)

laws, effectively banning sexual education about non-cisheteronormative sexual and gender identities from classrooms and teacher-student conversations until arbitrarily determined year grades, the “representational” may well be the only dimension available to queer youth<sup>7</sup>.

### **Theory to practice: Agbabi, Duffy, and the sonnet genre**

It is obvious, from the interconnectedness of literary terms such as ‘canon’ and sociological concepts such as ‘representation,’ ‘identity,’ and ‘privilege,’ that interacting with an established literary tradition is to negotiate both ideology and aesthetics. Agbabi’s and Duffy’s poetry represents a range of marginalised characters and lifestyles, but moreover, the poets occupy the position of the ‘other’ as queer women writers in a tradition associated predominantly with white cis-heterosexual men. So far, this thesis has covered the revisionist strategies which these poets employ in their sonneteering at the level of individual sonnets, as well as indicated what is at stake, socially, in revisionist writing. What follows now is an examination of the larger revisionist structures in the sonnet genre works in Agbabi’s sonnet collection *Bloodshot Monochrome* (2008), particularly the subsection *Problem Pages*, and in Duffy’s sonnet collection *Rapture* (2005), as well as two sonnets, “Anne Hathaway” and “Demeter,” in her feminist collection *The World’s Wife* (1999). I argue that what is at stake in Agbabi and Duffy’s sonnet-writing projects at large is creating a space for (their) authentic (self-)expression in a genre with a fixity of form and identity positions.

To engender an understanding of the sonnet as a genre from which a tradition and potentially a canon can be theorised, it seems helpful to both define the term *genre* as well as situate Agbabi and Duffy within it historically. *Genre* is an interface where artistic conventions—“distinctive features” of similar works sharing “mutual abstract features”—which is to say, abstract properties of a work, meet “the description of individual phenomena,” and in theorising a genre is a “careful balance” between the two” (Reeder 186). Genres are therefore not simply “means of literary classification,” but “institutionalised channels of creativity, mediating and connecting in various dialectical ways between author and audience (including critics)” (Fishelov 54). Macaluso and Macaluso elaborate further on the connection between audience and author, understanding genre as “impl[y]ing an attentiveness to the way language works to make meaning. In other words, genre attends to the social action that language is performing in the world” (x).

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<sup>7</sup> As an example, see “Not just Florida. More than a dozen states propose so-called ‘Don’t Say Gay’ bills” by Jones and Franklin for *NPR*, <https://www.npr.org/2022/04/10/1091543359/15-states-dont-say-gay-anti-transgender-bills?t=1652538662982>.

The canon, too, features in Fishelov's theory, albeit implicitly, when he discusses the mechanisms involved in the birth of a genre through something he calls generic production, where "certain works left an impression on the minds of their readers that led some of them to produce works 'like' or 'in imitation of the ones they had read" (56)—a notion that overlaps with the concepts of a source text or hypertext from adaptation studies where such genre productions are typically considered canonical works. Fishelov has articulated the development of the sonnet genre in his essay as well:

First, Petrarch's generic model was adopted by many translators and imitators, who followed it very closely, and made Petrarchism into a fashion sweeping throughout the Europe of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The introduction of the sonnet into England is also characterised by secondary forms of generic productivity, with only minor changes, notably by poets such as Wyatt and Surrey. It was only later, after it had become a recognisable genre in England, that the primary forms of generic productivity began to show up, with Sidney, Spenser, and most conspicuously Shakespeare, who introduced into this generic framework a new concept of love. (60-61)

This is a simplification of the origins of the sonnet genre, not to say anything of the developments of the past twenty years (Fishelov wrote in 1999).

The origins of the sonnet are some six-hundred years long, but certain things about the tradition have not changed, exemplified rather aptly, perhaps, by the fact that the appointment of Duffy as Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom in 2009 was the first instance of a female, Scottish, and openly queer poet holding the post (Jurado 34). Julieta Flores Jurado describes the appointment as "a concluding moment in the normalisation of female authorship in British poetry" (33)—over half a millennium since the beginning of a historical British poetry tradition, and "341 years of male bardship" in the form of male Poet Laureates, later (Winterson qtd. in Jurado 33-34). Agbabi has likewise received acknowledgment, although her preference to split her time "between page and stage" has perhaps split the opinions of more traditional poetry critics as well (Ramey 311). Some of her accomplishments include her nomination as one of the Poetry Society's *Next Generation* poets in 2004, her appointment as the Canterbury Poet Laureate, being shortlisted for The Poetry Society's Ted Hughes Award for her Chaucerian poetry retellings in *Telling Tales* (2014) in 2014, and being elected as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 2017 (British Council). A self-identified "bi-cultural"—born to Nigerian parents but raised in North Wales in a white English family—and "bisexual radical feminist" (Evans-Bush), finding space within, or probably more accurately chipping away at, the British poetry canon is about ontology as it is about representation for Agbabi. Female and queer subjectivities are still "rarely portrayed in canonical literature" (Jurado 33-34), and when the appointment of a female Poet Laureate

still makes waves across the British poetry sphere, raising questions about “revisions and negotiations concerning women poets’ engagement with language, form, and literary conventions,” clearly, the work of revisionist authors such as Duffy and Agbabi still has much to do (Jurado 33-34).

Carole Birkan Berz has outlined some of the ways in which contemporary British sonneteers, Duffy and Agbabi among them rise to this challenge provided by the “monumentality” and gendered tradition of the sonnet in her paper “Mapping the Contemporary Sonnet” (2014). Birkan Berz’s analysis is less concerned with the form itself, finding the technical demands of a sonnet a “misreading of the tradition itself”: “despite the calls of certain rule-makers, the sonnet has always been a privileged site for innovation...it is quite clear that each of the three main rules of the sonnet...‘extension, proportion, duration’ have already been broken at one time or another, and new patterns injected into the tradition” (2-3). Out of these three characteristics—extension, proportion, and duration, taken originally from Spiller’s introduction to the sonnet—the sonnet need only conform to one, according to Birkan Berz, until it becomes something else, in addition to “gestur[ing] toward at least one of the traditional interpretations of the genre (the love lyric, the political sonnet etc.)” (3). With these considerations in mind, Birkan Berz has theorised “meta-poetic” modes which contemporary poets “negotiate the iconicity of the sonnet”: parody and satire, by “overturning [the sonnet’s discourses] in their own perspectives, in terms of class, race, ethnicity, religion, gender or sexuality,” as well as by writing “sonnet[s] on the sonnet,” in keeping with the sonnet tradition itself (3-4).

### ***Problem Pages and the sonnet canon***

*Problem Pages* by Agbabi is a subsection in *Bloodshot Monochrome* consisting of fourteen poems stylised as highly innovative sonnets—essentially a corona sequence with fourteen poems of fourteen lines, with only the repetition of each sonnet’s final line missing. With the added consideration of the poem which closes out the collection, a ‘pure’ sonnet corona titled “Vicious Cycle,” and Agbabi’s reference to corona sequences within one of the *Problem Pages* sonnets (“A Crowne of Sonnets,” p. 35), one may assume that the association is deliberate. The *Pages* sonnets are formatted as a questions and answers columns where Patience Agbabi herself responds to influential—one might even say canonical—sonnet writers of times past: the usual suspects, such as Henry Howard the Earl of Surrey (typically credited with the Englishing of the sonnet), William Shakespeare, Mary Wroth, John Milton, but also Claude McKay, a key figure of the Harlem Renaissance period, and the movement’s spiritual successors in Gwendolyn Brooks and June Jordan. These authors are listed in a

deliberately intertextual fashion as the columns' "contributors" after the title page (31). They are by far the most ambitious formal and thematical revisionist project of Agbabi's as it pertains to the sonnet, invoking the Petrarchan formula of an octave and sestet. The octave is set in bolded typeface and forms the question posited to 'Patience' (Agbabi) by her fellow (famous) poets. The lines are neither end-rhymed nor consistent in meter, and the lines are enjambed. The sonnet association, then, stems from the 8+6 structure, the intertextual references to sonneteers, their positioning within a sonnet collection, as well as a "parodic-satirical" take on the Shakespearean witticism also present in the 'agony aunt' column, where the answer must provide solutions expressed compactly (Birkan Berz 4-5). Undoubtedly, such maximum expression with minimal extension presented for Agbabi a thrilling parallel with the sonnet form itself.

Many of the poems in the sequence also read as 'sonnets on the sonnet,' with the sonneteers coming to Patience with various problems relating to their sonnet production precisely: Surrey worrying that his temper will get him into trouble, dressed in literary terminology (Patience could not have helped him; "his tongue, his sword" would get him beheaded in the end) (33); Shakespeare worrying about homophobia and racism with regard to his famous sonnet sequences, to which Patience replies with wholehearted empathy stemming from her own experiences (34); Mary Wroth agonising over her under-appreciated corona sequence, to which Patience replies, with biting irony, "Few women publish coronas; may / yours receive due critical attention on and off the shelf," (35), slyly making a case for "Vicious Cycle" later in the collection. In the case of Charlotte Smith, a victim of pre-Eliot appraisal of 'individual genius,' describes writing "a sonnet sequence" where she "borrowed from the / past masters to add gravitas to my melancholic / landscapes...Critics screamed plagiarism," to which Patience replies with nothing but the T.S. Eliot quote at the top of this chapter—"I rest your case" (37). This is very telling about Agbabi's personal approach to adaptation and revision.

In the same vein, the other sonnets in *Problem Pages* can be conceived as meta-poems about Agbabi's own production, helping the reader position Agbabi ideologically. "The sonnet's narrow room can open doors, break / glass ceilings," Patience responds to Wordsworth (38), and to Keats, she suggests her own course: "teach[ing] Creative Writing part-time and / writ[ing] one day a week minimum" (36). Toward the end of the sequence, the Q&A-sonnets take on an increasingly personally relevant nature. Agbabi assumes the guise of Robert Frost for the octave, proclaiming "I am on the cutting edge of / contemporary craft. The sonnet is the tightest / chamber I have made music in, by subverting / its form, becoming its master" (42). While I would not dare posit that this is how Agbabi sees her own sonnetting, it is nonetheless reminiscent of what contemporary critics do write about her: "an unconventional performance poet: a formalist, often adapting traditional forms such as sonnets and sestinas to her own gender-bending sexual politics" (Smith 2003); "poetic

street-wisdom...dextrous and formally wrought" (Rosenfield), to mention only a few examples. The following entry, penned in the voice of Claude McKay, draws more parallels with Agbabi herself: "I / challenge racism and classism in classical / sonnets in Standard English," Agbabi's McKay explains, and Patience replies, "why not / shake some foundations writing classical sonnets / in patois? A progressive publisher's dream" (43), pre-empting her own 2014 collection where she rewrites Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, sometimes in Standard English, sometimes in regional Englishes, adhering to meters conventionalised by Chaucer himself.

"If you want danger, corset your women into / fourteen lines. It's time more sonnets came out," Patience advises Edna St Vincent Millay next (44), recalling the closing and title sonnet of her previous collection, *Transformatrix* ("She trusses up / words, lines, as a corset disciplines flesh" (78)), and continuing to build her argument for *Bloodshot Monochrome*—for the sonnet, even. The final two poems of the sequence are the ones which best describe her revisionist agenda, powerfully 'corseted' into a form where voices like hers have not always been welcome or indeed comfortable, in the voices of Gwendolyn Brooks and June Jordan. "I'm a black female Chicagoan poet," Agbabi's Brooks begins, "My first collection ended with an / off-rhyme sonnet series... / resurrecting the / controversy about black poets using / traditional white forms" (45), and if it were not for 'Chicagoan,' the octave could well be describing Agbabi herself. Patience's response almost reads as the poet assuring her own self: "Some say poetry+politics=propaganda. That / blackpoet+sonnet=sellout. I do hope your / 'propaganda' sells out, continuing the long / tradition of both political poetry and black poets / engaging with white forms"(45). Agbabi reprises the sentiment in the final sonnet of the sequence, "From Africa Singing," which features 'Jordan's' contribution to Agbabi's meta-literary thesis on the sonnet tradition: "I write from the tradition of / non-European poetry that celebrates the voice / of the people, the orality of literature, spoken / word, yet sometimes the struggle shrinks to a / clenched fist in a European cage: a sonnet" (46). This calls to mind the characterisation of Agbabi as a 'performance poet,' somebody who emphasises the musicality of poetry, its aural dimension as well as the visual (Agbabi qtd. in Novak and Fischer 355). Agbabi acknowledges the "ethnic dimension to [the] page-stage dichotomy," referring to the tendency to associate black poets more with "the performance circuit" than with published poetry, but at the same time, she warns against the danger in assuming that the issue is so clear cut (359).

*Problem Pages* is a fourteen-sonnet corona—a subversive take on genre conventions, but the other half of it is metaliterary, Agbabi's ideological manifesto on what it means to be a female, black, queer writer in a "European cage"; a "sellout," a "cutting edge" contemporary poet whose "verse errs on the side of oddness" (Agbabi 41). The sequence functions in yet another way: it positions Patience the correspondent next to Surrey, Shakespeare, McKay, and the others, as a figure of equal if not greater authority in depicting the canonical



greats in the act of coming to her for counsel. This is not the first time she engages in this kind of positioning: in "Rappin It Up," a poem from her first collection *R.A.W.* (1995), she likewise "[takes] on the great male literary tradition...and [has] Wordsworth and Shakespeare as would-be rappers, and...diss[es] them in the poem" (Agbabi in Novak and Fischer 358). Agbabi's stance regarding canons and canonicity is not subtly woven in: its presence is key for reading *Problem Pages*, which then give context for reading the entirety of *Bloodshot Monochrome*; her approach employs the strategies which feminist, queer, and postcolonial students of the canon have always employed in their interrogation of the Anglo-European literary canon: bringing previously underrepresented and neglected minority voices into the canonical sphere, thereby 'opening' the canon "to include writings by—but also about, or for—social minorities" (Hayes 1). In *Problem Pages*, Agbabi has essentially compiled a list—a miniature canon—of sonneteers, positioning female, queer, and black writers alongside the famous, already canonised white, male, and European arbiters of the sonnet form.

In order to recognise this project for what it is, the reader requires a vast amount of knowledge about its intertextual relationships—the commercial reader is unlikely to catch the connection between the *sonnet* canon in particular, even with the paratextual context clues Agbabi has provided, and the recognition of the many household names of British poetry. But Agbabi does ply even the casual reader to re-examine the poems—in *Bloodshot Monochrome* in general, but the *Problem Pages*, which take up most of the "Notes" at the end of the collection—in context by providing references for the intertextual titles of the *Problem Pages* sonnets. She, for example, reveals the origins of the concept of *Problem Pages* in the entry for "My Light Is Spent" (36): "Title from sonnet 'When I consider how my light is spent' in which 'patience' responds to his question in the sestet, subliminally giving me the concept for *Problem Pages*..." (76). In these notes, Agbabi notes the origins for the titles—all from sonnet works—as well as any other citations she has borrowed in her sonnets, equipping the curious reader with tools to pursue these connections further. This is not typical of poetry collections, not even those with a great degree of intertextuality, and Agbabi's making this information explicit in paratextual form is without a doubt a way to introduce the theory of intertextuality to the commercial reader in accessible form. Whether this is ideologically motivated, in that by naturalising the inclusion of female, queer, and black sonneteers within the sonnet canon for casual readers without disclaimers or references to internal hierarchies, or perhaps a remnant from her occupation as a teacher—a tendency to invite critical thought and new connections in readers—it is a subversive approach to the sonnet canon and canonicity in general.

## Duffy, canonicity, and revision

While the feminist and queer-revisionist ideologies behind Duffy's sonnet production are explored earlier in this thesis, her general approach to sonnet writing is not quite as easily pinpointed as Agbabi's requiring more close-reading of primary production—Duffy, for example, does not provide a list of her intertextual references despite her avid inclusion of them in her work. But then, Duffy, rich in fame and infamy both (following the banning of her poem "Education from Leisure" from the GCSE syllabus in 2008 (Lanone i) and practically a canonical writer herself following her tenure as Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom, does not have as large a stake in the canon debate as her peer, Agbabi (coincidentally, Duffy is one of the three poets Agbabi cites as commercially successful in Britain in terms of book sales in an interview with Novak and Fischer, the two others being Shakespeare and Seamus Heaney, p. 355).

The first edition of Catherine Lanone's article "Baring Skills, Not Soul," published in 2008 and before Duffy's appointment as Poet Laureate, describes Duffy as a "prominent figure of contemporary British poetry" who, "not having been chose as Poet Laureate...has escaped *stuffy canonisation* (Lanone 1; emphasis mine) reveals an interesting juxtaposition of Duffy's profile as a poet, however. If the list of the United Kingdom Poet Laureates since 1616 can be considered a kind of "real or notional list" as Roland defines 'canon' (Roland 186-187), Duffy's place within it does not seem entirely unproblematic. The post, albeit prestigious, "entails conventional celebrations of royal activities," and one task of the appointed poets is to write verse which reflects favourably on the Kingdom and its royalty (Lanone i). Duffy herself confesses to having had "qualms about accepting the job," citing her interpretation of her appointment as a recognition of the great women poets of contemporary Britain, as well as her intention to "preserve her freedom and artistic integrity and limit lines on royal events" as her reasoning behind accepting the post (ibid.). Furthermore, Lanone's conceptualisation as the Poet Laureate list as a site of "stuffy canonisation" calls into question whether, indeed, Duffy has since surrendered to it (ibid.).

Certainly, Duffy is a departure from the twenty other historical white, male, and predominantly, if not exclusively, cisheterosexual Laureates, and so are the themes in her poetry. Jurado describes Duffy's at once canonical—by virtue of being recognised in nearly every way a 'canonical' author is—and non-canonical—in that the experiences she portrays ("motherhood, women's sexuality, and queer desire" (33-34))—as "writing from inside and against tradition," defined further as "love poetry written primarily in English, but also to a counter-tradition, *a history of women poets' appropriation of and conscious engagement with poetic conventions* (34; emphasis mine). If Duffy's appointment within "the great tradition" (Lanone 1) by the Crown as well as

critics situate her firmly in the “in” group of canonicity, our other poet, Agbabi, by definition then only occupies the category of “out; against.” While the written prolificity of these two authors differ greatly—with age providing no real explanation for the difference in active years, Duffy being only ten years Agbabi’s senior—and the sheer volume of Duffy’s production lends claim to her Laureate candidacy, it is nonetheless interesting to compare the two authors’ strategies as it pertains to Jurado’s second category, conscious counter-tradition.

The premise of Duffy’s (1999) collection, *The World’s Wife*, is simple in premise, articulated by the poet herself thus:

What I wanted to do in the book was to look at all the stories ... which had informed me as a writer, part of my cultural ancestry. I wanted to celebrate them, ... but also find a truth which hadn’t been amplified previously. The way I wanted to do that was to find a female perspective on the character (77)

I never felt, in the writing of the *World’s Wife* poems, that the main endeavour was to have a go at certain aspects of maleness, although I can see that that’s part of what comes out of the content. My aim was to find hidden truths or fresh, female ways of looking at familiar things... In that sense, although the book has been called a feminist manifesto, and I am feminist and it is feminist, my aim was larger than that (78)

Consciously then, in an ideological sense, if not entirely consciously when it comes to precise wording, Duffy is channelling Adrienne Rich’s original definition for “re-vision”: “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction” (Rich 18). The two sonnets from this collection, “Anne Hathaway” (see fig. 9) and “Demeter” (see fig. 10) also explicitly address ‘the sonnet canon’. The first fashions the private life of Shakespeare into a rather Shakespearean sonnet (minus the rhyme scheme; plus a rhyming closing couplet popularised by the bard) and rewrites the narrative around the epigrammatic will of Shakespeare himself. The sonnet is riffing off the “traditional view of Anne as a forsaken shrew” (Lanone 4) while also depicting the traditionally taboo topic of female sexuality and pleasure. It is likewise a subversion of both the Petrarchan and English sonnet tropes in that the love and affection Duffy’s Anne feels for her husband is rather specifically requited as well as consummated, and Duffy makes no particular use of the Shakespearean type of innuendo with its crass jokes and almost locker-room humour.

From the outset, Duffy creates a competing narrative for the assumption that Shakespeare left Anne the second-best bed because he did not

value Anne any further: "The bed we loved in," Duffy's Anne begins the sonnet, crafting an association with the bed from the epigram due to the proximity of the "second best bed" and "the bed we loved in" (30). "We loved in" is dual in meaning, affirming both that Shakespeare and Hathaway loved each other, and that they made love—the "second best bed" is implied to be a site of emotional and physical connection, associated with precious, rapturous moments, "a spinning world / of forests, castles, torchlight, clifftops, seas / where he would dive for pears" (30). The "diving for pearls," here is certainly intended as an allusion to oral sex, further pronouncing the love Shakespeare had for Anne by prioritising Anne's pleasure, narratively (for Duffy) as well as within the relationship Duffy is depicting. Further descriptions of physicality serve the same function: "My lover's words / ...fell to earth as kisses / on these lips" and "Some nights I dreamed he'd written me, the bed / a page beneath his writer's hands" (30), Anne describes, again focusing on her husband touching *her*, kissing *her*, bestowing his attentions on *her*, reciprocally. Finally, Anne explains, explicitly, the logic behind Shakespeare's will: "In the other bed, the best, our guests dozed on, / dribbling their prose," indicating that the reason behind Anne—and Shakespeare, as Anne affirms in this sonnet—sleeping and loving not in the best bed but the second-best one was that their sense of hospitality dictated that the best bed be reserved for house guests instead: a practical, relatable course. Not only that, but in Duffy's rewriting of the relationship dynamic, leaving Anne the "second best bed" becomes an inside joke referring to the "romance / and drama played by touch, by scent, by taste" (30) in said bed; the bed might have been second-best objectively, but in the "spinning world" of Anne and Shakespeare, it was their favourite, charged with affection and sensuality. Duffy thus objects to the characterisation of Anne as Shakespeare's lonely, neglected wife relegated to child-rearing and household duties while he lives out his writer's dreams—Duffy's sonnet places Anne as Shakespeare's cherished muse and their bed an inspiring, renewing safe haven for the bard while also reaffirming Anne as a sexual and sensual being. The sonnet ends in a Shakespearean rhyming couplet which turns from the fond remembrance of Anne and William's marital life to the reality which brought about the will from the epigram: Shakespeare is dead, and Anne must now contend with the loneliness it brings, comforted, still, by the loving times she shared with her late husband.

"Demeter," similarly, shifts the focus to a female-centric account in her reinterpretation of the abduction of Persephone and the origin of the seasons from the Homeric Hymns—named thus for sharing the meter and generic features with Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, some of the Western canon's undisputable mainstays. Where retellings of this myth are often focused on the abduction of Persephone by Hades, and often romanticize the relationship between Persephone and her abductor and fashion it into a love story instead<sup>8</sup>, Duffy chooses to highlight the relationship between mother and her long-lost

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<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, the popular webcomics *Lore Olympus* (2021) by Rachel Smythe, *Punderworld* (2021) by Linda Sejic, and *Persephone: Hades' Torment* (2021) by Allison Shaw.

## Anne Hathaway

*'Item I gyve unto my wief my second best bed ...'*  
(from Shakespeare's will)

The bed we loved in was a spinning world  
of forests, castles, torchlight, clifftops, seas  
where he would dive for pearls. My lover's words  
were shooting stars which fell to earth as kisses  
on these lips; my body now a softer rhyme  
to his, now echo, assonance; his touch  
a verb dancing in the centre of a noun.  
Some nights, I dreamed he'd written me, the bed  
a page beneath his writer's hands. Romance  
and drama played by touch, by scent, by taste.  
In the other bed, the best, our guests dozed on,  
dribbling their prose. My living laughing love –  
In hold him in the casket of my widow's head  
as he held me upon that next best bed.

Fig. 9. "Anne Hathaway" by Carol Ann Duffy (*The World's Wife*, 1999, p. 30)

daughter, like Louise Glück also would seven years later in her collection *Averno*, and to place the joy of their reunion—of Persephone’s homecoming, rebirth—in the centre of the sonnet. The poet speaker of the sonnet is Demeter, Persephone’s mother and the Greek goddess of harvest. Structured into four tercets and a rhyming couplet, again more Shakespearean than Italian in structure. Persephone’s return from the Underworld is associated with spring and rebirth, and in Duffy’s sonnet, the literal winter and the following thaw function as allegory for Demeter’s mood. It broke Demeter’s heart to lose Persephone, it made her cold: “I sat in my cold stone room / choosing tough words, granite, flint, / to break the ice” (30).

Demeter expresses having tried to recover through “breaking the ice,” but where the expression functions as a symbol for her wounded and guarded spirit, she may well be referring to a literal frozen lake as well (“it skimmed, / flat, over the frozen lake” (30)). The lake Averno is where ancient Romans believed the entrance to the Underworld was located, cited epigraphically in Glück’s *Averno* as well, which makes it the site of Persephone’s disappearance as well. This referential knowledge, cleverly deposited in the sonnet by Duffy, creates a duplicity of meaning in the sonnet; the image evoked by the two first tercets of Demeter raging against the unyielding ice of Averno is raw, brimming. The following eight lines bring a lightness of relief and sweet reunion, the emotional and the physical both represented in the return of spring: “I saw her at last, walking, / my daughter, my girl, across the fields, / in bare feet, bringing all spring’s flowers”; “I swear / the air softened and warmed as she moves, // the blue sky smiling, none too soon” (30). Importantly, Duffy affords the reunion eight lines versus the six dedicated to heartbreak, so the proportionality of lengths translates to “consequentiality of thought” (Spiller 4); Spiller further posits that “[s]ix is to eight as conclusion is to proposition, or as development and summing up is to a statement” (4), and here, too, Duffy’s revisionist tendencies are visible in the way the usual configuration of octave and sestet is reversed, the octave *following* the sestet instead. Where most previous narratives have given centre stage to the heartbreak and tragedy of Persephone’s abduction, Duffy resists this narrative, subtly centring the joy of reunion on a structural level as well.

Duffy works with the connection between form and meaning in several other sonnets as well. “Hour,” published in *Rapture* (p. 7), is possibly the most conventional of all of Duffy’s sonnets, featuring both typical ‘extension’ and ‘proportion,’ to borrow Spiller’s terminology (Spiller 3), but also a rhyme scheme which reads—including the few consonant rhymes of *hair/here* and *hour/ear*—*abab cdcd aece ff*, or *abab cdcd efef gg*, in archetypical Shakespearean fashion (the couplet rhymes, *poor/straw*, are near enough in Standard English that I consider them a rhyming couplet). The recycling of “hour” at the end of line 9, marking the beginning of a new open rhyme pair, and its pair, “ear,” not a full rhyme for “hour” but certainly for “here” on line 7, gives the impression that Duffy is playing with the rhyme scheme, baiting the

## Demeter

Where I lived – winter and hard earth.  
I sat in my cold stone room  
choosing tough words, granite, flint,

to break the ice. My broken heart –  
I tried that, but it skimmed,  
flat, over the frozen lake.

She came from a long, long way,  
but I saw her at last, walking,  
my daughter, my girl, across the fields,

in bare feet, bringing all of spring's flowers  
to her mother's house. I swear  
the air softened and warmed as she moved,

the blue sky smiling, none too soon,  
with the small shy mouth of a new moon.

Fig. 10. "Demeter" by Carol Ann Duffy (*The World's Wife*, 1999, p. 76)

reader with internal and half rhymes. The pattern very closely resembles, but is not quite, Shakespearean.

The same can be said for its content, with Lanone describing the sonnet as “deliberately traditional...Duffy’s pun on love, time and money has distinct Shakespearian overtones” (4). Composed precisely in the vein of Shakespeare’s sonnet sequences, the sonnet spends the first half developing the argument that, while no amount of time could sometimes feel enough for two people in love who wish to spend all their hours with their lover, each moment spent together is precious; all worrying about limited time does is retract from the magic of each moment, however short. The language is purposefully crafted to create associations with Shakespeare, with phrases such as “Love’s time’s beggar, but even a single hour, / bright as a dropped coin, makes love rich”; “We find an hour together, spend it not on flowers / or wine...”(note, especially, the reversed syntax associated with older, formal poetic registers); “no jewel hold a candle to the cuckoo spit / ... / no chandelier or spotlight see you better lit” (as before Duffy turns to the defamiliarizing effect of unusual poetic syntax); and the concluding couplet, technically beginning only half way through line 13, “Time hates love, wants love poor, / but love spins gold, gold, gold from straw” (2008, 7). While popularised by Shakespeare, the “epigrammatic sting” of the couplet which summarises the gist of the sonnet is nonetheless an invention of Wyatt, and evokes his work, too (Burt and Mikics 11).

If “Hour” strikes a balance between a conventional sonnet and a revisionist take on the genre, “Syntax” (see fig. 11) also from *Rapture*, is more metapoetic in mode than a pure sonnet—a “sonnet on the sonnet” (Birkan Berz 4), and an experimental take on the sonnet form; explicitly “metatextual” in title (Lanone 4), as well as unsubtly calling to the defamiliarizing language of Elizabethan sonneteers. Carrying on with one of the overarching themes of *Rapture*—unspokeness, liminal knowledge, and the unwieldiness of language, explored in more detail in chapter 2—“Syntax” is located close to the end of the collection and therefore toward the end of the love affair it describes as well. The poet speaker struggles to speak the words which best describe her feelings for her beloved, evident in the way the first twelve lines—divided into two sestet, a self-contained rhyming end couplet in the style of Shakespeare bringing the line count to fourteen thereafter—do not once mention the poet speaker following through on her wishes. “I want to call you though,” the poet speaker begins, “and to say, after, I love / thou...not / I love you” (51). The second sestet carries on with this logic instead of introducing new ideas: “Because I so do [love thou] – / ... I want to say / thee, I adore, I adore thee” (51). These thoughts remain in the realm of wishful thinking, familiar to the reader from “Chinatown” (p. 35) as well, underscoring the lovers’ struggles with communication throughout the love affair. For the speaker to wish for these things carries the implication that the speaker does not, or perhaps cannot, have the scripted, familiar, romanticised, and idealised love, which is portrayed, for instance, in Shakespeare’s famous sonnet sequence to his two beloveds.



## Syntax

I want to call you thou, the sound  
of the shape of the start  
of a kiss – like this, thou –  
and to say, after, I love,  
thou, I love, thou I love, not  
I love you.

Because I so do –  
as we say now – I want to say  
thee, I adore, I adore thee,  
and to know in my lips  
the syntax of love resides,  
and to gaze in thine eyes.

Love's language starts, stops, starts;  
the right words flowing or clotting in the heart.

Fig. 11. "Syntax" by Carol Ann Duffy (*Rapture*, 2005, p. 51).

On a more symbolic level, the speaker wishes for the things associated with the Shakespearean allusions of the sonnet properties and the archaic language—"artful and reflective...passionate [and] love-struck," a genre where "[e]xpressing one's love [is] a genuine relief, but also a performance...include[ing] erotic anecdote, moralising, intimate confession, and satirical grace notes" (Burt and Mikics 13); what is particularly interesting is that the satirical mode, cited even today as a favourite device among contemporary sonneteers by Birkan Berz (3), was already in use during the British sonnet vogue of the 16th century. There is a rapturous, physical quality to the few descriptive lines in the poem which deviate from the 'syntactic' interest in archaic forms: "thou, the sound / of the shape of the start / of a kiss" across lines 1 to 3 have a feverish arrangement of three anaphoric anapaests (Duffy 51). The line implies, in addition to the giddiness of the anapaests, an inherent sensuality—or perhaps romanticism—in using the older, 'poetic' "thou" for the speaker. Similarly in lines 10 and 11, the speaker once more reverses syntax for a more defamiliarizing register in the second allusion to the physicality of her love: "to know in my lips / the syntax of love resides" (51). 'Giddiness' is a particularly fitting description also for the "slight hesitation, that elusive temporary absence or suspension" in line 7, where the line is visually delayed, set on the page to follow, visually, after line 6 ("I love you," 51; Lanone 5). Visually, and also to better suit the loose meter of the first sestet where the lines are hexa- or heptasyllabic, as well as syntactically, line 7, then, is a continuation for the thought in line 6, and a conclusion to the thought developed in the first sestet, "Because I so do" (51). In order to adhere to the traditional sonnet length—considering the sonnet is very revisionist in other ways, conspicuously missing a typical rhyme scheme, and rather short of the usual pentameter line length—Duffy employs what Lanone calls *syncope*, defined as "a weak musical beat between two strong beats, a kind of hesitation or dissonance...the end of the line [6]...occurs off-beat, after a blank, a gap...forc[ing] the reader to take a breath, shifting the rhythmic balance of the lines. This is a tactic which Duffy employs all throughout *Rapture*, sometimes resulting in sonnets of fourteen lines, sometimes extending them to as many as sixteen lines on this technicality; I read them all as sonnets all the same due to their close relation with the themes and form.

'The beloved' of the sonnet tradition is someone seemingly without fault, except in that they are perfect enough to cause pain; the speaker of the sonnet is at least safe in that their love for someone unattainable provides protection from heartbreak after hope. In the context of the *Rapture* sequence, the reader is very aware, by the time they reach "Hour," of the heartbreak administered to the poet speaker of the sequence. The reader knows that the beloved to whom the poems of *Rapture* are addressed, and of whom they speak, is not particularly perfect: already on page 18, "Row" depicts scenes from the lovers' 'rows,' marking the beginning of the end with violent imagery:

But when we rowed,  
 the room swayed and sank down on its knees,  
 the air hurt and purpled like a bruise,  
 ...  
 ...  
 the trees wept and threw away their leaves,  
 the day ripped the hours from our lives,  
 the sheets and pillows shredded themselves on the  
 bed.  
 ...  
 our mouths knew no kiss, no kiss, no kiss,  
 our hearts were jagged stones in our fists,  
 ...  
 ...  
 my hands squeezed themselves, burned like verbs,  
 love turned, and ran, and covered in our heads. (18)

This love is not pristine, and it is precisely the reciprocity of the preceding poems—the fact of the attainable beloved, a departure from Petrarchan love lyric—which makes the following depiction of the relationship’s deterioration so bittersweet in undertone. After the lovelorn, hopeless interludes of “Row” and “Cuba”—also on distance, and fighting (19)—the speaker of *Rapture* returns to a more blissful coexistence with her beloved, which is all the same overcast by the dark clouds of the heartbreak interlude. “Pity the lovers, homeless, / with no country to sail to,” the speaker warns on page 24, amid otherwise hopeful love lyric, foreshadowing the difficult times to come, beginning again only three poems later, almost precisely at the halfway point of the sequence, in “Give”: “I left you, the last night we loved, / and when I returned, you were gone with the gold, / and the silver, the river, the forest, the fields, / and this is the story I’ve told” (29). Reciprocity is one of the revisionist techniques employed this way by Duffy to revise the trope of an idealised and unattainable female beloved, “push[ing] against the trope of distance” (Seiler-Garman 28).

Duffy’s decision to chart the entire course of a reciprocal love affair, from its tentative beginning to the scorn at its end, Duffy is posing the old question of whether it is better to love and lose than to never love at all, with conventional and tropic sonnet lyric a synecdoche for the latter, and her revisionist sonnet for the former. Form begets meaning in Duffy’s treatment of the sonnet genre, and thus Duffy’s revisionist project in *Rapture* asks questions about the sonnet’s conventional uses as well as human nature: will a sonnet sequence be able to carry out a chronological narrative? (The answer, evidently, is yes.) Is there room for lovestruck, rapturous, bitter, and sorrowful love lyric in one single volume? Is the blissful reward of reciprocal love worth the potentially

devastating risk of heartbreak? Who are we, alone and to each other, when communication fails to represent us adequately, and are we then the sum of only the things we imprecisely express, or perhaps in essence unknowable by other humans? Duffy provides no answers, except for her implicit agreement with Spiller: the sonnet can be used to talk about anything at all, with the caveat that the sonnet's formal and thematic conventions are closer to a corset than straitjacket, as Patience Agbabi declared.

## **In closing**

These chapters serve as an introduction to the possible readings of feminist and queer revisions in the works of Agbabi and Duffy, as well as the mechanisms which canonise certain British poets and marginalise others. This thesis makes the argument that literary revisionism is a useful tool for analysing feminist, queer, and postcolonial ideologies in works where this content is already prominent, such as in the sonnets of outspoken feminist and queer activists such as Patience Agbabi and Carol Ann Duffy. Instead of performing feminist or queer criticism, this thesis has focused on identifying revisionist tendencies and strategies in the sonnets of Agbabi and Duffy. This thesis identifies three key features of the practice of revising the sonnet tradition: 1. paying homage to the sonnet tradition by including implicit or explicit intertextual references to its canonical names, texts, and conventionalised themes and structures; 2. by claiming the tradition for themselves by interacting, as poets identifying with various and overlapping marginalised categories, with a tradition which historically has been the voice of cisheterosexual, white European men; and 3. by critically revising and in parts rebuffing the tradition by exposing or subverting the conventions which have facilitated its nature as an androcentric and Eurocentric medium.

Agbabi and Duffy use a combination of formal and thematic revision. They subvert the most common structural conventions—those being fourteen lines of iambic pentameter, stanzaed according to various conventionalised schemes—and thematic ones, the most important ones being the Petrarchan trope of love lyric where the speaker poet is most often a male yearning after an (sometimes imaginary) idealised, romanticised, and objectified female beloved. Chapter one establishes *feminist revision* as one of the strategies Agbabi and Duffy use to challenge the trope of lovelorn male speaker poet and his idealised female beloved. Agbabi and Duffy carry out a feminist re-imagining of the genre by problematising the gender dynamic of Petrarchan love lyric by exposing the violent implications of male sexual desire. In the sonnets in chapter one, Agbabi and Duffy's female characters are purposefully voiceless and absent, but instead

of inadvertently silencing them, Agbabi and Duffy place women's silence and absence in the centre of their sonnets instead.

Chapter two identifies *queering the sonnet*, or *queer revision*, as Agbabi and Duffy's second revisionist strategy. Queering, in this context, implies a systematic and intentional problematisation of binaries which creates potential for queer readings. The queer revisionism in the sonnets of Agbabi and Duffy are explored through explicit queer texts, namely Agbabi's "Step" which is a revisionist version of the story of Snow White, but also through implicit codes for queerness. This chapter contextualises queer expression through such concepts as secrecy/unspokenness/the unsayable/the unsaid, arguing that where binary conceptions of 'epistemologies of the closet' dominate a social landscape around queerness, codes and symbolism about silence, voice, secrets, and knowledge become queer subtext. The foregrounding of gender and sexuality as nonbinary categories engenders the problematisation of other characters as well, and therefore *queering* is understood, as a theoretical approach, to be applicable to any binary arrangement, particularly as it pertains to social identities.

Chapter three first establishes *the canon* and *identity* as relevant concepts for exploring the meta-structure level revisionism in the sonnets of Agbabi and Duffy. In this chapter, the argumentation transitions from individual close readings to the revisions made on the level of tradition. First, the chapter establishes a historical trajectory of sonnet writing, positioning Agbabi and Duffy as writing from *outside* the sonnet tradition on account of their identities as women and queer poets, and in Agbabi's case, also on account of her ethnicity; this establishes them as *counter-canonical* writers. Here, however, the thesis diverges from previous comparisons between the two poets' sonnets—previously concerned with commonalities in revisionist strategies—to differentiate between Agbabi and Duffy in terms of their perceived canonicity. Duffy, as the recipient of various national accolades and with her appointment as the Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom from 2009 to 2019, occupies a position *within* the canon as well. She is therefore positioned both within and without and enjoys the privilege of a canonised author while publishing material which, written by anybody else, would be considered counter-canonical, giving voice to topics such as motherhood, same sex desire, and gender relations.

The third revisionist strategy, then, as argued by chapter three, is *purposeful engagement with the sonnet tradition* through the concept of canonicity. Agbabi, identified in this chapter as a fully counter-canonical writer, engages with the canon through explicit intertextual riffs—such as addressing fellow (famous) sonneteers directly in her sonnets, and by curating a *counter-canon* of her own in *Problem Pages*, a sonnet sequence in her collection *Bloodshot Monochrome*, where she curates a "miniature canon" of influential sonneteers, featuring sonneteers that are female, queer, and Black. Duffy, occupying the dual positions of within and in opposition to the canon, confronts the canon through less direct means, in centring women and queer voices in

sonnets such as "Anne Hathaway" and "Demeter." She remains conscious of the problematic nature of the Poet Laureate position, citing the promotion of the voices of female poets as a chief factor in making the decision to accept the honour. Although their approaches differ in accordance with their canonicity status, Agbabi and Duffy both revise the sonnet tradition by remaining explicitly conscious of the canon's existence and the social mechanics which perpetuate it, and negotiating their place within it through their different (marginalised) identity categories.

There is a danger inherent in positioning any person or group as 'the other' to a dominant group; the dialogue of difference, and oppression and inequality perpetrated through this difference, risks further reinforcement of the power structures which critical approaches such as feminist, queer, and postcolonial theories seek to destabilise and resist. It is therefore important to note the following: while the identity categories of 'woman', 'queer', 'Black', 'Scot', 'Welsh', and so on, which are some of the labels we may attach to Agbabi and Duffy, may in certain (Anglo-European social contexts) occupy marginalised positions, the aim of this thesis is not to posit that each of these categories is not also a site of joy, peace, pride, and personal empowerment. Defining identities through privilege is a useful tool in certain (critical) contexts, but it would be incredibly reductionist, not to mention inaccurate, to assume that marginalised identity categories are primarily characterised through the oppression, discrimination, and difficulty. The purpose of this thesis is also not to assign marginality to the existence of any specific identity category, or to the subjective experiences of Agbabi or Duffy, or to make conclusions about the kind of lives they may lead on account of belonging—or not belonging—to some of the above categories.

Similarly, due to the immense plurality and changeability of personal identity, these identity categories may or may not be central to a person's identity. It is not a critical scholar's—or anyone's—place to assign importance to any one identity category of the several of which make up another person's experience of identity. This is also to say that my analysis, which has been chiefly concerned with gender relations as well as representations of queerness in the sonnet works of Agbabi and Duffy, is by any means the only, or the best, way to examine their works. These analyses have been largely formalist in their application of deconstructive theory; other scholars may want to include an analysis of authorial intent as it pertains to feminist and queer theory. Due to its comparative nature and the choice to focus on these poets, this thesis could not properly accommodate an analysis on race and ethnicity—this is not due to oversight, but rather a means to narrow my own focus. Race, culture, diaspora, and Britishness are prevalent themes in Agbabi's poetry, and while they are outside the scope of this thesis—the sonnet oeuvre of Duffy providing little in the way of a natural parallel—they more than deserve academic attention.

This thesis is in no way intended to be exhaustive. These analyses hold the foregrounding assumption of the intersectionality of identity; however, a critical inquiry into how identity categories overlap *specifically* rather than generally in the works of Agbabi and Duffy would make for a worthwhile research project. There is much potential yet for feminist, queer, and postcolonial inquiries into these texts and others by these authors. While the research questions which this thesis set out to answer—what the techniques through which Agbabi and Duffy achieve this revision of the sonnet forms and genres in order to represent marginalised experiences and identities, and what similarities and differences can be found in their respective approaches to revising these traditions—have been answered in these chapters, other interpretations yet remain. In addition to feminist and queer revision, and engagement with the canon, future thesis might examine the use of different English registers and syntactic devices as means to articulate experiences which fall into nonnormative identity categories.

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