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## Lesbian Love Sonnets: Adrienne Rich and Carol Ann Duffy

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# Lesbian Love Sonnets: Adrienne Rich and Carol Ann Duffy

by Robin Seiler-Garman

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Bachelor of Arts in English

Linfield College

May 25, 2017

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To my professors who taught me restraint when it came to commas, to my family for sending me pictures of our cats, to my friends who now know more than they ever expected about sonnets and lesbian poetry: thank you.

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## Introduction

In her highly influential book *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes, “without a concept of gender there could be, quite simply, no concept of homo- or heterosexuality” (31). Our conceptualization of sexuality is rooted in gender. Modern, western society defines sexuality as which genders one is and is not attracted to—often appearing as a binary between homosexuality and heterosexuality. Recently, however, queer theorists have begun to push against the idea of binary sexuality altogether. In her discussion about the overshadowing of bisexuality in queer theory, April Callis argues “bisexuality, which cannot help but be uniquely placed inside/outside of the binary of heterosexuality/homosexuality, seems to be an ideal starting place for deconstruction” (27).

The interplay between gender and sexuality additionally manifests in the history of literature, with Monique Wittig arguing in *The Lesbian Body* that “male homosexual literature has a past, it has a present. The lesbians, for their part, are silent—just as all women are as women at all levels” (qtd. in Collecott, 92). Even among the LGBTQ+ community, male voices often overshadow their female counterparts. Because the two are so intimately intertwined, writing about sexuality necessitates writing about gender. *Twenty-One Love Poems* by Adrienne Rich and *Rapture* by Carol Ann Duffy are two poetry collections where as lesbian poets, gender and sexuality play an important role. Separated by an ocean and decades, Rich and Duffy draw on many of the same sonnet traditions and elements with one major difference between the two collections—gendering of the beloved. Reading these sequences through the lens of sonnet sequences emphasizes the contrast between the highly gendered beloved of *Twenty-*

*One Love Poems* and less gendered beloved of *Rapture*, putting forth two different conceptualizations of sexuality as binary and non-binary respectively.

However, although the two collections are not sonnet sequences, Rich and Duffy are clearly influenced by and calling on that tradition. Stephen Burt and David Mikics argue that “the sonnet had a history—and to write a sonnet was to participate in a line of poets, stretching back for centuries, who had taken up the form” (21). The sonnet is one of the oldest poetic forms, recognized by its set rhyme scheme and fourteen lines. Although there are many forms of sonnets and it is now considered a somewhat outdated form, it is still considered the quintessential form of the love poem. William Shakespeare’s iconic sonnet series is one of the best-known examples of the sonnet sequence charting the rise and fall of a love affair.<sup>1</sup> Oppenheimer describes the appeal of the sonnet as being “tantalizingly private as well as public” (5).

Structurally, Adrienne Rich appears to be most influenced by the Petrarchan style of sonnets.<sup>2</sup> It is the oldest type of sonnet, dating back to the thirteenth century in Sicily (Burt & Mikics 6). A Petrarchan sonnet is made up of fourteen lines: two quatrains of four lines each—often with a closed rhyme scheme—and two tercets of three lines each with an interlaced rhyme scheme. The “turn” or “volta” in the Petrarchan style is

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<sup>1</sup> Although there is currently academic debate over whether Shakespeare’s collection of sonnets is an official sequence based on whether he or his publisher arranged the sequence.

<sup>2</sup> Petrarchan sonnets are also referred to as Italian sonnets just as Shakespearean sonnets are also referred to as English sonnets. To avoid conflating form and language, I will be referring to the two major styles of sonnets as Petrarchan and Shakespearean respectively.



often between the second quatrain and first tercet (Fuller 2).<sup>3</sup> Mary Robinson's sonnet "Sappho and Phaon 24" is an example of this style:

O thou! meek Orb! that stealing o'er the dale  
 Cheer'st with thy modest beams the noon of night!  
 On the smooth lake diffusing silvery light,  
 Sublimely still, and beautifully pale!  
 What can thy cool and placid eye avail,  
 Where fierce despair absorbs the mental sight,  
 While inbred glooms the vagrant thoughts invite,  
 To tempt the gulf where howling fiends assail?  
 O, Night! all nature owns thy tempered power;  
 Thy solemn pause, thy dews, thy pensive beam;  
 Thy sweet breath whispering in the moonlight bower,  
 While fainting flow'rets kiss the wandering stream!  
 Yet, vain is every charm! and vain the hour,  
 That brings to maddening love, no soothing dream!

(Burt and Mikics 100)

This fits perfectly into the standard Petrarchan form. Note the closed rhyme scheme of the two quatrains (ABBAABBA), the volta between the second quatrain and third tercet shifting to talk about night, and the interlaced rhyme (CDECDE) of the two tercets. Fuller argues that when it comes to the Petrarchan sonnet the "essence of the sonnet's form is the unequal relationship between octave and sestet" (2).

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<sup>3</sup> Some also refer to the Petrarchan sonnet in terms of an octave of eight lines and sestet of six lines.

The Shakespearean sonnet is the other major sonnet form. Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard are credited with the initial emergence of this sonnet form in England after being exposed to it on a trip to Italy. Wyatt, specifically, is credited with the invention of a couplet to close the sonnet —although Shakespeare prompted the shift away from a more summary couplet to a self-reflective, declarative couplet (Burt & Mikics 11, 14). Refined and popularized by William Shakespeare—hence the name—a Shakespearean sonnet is, like a Petrarchan sonnet, composed of fourteen lines. However, the form is altered. The Shakespearean sonnet is made up of three quatrains—often in open rhyme—and a couplet. The major turn is a little delayed and often does not occur until the couplet, although there is often a minor turn between the second and third quatrains (Fuller 14, 17). There are, of course, variations. One example is Sonnet 116 by William Shakespeare:

Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
 Admit impediments. Love is not love  
 Which alters when it alteration finds,  
 Or bends with the remover to remove:  
 O no; it is an ever-fixed mark,  
 That looks on tempests, and is never shaken;  
 It is the star to every wandering bark,  
 Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.  
 Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks  
 Within his bending sickle's compass come;  
 Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,

But bears it out even to the edge of doom.

If this be error and upon me proved,

I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

(Burt & Mikics 68)

Note the open rhyme scheme persisting through the three quatrains (ABAB CDCD EFEF). An open rhyme scheme is more flexible than the closed rhyme scheme of the Petrarchan sonnet. Fuller notes the proportions of the sonnet again—twelve lines of quatrain and two lines of couplet—and as seen above the couplet both summarizes the contemplation of the sonnet and makes a witty, epigrammatic comment. Fuller puts it succinctly when he writes, “the couplet must assert” (Fuller 15, 19). Thematically, the Shakespearean sonnet is highly influenced by the Petrarchan sonnet with the distant beloved and suffering speaker-poet. Shakespearean sonnets tend to be both more contemplative and performative, where the declaring of love ties into notions of courtly love (Burt & Mikics 12-3).

Originally, sonnets were written as standalone poems but in the mid-sixteenth century some began to be ordered in a sequence (Spiller “Sequence” 4). A single sonnet is often too short, too prone to contemplation for narrating events. (Spiller “Development” 4). Perhaps most famously documenting the rise and fall of a love affair, a sonnet sequence can be on any number of subjects, whether narrative or descriptive, and connected in a variety of ways. Spiller writes that in many of the most famous sonnet sequences, “love, or worship of a loved one, is the thread, keynote, or motif of a sequence, and some sort of struggle to know or understand the self is one of the animating forces” (Spiller “Sequence” 2). Merely publishing sonnets together does not

automatically make a sonnet sequence; they need to be related and deliberately connected (Spiller "Sequence"16-7). This linking can occur in a variety of ways: a defined cycle such as seasons, on a set number of objects or theme (such as a sequence about the Seven Deadly Sins), through consistent speaker-poet and Beloved, or through a "crown" created by the repetition of lines (Fuller 40-2). By far the most obvious way to indicate linkage is to number the sonnets sequentially.

There are various types of sonnet sequences from formal, topographical—about a landscape—narrative, philosophical, and lyric. The most popular form of sonnet sequences are lyric sequences, which make up the majority of love sequences. Spiller writes "the point of view is usually that of a single character whose thoughts and feelings are foregrounded, making the sequence lyric rather than narrative" ("Sequence" 26). In a sequence about a love affair, readers do not usually see the events themselves; rather they observe the speaker-poet retroactively reflecting on events and emotions.

Although less evident than technical structure, writing sonnets also entails participating in a highly gendered tradition where the male speaker-poet yearns after an often unattainable female beloved. Diana Henderson describes the gendered space of the sonnet, writing "as Europeans in a hierarchical world that presumed male superiority...writers of the first love sonnets expressed the cultural and social paradoxes their desires engendered" (46). Although women such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote sonnets, it was not until Edna St. Vincent Millay in the 20th century that women could usurp the traditionally male role of "active desirer" (Henderson 62). Thus, themes

and tropes that have defined the sonnet throughout history emerged from this space of gendered power dynamics.

Both *Twenty-One Love Poems* by Adrienne Rich and *Rapture* by Carol Ann Duffy draw on the tradition of sonnet sequences, a tradition defined by strict structure and gendered power dynamics. As lesbians with female speaker-poets writing about other women, they both include and subvert themes and tropes, highlighted by their playing with the prescribed structure. Viewing the collections through the lens of sonnet sequences provides an intriguing perspective for examining the depiction of gender and, by extension, sexuality.

## Chapter 1- Adrienne Rich and *Twenty-One Love Poems*

Adrienne Rich was a prominent American poet, essayist, and feminist who was born in 1929 and died in 2012. *Twenty-One Love Poems* was initially published on its own in 1977 and then in a larger collection, *Dream of a Common Language*, a year later. It was published during an important period of LGBTQ+ rights in the United States. In 1962, just 15 short years before the release of *Twenty-One Love Poems*, Illinois became the first state to decriminalize homosexuality. In 1973, just four years before, homosexuality was declassified as a mental disorder through its removal from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. The AIDS crisis in the United States began in 1980, three years after the collection was published. One of the most well-known pieces of LGBTQ+ history, the Stonewall Riots, occurred in 1984, only seven years after the publication of *Twenty-One Love Poems* (Stevens xviii-xix).

*Twenty-One Love Poems* is Rich's coming out collection, so to speak, as it is the first time she explicitly writes about relationships between women. Many reviewers, whether positively or negatively, saw this collection as directed to the growing lesbian-feminist movement in the United States and noted the change in tone, with varying degrees of approval and disapproval. In *Feminary*, the reviewer suggests that now, "as she writes more for a lesbian feminist audience," Rich "feels more oriented toward her audience," and conveys a sense of a "we" not just an isolated "I." (Sheridan 35). Olga Broumas, another reviewer, noted how this collection had a new focus on women, describing it as the "absolute and primary attention directed at the other." (Sheridan 35). This positive criticism, however, was not universal. Alicia Ostriker believe that the collection overly romanticized women, portraying them without flaws, referring to it as

“the Lesbian Imperative” and calling it “offensively totalitarian.” (Sheridan 35). Another reviewer summarized their reaction with “Separatist politics shut listeners out of ‘common language’” (Sheridan 34). The combination of the sequence being about a relationship between two women and the corresponding explicit focus on women was not ignored by reviewers. Tapping into one of the most common criticisms of *Twenty-One Love Poems*, or really anything that focuses on a marginalized group, one reviewer wrote “Miss Rich has forsaken the life of human-being for that of a lesbian” (Sheridan 33-4). Many reviews also noted the lack of male bodies in the sequence, one writing “men figure little in [Rich’s feminism] now, even as objects of blame” although feeling that Rich’s new focus on lesbian identity and relationships is less threatening than her previous criticism of the prevalence of the patriarchy (Sheridan 34). The deliberate focus on women had been connected to the lesbian feminist movement at the time, thus the sequence was seen as inherently political or “poetry of protest” (Sheridan 27). Colette Ann Peters, writing later, emphasizes Rich’s lesbian identity, arguing that “*Twenty-One Love Poems*, an illocutionary attempt to break lesbian silence, can be read as addressed to Rich’s lesbianism” (Peters 67). Madeline Bassnett continues on a similar vein, examining the interaction between public and private spaces in the sequence, concluding “Rich adds the traditional focus to her awareness of the societal pressures on lesbian desire and relationships” (Bassnett 53). Although some critics mention the traditional sonnet influence on Rich, it is rarely a sustained focus of their analysis. This is an oversight because reading Adrienne Rich’s *Twenty-One Love Poems* through the lens of sonnet sequences highlights the subversion of gendered

dynamics in the collection and, along with queer theory, bring to light the binaries established in the collection.

### Gendering of the Speaker-Poet

In *Twenty-One Love Poems*, it becomes apparent to the reader early on that the speaker-poet is a woman. The first hint is in poem IV when a man calls the speaker-poet “hysterical”, a term predominantly directed towards women (7). In the next poem, the speaker-poet claims “we still have to stare into the absence/of men who would not, women who could not, speak/to our life” (Rich 17-19). Instead of explicitly identifying herself as a woman, the speaker-poet harkens back to continuing literary tradition of the absence of women’s experiences through women being unable to write their experiences and men being unwilling. This emphasis on tradition, drawing on pains of the past to explain the present, continues throughout the collection. In poem VIII the speaker-poet declares “the woman who cherished/her suffering is dead. I am her descendant”, simultaneously positioning herself in this tradition while asserting her own identity as a woman (Rich 10-11).

### Gendering of the Beloved

It is also apparent that the female speaker-poet is writing about another woman. Although the speaker-poet does not explicitly refer to the beloved as a woman until poem XII, declaring “we were two lovers of one gender,/we were two women of one generation” the implicit gendering of the beloved’s body begins earlier (Rich 16-17). Poem VI begins with “Your small hands, precisely equal to my own—/only the thumb is



larger, longer” (Rich 1-2). Although at first appearing contradictory, Rich is utilizing metonymy to convey the shared gender of the speaker-poet and beloved. Unlike metaphor, metonymy is not a comparison between two distinct things; instead it is using an aspect of something to stand for a larger thing (Littlemore 1, 4). When utilized in terms of people specifically, the most applicable or prominent characteristic stands for the person as a whole (Littlemore 7). In this instance, Rich is using the physical similarities between the speaker-poet and the beloved’s hands to metonymically imply their shared gender.

#### Subversion of Gendered Power Dynamics

Jennifer Ann Smith in her article “The Lesbian In Us” further develops the “precisely equal” description by arguing the hands metonymically imply equality in the relationship as well as a shared gender, which is a very different approach than the inherent power dynamics found in traditional sonnet sequences (8). Jane Hedley agrees, arguing that the metonymic implications of the hands “is yet another example of Rich’s resistance to ‘using’ her lover in the traditional way: instead she preserves the integrity of both bodies in the poem, and affirms their ‘natural’ connection” (74). It cannot be overlooked that one of the first instances of gendering the beloved also reaffirms the inherent equality in the relationship. Although Rich is writing in the gendered tradition of sonnets, she pushes against the power imbalance as an inherent result of heterosexual gendering by writing from the perspective of a woman, by depicting a same-sex relationship, but most significantly, by actively subverting the hierarchies of gender through casting both the speaker-poet and beloved as equal participants.

This metonymy, along with this balancing act between sameness and difference, continues in poem XII with

I've wakened to your muttered words

Spoken light-or dark-years away

As if my own voice had spoken.

But we have different voices, even in sleep,

And our bodies, so alike, are yet so different (Rich 7-11)

This is another example of Rich pushing against the sonnet's gendered power dynamics. The speaker-poet is anxious to state physical similarities—thereby implying their shared gender of female—but still wants to reaffirm the beloved's identity as an individual. She does this through noting the differences, reasserting that the beloved is her own person outside of her relationship with the speaker-poet and subverting the gendered power dynamics that are so prevalent in traditional sonnet sequences.

### Influence of Sonnet Sequence Tradition

There is some academic dispute over what constitutes a sonnet, especially when variations enter into the conversation. Although there are two major types of sonnets—Petrarchan and Shakespearean—both are characterized by the customary structure of fourteen lines with a consistent rhyme scheme. However, many variations or playing of the sonnet structure has appeared throughout history. Fuller takes a slightly dim view of variations on the set sonnet structure, declaring “at all periods, fascination with the idea of the sonnet has tended to take precedence over its legitimate use” (1). None of the

poems in *Twenty-One Love Poems* are, by the strictest definition, sonnets. However, Hayden Carruth argues

The heart of this book is a sequence of sonnetlike love poems--no, call them true sonnets. For if they do not conform to the prescribed rules, they certainly come from the same lyrical conception that made the sonnet in the first place, and it is long past time to

liberate the old term from its trammeling codes of technique. (Modern American)

In the midst of a broader academic conversation about what, exactly, constitutes a sonnet and what variations are permissible, we can see this influence on *Twenty-One Love Poems* both structurally and thematically.

Distance between the speaker-poet and the beloved is one of the major Petrarchan tropes—typically either physical or emotional distance. Sometimes distance also manifests in terms of a gap between social status of the speaker-poet and the beloved. However it appears, the removed beloved is a hallmark of the Petrarchan sonnet (Burt & Mikics 7). Catherine Bates argues that distance is indeed essential to the sonnet because

ultimately, the focus of interest is not the desired object but the desiring subject... when the beloved “is held off at a discreet distance—as an addresses to be importuned,

a “You” to be apostrophized and invoked—she creates a situation in which there is

necessarily an addressing, importuning, apostrophizing ‘I’. (107)

It is the pursuit of desire, set in a gendered context, that is often the focus of the sonnet, not the fulfillment of desire. Other portrayals of the beloved in Petrarchan sonnets including the glorification of honored or “quasi-divine lady” with a love that is idealized yet laced with suffering (Burt & Mikics 7 8-9). Oppenheimer writes that the lover’s “pose

was always that of the lover denied” (4-5). This unrequited or challenging love is often essential to the suffering and pursuit of desire found in Petrarchan sonnets.

Both structural and thematic elements can be found in *Twenty-One Love Poems*, albeit existing as variations instead of strict adherence to the form. In Poem VII, the speaker-poet wonders “what kind of beast would turn its life into words?/ what atonement is this all about?/—and yet” is ended by the dash, interrupting the poem a line early (Rich 28). The poem for the most part can be divided into the Petrarchan style of sonnets with quatrains and tercets. The one exception is the first quatrain where the interruption ends the first quatrain at three lines instead of the standard four. Thus this poem is only thirteen lines, making it one line shy of the standard sonnet form. Still, shades of Petrarchan sonnets can be seen although there is no rhyme scheme.

Smith picks out the “distancing from her beloved” in *Twenty-One Love Poems* and the anxieties surrounding such distance (6). In poem VII, the speaker-poet wonders “when away from you I try to create you in words/ am I simply using you, like a river or a war?” (Rich 28). The self-aware speaker-poet worries about the implications of how she handles this physical distance: how she writes about the beloved and the authenticity or impact of this act. Will the beloved become a metaphor—dehumanized— like the other metaphors in poems? Much like how the speaker-poet was anxious to portray her and the beloved as equal, she is also anxious about the potential outcome of distancing where she tries to “create” the beloved because she is elsewhere. This anxiety is a split from the traditional sonnet fueled by distance and the unattainable. The subversion of this trope portrayed in poem VII emphasizes how Rich harkens back to and then

subverts traditional tropes portraying a more equitable relationship between her speaker-poet and beloved.

Poem VIII is another example of the subversion of tropes and also an example of how Rich's poems are structurally influenced by sonnet sequences. The speaker-poet envisions a myth, writing

I can see myself years back at Sunion,  
hurting with an infected foot, Philoctetes  
in woman's form, limping the long path,  
lying on a headland over the dark sea,  
looking down the red rocks to where a soundless curl  
of white told me a wave had struck,  
imagining the pull of that water from that height,  
knowing deliberate suicide wasn't my métier,  
yet all the time nursing, measuring that wound.  
Well, that's finished. The woman who cherished  
her suffering is dead. I am her descendant.  
I love the scar-tissue she handed on to me,  
but I want to go on from here with you  
fighting the temptation to make a career of pain.

(Rich 1-15)

This poem has fourteen lines with the quatrains and tercets in the Petrarchan tradition, although there is no corresponding rhyme scheme. Although they are less defined, this poem, like other of Rich's poems, contains the classical references found in both sonnet

styles (Michailidou 51). In this poem, Rich reinterprets the myth of Philoctetes from classical mythology, with the speaker-poet putting herself in the role of Philoctetes—in the ancient tradition of suffering male heroes—and expanding it to include women. While male heroes suffering is explicit in the canonical literature, depicting the suffering of the female hero is rare.

Jennifer Ann Smith writes that Rich often draws on “conventional topics and images” of the sonnet sequence, such as allusions to classical mythology (Smith 6). However, she does not merely draw on them but additionally reclaims and subverts them to fit her subjects. As the speaker-poet reshapes ancient tradition, she also reshapes future tradition by declaring to be “fighting the temptation to make a career of pain” (Rich 29). She coopts the male tradition of suffering heroes into female—continuing from earlier in the sequence— and then tries to move past this newly established tradition of female suffering.

### Desire and Reciprocity

Although distance and the unattainable are major tropes, they do not preclude sexual desire in the sonnet sequence tradition (Bates 121). Thematically “The Floating Poem, Unnumbered” again tackles the trope of distance. Bassnett argues that Rich “attempts to resist the Petrarchan trope of the distant beloved” (63). Focusing so explicitly on the beloved’s body and the reciprocity of their physical interactions is one of those attempts. “The Floating Poem, Unnumbered”, although even less conforming structurally to the Petrarchan form, is Rich’s updating this element of sonnets.

Whatever happens with us, your body

will haunt mine—tender, delicate  
 your lovemaking, like the half-curved frond  
 of the fiddlehead fern in forests  
 just washed by sun. Your traveled, generous thighs  
 between which my whole face has come and come—  
 the innocence and wisdom of the place my tongue has found there—  
 the live, insatiate dance of your nipples in my mouth—  
 your touch on me, firm, protective, searching  
 me out, your strong tongue and slender fingers  
 reaching where I had been waiting years for you  
 in my rose-wet cave—whatever happens, this is. (Rich 1-12)

One of the most famous poems in this collection, “The Floating Poem, Unnumbered” continues playing with structural influences from the sonnet tradition. It is not numerically linked like the rest of poems in the sequence, instead it is “unnumbered” and “floating”— existing outside of the formal structure and sequence. The narrative implication is that this poem could occur at any point in the sequence or repeatedly.

Rich continues playing with the traditional sonnet structure. This poem has twelve lines with the same sense of interruption in Poem VII with “your strong tongue and slender fingers/reaching where I had been waiting years for you/in my rose-wet cave—whatever happens, this is” (Rich 32). The speaker-poet again cuts herself short, ending the poem at twelve lines instead of continuing and reaching the standard fourteen lines of sonnets. The poem builds and then abruptly ends, mimicking the sexual experience between the speaker-poet and beloved. Bassnett connects the

thematic and structural subversions through arguing that by “refusing to conceal her desire, this refusal is imitated in her departure from the formal constraints of the sonnet” (52). Rich reshapes and updates the sonnet structure, just as she reshapes the sonnet tropes, updating them for the 20th century by subverting the gendered power dynamics. However, Rich apparently can only resist the trope of distancing to an extent. Emotional distance, as well as physical, becomes increasingly present in *Twenty-One Love Poems* as the sequence progresses. In one of the last poems of the sequence, the speaker-poet admits, “I feel estrangement, yes” (Rich 34). As Estrin puts it, this sequence is “Petrarchan revisionism”— a subversion instead of a complete rejection of Petrarchan tropes (345).

Examining “The Floating Poem, Unnumbered” poem within the context of the tradition of sonnet sequences reveal the subversion of primacy of male desire that Rich is engaging in within this sequence. Smith writes “rather than remain as the silent object of admiration and desire, the female beloved now becomes the admirer and the desirer, the speaker and the subject” (4). This shift is made most evident by the presence of reciprocity. In contrast to the gendered power dynamics based on the presence of distance, there is “active reciprocity” in this description of sexual activity (75). The speaker-poet repeatedly mentions a body part of the beloved, for example her “traveled, generous thighs” or “nipples” and then describes her interaction with that body part: “my whole face” or “my mouth” (Rich 5,8, 6,8). Desire in this sequence is not distant, not idealized. Instead it is expressed as touch, not gaze (McGuirk 73). Desire is reciprocal as is their explorations of each other’s bodies. Instead of the speaker-poet’s desire present as untouchable longing, she notes the beloved’s “touch on me” (Rich 10). This



subversion of desire continues to gender both the speaker-poet's and beloved's body—reinforcing the sequence being about two women in a relationship with each other—and emphasizes the equality in their relationship.

## Binaries

As shown, the speaker-poet in *Twenty-One Love Poems* continuously draws connections between female identity and identification deriving in the physical sameness amongst women. Nowhere is this more prevalent than in Poem XI

Every peak is a crater.  
This is the law of volcanoes,  
making them eternally and visibly female.  
No height, without depth, without a burning core,  
though our straw soles shred on the hardened lava.  
I want to travel with you to every sacred mountain  
smoking within like the sibyl stopped over her tripod,  
I want to reach for your hand as we scale the path,  
to feel your arteries glowing in my clasp,  
never failing to note the small, jewel-like flower  
unfamiliar to us, nameless till we rename her,  
that clings to the slowly altering rock—  
the detail outside ourselves that brings us to ourselves,  
was here before us, knew we would come, and sees beyond us.

(Rich 1-13)

“Visibly female” is an interesting choice of language. It draws lines: this is female, this is not female, this looks female, this does not look female. The speaker-poet recognizes physical elements of the world around her—volcanos, the flower—that mirror gendered physical aspects of women’s bodies. In her discussion of Judith Butler, April Callis argues “gender is thus not a stable attribute of identity, but something that must constantly revealed and restated” (35). The “detail”, the physicality of the speaker-poet and beloved, first implied and then explicit is a fundamental part of *Twenty-One Poems* where Rich continuously reveals the beloved’s gender through gendered language and physical depictions, emphasizing the homosexual nature of the relationship this sequence depicts.

More recently, trans and queer critics have pushed back against the idea that female identity lies in the physical body, arguing that gender is not based on shared physical attributes. Likewise Sandra Runzo identifies additional problematic elements. She writes “although the hands in Rich’s poems are wonderfully creative, this woman’s body has still been cut into one body part—a kind of severance that recalls the editing techniques characteristic of pornographic texts” (Runzo 67). Along with the erasure of transgender women, this focus on the physical gendering of the body—although useful to imply gender and thus sexuality—still places focus on the body, albeit a more equal and affirmative focus.

Perhaps because the gendering of the speaker-poet and the beloved are so prominent, *Twenty-One Love Poems* is also directed against the larger heteronormative society. In the very first poem, the speaker-poet declares “no one has imagined us” and a few poems later describes how she fell asleep “dreaming again/of the desire to show

you to everyone I love,/to move openly together/in the pull of gravity, which is not simple" (Rich 25, 12-14). The historical context of this collection written amidst rampant, institutionalized homophobia impacts the relationship between the speaker-poet and the beloved, necessitating them to remain closeted and hide their relationship.

By the end of the sequence as the lovers struggle with their relationship in the context of external opposition, the speaker-poet declares "two women together is a work/nothing in civilization has made simple" (Rich 35). Their shared identity as women, which is the subject of such connection earlier in the sequence, also complicates their relationship because of the homophobia they must contend with. Smith writes that "the speaker and her lover must suffer the constraints of living in a society that denies them a voice, not to mention even something as basic as existence" (6). The speaker-poet highlights those constraints by juxtaposing her relationship with the heterosexual couples around them who do not suffer the same constraints.

In the close cabin where the honeymoon couples

Huddled in each other's laps and arms

I put my hand on your thigh

To comfort both of us, your hand came over mine.

(Rich 9-11)

This contrast in how comfortable the speaker-poet and the beloved are with physically versus the couples around them highlight the relationship's deviation from expected societal norms and the pressure that places on the women. These norms are so ingrained that Rich portrays them as inherent in the world in Poem XV where the speaker-poet proclaims

lying on that beach we could not stay  
because the wind drove fine sand against us  
as if it were against us  
if we tried to withstand it and we failed

(Rich 3-6)

Even the wind appears to oppose their relationship, symbolically standing for the homophobic society they must contend with—so entrenched that even nature turns against them. Like society, the two women cannot withstand the force of the wind.

The presence of oppositional forces actively harming the speaker-poet and the beloved's relationship persists throughout the sequence. One of the last poems, poem XVII, integrates the personal flaws that lead to the demise of the relationship between the speaker-poet and the beloved and how they combine with societal opposition

Merely a notion that the tape-recorder  
should have caught some ghost of us; that tape-recorder  
not merely played but should have listened to us,  
and could instruct those after us  
this we were, this is how we tried to love,  
and these are the forces they had ranged against us,  
and these are the forces we had ranged within us,  
within us and against us, against us and within us.

(Rich 9-16)

Going back to the traditional sonnet structures, this poem is interesting structurally. This poem has fifteen lines and opens by mimicking a closed rhyme scheme and ending with

a series of hinted-at-couplets. A series of three couplets does not fit the Shakespearean rhyme scheme but the interrupting line is the fascinating part. There is a pattern of two couplets—not rhyming but ending on the same words—and then there is the line “this we were, this is how we tried to love” breaking the pattern and then the last couplet. Now, this poem could function without the interrupting line, thereby being closer to a sonnet with fourteen lines, but the interrupting line interrupts the sonnet influence just as it interrupts the pattern of couplets. It is notable that a line about love, or more accurately a line about attempting to love, disrupts the pattern. However the pattern continues in spite of this interruption, emphasizes the futility of their love against society, against “the forces...within us and against us”, or against structure.

Highlighted by the physical gendering of the beloved which continuously reveals speaker-poet and beloved are two women in a relationship, Rich aligns them against the society, establishing a binary of heterosexual—societal norms—and homosexual—deviation from those norms. Callis pushes back against binaries, writing “in an attempt to break down dualistic opposition, queer theorists ignore sexuality that lies outside of them and end up reifying the binaries that they attempting to challenge” (28). Rich is subverting the gendered context of the sonnet sequence but by investing so heavily in shared female identity and physical sameness, in continuously portraying this relationship as oppositional to society, Rich establishes a binary of sexuality between heterosexuality and homosexuality as well as reaffirms a gender binary between men and women. At one point, the speaker-poet declares “look at the faces of those who have chosen it” (Rich 18) The label “lesbian” is not used in this sequence but this highly

binary space does not leave room for the ambiguity of sexualities such as bisexuality. There appears to be no moving between this binary, no sexual fluidity.

*Twenty-One Love Poems* by Adrienne Rich depicts the beginning and end of a romantic relationship between two women. Published in 1977, it is set in a historical context of rampant institutionalized discrimination of LGBTQ+ Americans. This sequence is heavily influenced by the tradition of sonnet sequences both structurally and thematically. Although no poem is a technical sonnet, Rich utilizes structural elements such as hints of specific rhyme schemes and the fourteen-line frame. Thematically, Rich attempts to subvert the trope of distance especially, portraying a relationship of equality and sexual reciprocity instead of the emotional yearning customary of sonnet. The gendering of the speaker-poet and beloved, read in this highly gendered tradition of poetry, strength the inherent opposition against society in this sequence that establishes a binary between heterosexual and homosexual. This opposition from society is one of the major reasons given for the ultimate demise of the relationship between the speaker-poet and beloved.

## Chapter 2-Carol Ann Duffy and *Rapture*

Carol Ann Duffy is the current British Poet Laureate, a position appointed by the monarch. She was born in 1955 and is the first woman, first Scot, and first openly gay individual to hold that honor (Scottish Poet Library). Her most recent collection of poetry, *Rapture* was published in 2005 and is allegedly about her relationship with Jackie Kay, another poet (Lanone 1). It was published just one year after the passing of the Civil Partnership Act in Britain that legalized civil partnerships between same-sex couples, giving them some legal rights, and just eight years before same-sex marriage was legalized in Britain (Barker and Monk 1).

Although *Rapture* won the T.S. Eliot Prize, there has not been a large amount of critical writing on it due to its relatively recent publication (Scottish Poet Library). Perhaps deliberately, because Duffy rarely focuses on the lesbian nature of the relationship, many reviewers note the subject of the collection but speak of the actual poems in more general terms. One reviewer notes that "Duffy moves back towards an apparently more naive, more intimate and subjective kind of poetry as she chronicles her affair with fellow poet Jackie Kay" (Lanone 1). Another reviewer argues that *Rapture* "eschews sentiment throughout...with a rigorous emotional and intellectual honesty" and is "characterized by paradox, contradiction and uncertainty" (Melvin 7-8). Ruth Padel writes in the *Independent* that love poetry "comes to its full flowering: ruthless, sensuous, tender; utterly modern, utterly classical" (Padel).

Although there is little criticism directly about *Rapture*, there is a wealth of criticism on Duffy and gender. Deryn Rees-Jones writes that Duffy's love "explore new

ways of negotiating the relationship between the subject and object of desire” (30). While *Twenty-One Love Poems* is centered about women, *Rapture* appears to be the opposite. The narrator is revealed to be a woman early on but the gender of the romantic other is deliberately ambiguous for the majority of the sequence. Catherine Lanone is one of the few critics who thoroughly examine the Petrarchan and other traditional influences on the sequence, writing “instead of merely challenging the tradition of male poetry, Duffy chooses to quietly appropriate it” (4). Reading Carol Ann Duffy’s *Rapture* through the lens of sonnet sequences highlights the subversion of gendered dynamics in the collection and, along with queer theory, bring to light the deconstruction of binaries in the collection.

#### Influence of Sonnet Tradition

At a glance, *Rapture* by Carol Ann Duffy appears even less influenced by the tradition of sonnet sequences. Unlike *Twenty-one Love Poems*, the sequence is not linked through the numbering of poems. Instead it is linked solely on the basis of the consistent speaker-poet and beloved along with the coherent progression of the love affair. The majority of the poems are not structurally influenced by the sonnet tradition but a few, often the more prominent ones, are. “You”, the very first poem is “directly reminiscent of the sonnet form” (Michelis 65). It does not follow a rhyme scheme but does have the three quatrains and a couplet of the Shakespearean style. Duffy also plays with the Petrarchan dream trope by describing the beloved “like a touchable dream” (1). By including various structural and thematic elements of the sonnet tradition



in the very first poem, Duffy is clearly emphasizing the influence of that tradition on the sequence.

“Hour” is the next poem that has a sonnet- influenced structure. Like “You”, it is modeled after the Shakespearean style with fourteen lines divided into three quatrains and a couplet.<sup>4</sup> Lanone describes the poem as “deliberately traditional” (5). However, there is a ghost of a rhyme scheme peaking through in some places rather than a consistent rhyme scheme. The first quatrain has the open rhyme scheme of Shakespearean sonnets but it quickly breaks down as the poem progresses, ending on an unrhymed couplet. “Syntax” harkens back to deliberately traditional forms of address with “I want to call you thou...thou I love, not/I love you” (Duffy 1, 5-6) The speaker-poet is elevating more traditional forms of address above modern terms. Although this poem structurally is less like a sonnet, it still calls back to the tradition through the use of archaic terminology.

“Rapture”, the poem that gives the collection its title, is the only sonnet in both *Twenty-One Love Poems* and *Rapture* that adheres to the technical sonnet constraints.

Thought of by you all day, I think of you.

The birds sing in the shelter of a tree.

Above the prayer of rain, unacred blue,

not paradise, goes nowhere endlessly.

How does it happen that our lives can drift

far from our selves, while we stay trapped in time,

queuing for death? It seems nothing will shift

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<sup>4</sup> Unlike Rich, all of Duffy’s structural influences derive from the Shakespearean style; the only Petrarchan influences are thematic.

the pattern of our days, alter the rhyme  
 we make with loss to assonance with bliss.  
 Then love comes, like a sudden flight of birds  
 from earth to heaven after rain. Your kiss,  
 recalled, unstrings, like pearls, this chain of words.  
 Huge skies connect us, joining here to there.  
 Desire and passion on the thinking air.

(Duffy 1-14)

This poem is technically a sonnet in terms of structure with the proper number of lines, standard rhyme scheme. It also includes some traditional tropes of sonnets with a depiction of a life-changing love but it does not portray those tropes without subversion. Eleanor Porter writes "Duffy's love poems disrupt the hierarchy of speaker and object, intellectual versus physical sense" (80). The first line of the sonnet reveals this shift of power dynamics with "Thought of by you all day, I think of you" (Duffy 1). The speaker-poet both acknowledges the reciprocity and resulting more equal basis of the relationship between the speaker-poet and the beloved, thinking of each other. Furthermore, the speaker-poet puts the beloved first with inverted syntax. Like Rich, Duffy pushes against the trope of distance. Although the lovers are implied to be physically separated, they are not emotionally separated due to being in each other's thoughts. The first line of the concluding couplet "Huge skies connect us, joining here to there" develops the subversion of the trope of distance (Duffy 13). Although the lovers are physically separated, they are connected not just by shared thoughts but by the world around them.

In *Twenty-One Love Poems*, Rich subverts the trope of distance through physical proximity. However, because in *Rapture* the lovers are physically separated like traditional sonnet lovers, Duffy utilizes emotional reciprocity to push against the trope. In the poem "World", the speaker-poet writes to the beloved that "on the other side of the world,/you pass the moon to me...I roll you the sun" (Duffy 1-2, 5). The lovers are separated by distance like the lovers often are in sonnets. However, the two lovers mimic the rise and fall of the sun and moon, symbolically reaching out to each other across the distance separating them.

However, again like Rich, Duffy does not sustain the subversion of this trope of distance. Only a couple poems later, "Cuba" appears, a poem entirely about absence. It has the fourteen lines of a sonnet but, like many of the poems in these two sequences, only has a ghost of a rhyme scheme. "Cuba" is a poem constructed of negatives, continuously repeating "No":

No lifting the red rose  
 from the room service tray when you leave,  
 as though you might walk to the lip of a grave  
 and toss it down...  
 No white towel,  
 strewn, like a shroud, on the bathroom floor.  
 (Duffy, 3-6, 8-9)

This is a poem of absence, the absence of the beloved, yes, but also the absence of mess, of the death imagery that haunts the poem. The reverse, if there were no absence, if the beloved was present, would be the existence of the "white towel...like a

shroud". Duffy complicates the often-simplistic Petrarchan trope of distance and the corresponding pain of absence by portraying potential presence as also painful. The speaker-poet does not seem overjoyed by the beloved's absence but, at this point, her presence does not seem positive either. There is a lack of physical presence, yes, but the most striking aspect of this poem is the implication of lack of emotional reciprocity between the speaker-poet and beloved.

In the poem "Swing", the speaker-poet describes

the vision that flares in my head

...

of the moment you climbed on the swing, and swung out

into the silver air, the endless affirmative blue,

like something from heaven on earth, from paradise

(Duffy 9-12)

This poem is heavy with the romanticization of the sonnet tradition. The speaker-poet sees the beloved in a "vision" with mystical or religious implications (Duffy 9). The speaker-poet is also describing the beloved physically leaving the earth on the swing, going up to the sky and the implied heaven beyond. She even calls the beloved "like something from...paradise" (Duffy 12). The speaker-poet's idealization of the beloved, portraying the beloved as not quite of the earth is a common trope in the sonnet tradition. Often, however, this trope of romanticization extends to dehumanizing the beloved, elevating and idealizing her until she seems more of an idea and less of a human.

Although the speaker-poet in *Rapture* includes this trope of romanticization, she does not continue to the dehumanizing extent of many other poets in the tradition of sonnet sequences. In the very next poem “Rain”, the speaker-poet admits she “got bits of your body wrong, bits of it right” (Duffy 8). The speaker-poet is admitting her mistaken impression, revealing an awareness absent from many sonnet sequences. The beloved is not an idealized, distant figure portrayed as far more than human. She is a woman who the speaker-poet interacts with on a physical level.

### Gendering the Speaker-Poet

It is very evident that the speaker-poet is a woman as she continually refers to herself in gendered terms. Nowhere is this more evident than “Betrothal” where each stanza of the poem had a repetitive structure: “make me your bride”, “make me your own”, “make me your spouse”, “make me your lady”, “make me your wife” (Duffy 4, 8, 20, 32, 36). Although both gendered and non-gendered terms are present, by ending on a gendered term—“wife”—the speaker-poet is emphasizing the feminine gendering of both the term and herself.

This overt gendering is not only restricted to gendered terms. The speaker-poet in *Rapture* engages in a performative gendering of herself as a woman. Her poems frequently reference clothing commonly associated with women. In “Ithaca”, the speaker-poet writes “I pulled off my stiff and salty sailor’s clothes,/slipped on the dress of the girl I was” (Duffy 2-3). She is literally taking off clothing associated with masculinity and putting on clothing associated with femininity—and the past. The speaker-poet does not literally become male when she puts on sailor’s clothes but it

does allow more fluidity in comparison to the rigid gender presentation in Rich's *Twenty-One Love Poems*.

In "Betrothal", the speaker-poet again references feminine clothing, describing herself as "wearing my gown of stone" and how she will "sprawl in my dress" (Duffy 15, 22). Much like the previous example, there is nuance underneath this overt gendering of the speaker-poet as a woman. Her dress is made of stone, not fabric, following the nature motifs throughout the collection and adding a sense of heaviness, of burden to this performative gendering. Additionally, "sprawl" is an interesting verb because it is unlady-like, going against standards of femininity that dictate sitting neatly. A hint, perhaps, that while the speaker-poet genders herself as a woman through this performative gendering, she neither subscribes to all the standards around femininity nor allows them to alter her actions. Performative gendering, in this instance tied to clothing, is a less stable gendering than the physical gendering in Rich's *Twenty-One Love Poems*.

### Gendering the Beloved

In contrast to Rich's gendering of the beloved, the gender of the beloved in *Rapture* remains a mystery for most of the collection. The speaker-poet predominantly refers to the beloved with the gender-neutral "you". What is uncommon about Duffy's approach is not the pronoun itself, but its dominance in her pieces coupled with the lack of overall gendering. The first poem in the sequence is simply titled "You", introducing the prominence of that specific, genderless, pronoun persisting through most of the collection (Duffy 1). This lack of gendering can be found throughout Duffy's love poetry,

which “deal with unnamed and ungendered voices, and rarely are they explicit in their negotiation of the beloved’s body” (Rees-Jones).

Throughout much of the sequence, the beloved appears to be more connected with nature than with a gendered body. The beloved does not just move beyond gender, she appears to move on beyond human, melding with nature. In the poem “Forest” the speaker-poet writes “You were the water, the wind” (Duffy 12). This is not a simile; the beloved does not remind the speaker-poet of nature or has elements of nature. The beloved is literally nature. The speaker-poet continuously finding the beloved in nature around her creates the entire premise of “Absence”:

Then a sudden scatter of summer rain  
is your tongue.

Then a butterfly paused on a trembling leaf  
is your breath.

Then the gauzy mist relaxed on the ground  
is your pose.

(Duffy 25-30)

Firstly, although the speaker-poet is referring to physical elements of the beloved, they are non-gendered elements that do not give a sense of the beloved’s gender. Lanone writes that the nature in this poem “all shape a face rather than a land” (5). However, it is important to note that this face is ungendered. There is no indication of the beloved being a woman through any of the descriptions in this poem. Secondly, these descriptions are not similarities. The speaker-poet is not depicting the beloved as like elements of nature, she is depicting the beloved as literally part of nature. This lack of

gendering impedes the construction of a sexual binary and goes even farther. The beloved in her sequence moves beyond the binary of even human, dissolving into the world, subsumed into everything around the speaker-poet. It functions both as an indictment of the speaker-poet's love for the beloved—she sees her literally everywhere—and contributes to the overall lack of binaries in the sequence.

The beloved's gender is not implied until over halfway through the sequence. In the poem "Answer", the speaker-poet declares

If you were made of water,  
 your voice a roaring, foaming waterfall,  
 your arms a whirlpool spinning me around  
 your breast a deep, dark lake nursing the drowned,  
 your mouth an ocean, waves torn from your breath,  
 if you were water, if you were made of water, yes, yes.

(Duffy 13-18)

Along with the continual association and even submerging of the beloved with nature, "Answer" brings a shift to physically gendering the beloved. Most of the body parts in the stanza, "voice", "arms", "mouth", follows Duffy's pattern of not indicating gender, but this time she references the beloved's "breast" (Duffy 15, 14, 17 16). This is the first instance of a gendered body part on the part of the beloved, the gendering is highlighted by the verb "nursing" and caring for the drowned (Duffy 16). In the poem "Venus"—which has homoerotic implications already being written by a female speaker—the speaker-poet references "the dark fruit of your nipple/ripe on your breast" (Duffy 4-5). In another poem "Treasure" the speaker-poet comments on "the slim



turquoise veins under your wrists” just as the speaker-poet in *Twenty-One Love Poems* comments on her beloved's wrists (Duffy 8). Despite the deconstruction of binaries, Duffy is falling in the same, cis-normative pattern as Rich, assuming that physical gendering is adequate to imply gender.

Even though the beloved's body is being slowly gendered, the speaker-poet still refers to her with the gender-neutral pronoun “you” until one of the last poems. In “Your Move”, a poem late in the sequence, the speaker-poet notes “the goblin, crouched/under that dripping bush,/your servant, ma'am” (Duffy 10-12). It could be a reference to Christina Rossetti, a historical women poet who wrote the famous poem “Goblin Market”, which would fit the pattern of Duffy's intertextuality. Although there are no quotation marks to signify who is speaking, the most likely scenario appears to be the goblin saying the preceding line. It is also unclear who the “ma'am” is referring to, either the speaker-poet or the beloved. Because many of the stanzas in this poem are directed toward to the beloved, it can be argued that the goblin is speaking to the beloved. If so, this is the first time in *Rapture* that the beloved is referred to by a gendered pronoun. However, the ambiguity surrounding this reference supports the reluctance of the speaker-poet to gender the beloved.

The only time the beloved is directly, obviously referred to with female pronoun is in in one of the last poems called “The Love Poem” the speaker-poet quotes both William Shakespeare and Thomas Campion with “my mistress' eyes” and “there is a garden/in her face” (Duffy 3, 23-4). These are the only instances when the beloved is referred to in feminine terms and they are not even the speaker-poet's words. Even

though the beloved's body becomes gendered, the speaker-poet is reluctant to further gender her.

### Contrasting Gendering

As we have seen, gender is more complicated in *Rapture* than in *Twenty-One Love Poems*. The speaker-poet is gendered as a woman but in a more performative, fluid gendering while the beloved is hardly gendered at all. The poem "Give", almost half way through the sequence, exemplifies the differencing in the gendering of the speaker-poet and beloved. The speaker-poet writes that the beloved "sprawled on my breast" but refers to the beloved's "arms" and "moonlight on your throat" (Duffy 12, 7, 21). She reinforces the gendering of her body as a cisgender woman but does not give the same categorization to the beloved, only referencing gender-neutral body parts. Rees-Jones writes "in a form which typically places the woman as desired other, Duffy's poems explore new ways of negotiating the relationship between the subject and object of desire" (Rees-Jones). This lack of gendering and sexuality does not decrease the intimacy found in this poem, but such intimacy is not as tied to a gendered lens of desire.

Additionally, the beloved does not engage in the same form of performative gendering as the speaker-poet. In the poem "Presents", the speaker poet

snipped and stitched my soul

to a little black dress

hung my heart on a necklace

...

for a hair of your head on my sleeve

(Duffy 1-3, 11)

The speaker-poet is integrating performative aspects of femininity—clothing and jewelry that carry feminine connotations—with emotional intimacy. On the other hand, the beloved is only present as a piece of hair, a body part that carries no gendered connotations. The beloved is not absent from the poem, just absent from the performative gendering the speaker-poet engages in.

The beloved engages in subtle performative gendering to an extent. The speaker-poet in poem “Forest” describes how “We undressed,/then dressed again in the gowns of the moon” (Duffy 4-5). The word “gowns” does carry some feminine connotations, appearing to suggest that the beloved also participates in the speaker-poet’s gendering through clothing. In another poem “Elegy”, the speaker-poet tells her beloved that “love loved you best...blessed in your flesh, blood, hair, as though they were lovely garments” (Duffy 9, 11-12). The personification of love is very Petrarchan. Paring the word “garments” with the adjective “lovely” establishes some connotations with feminine. However the physical body of the beloved is ungendered. Whatever performative gendering the beloved engages in is incredibly ambiguous, especially compared to overt gendering of the speaker-poet.

### Subversion of Sonnet Sequence

With *Rapture* operating in a space of ambiguous gender, given the connection between gender sexuality, it follows that sexuality is also ambiguous. For the majority of the sequence, the reader is aware that the speaker-poet is a woman but is ignorant of the gender of the beloved. Therefore, the speaker-poet could be writing about a man

and presumed to be heterosexual, could be writing about a woman and presumed to be homosexual, or could be writing about someone outside of the gender binary altogether and her sexuality would coalesce into a large question mark.

Duffy enjoys writing in this ambiguous space. Rees-Jones describes Duffy as someone who “refigures heterocentric representations of desire both to affirm and problematize identity, throwing into question ideas of sameness and difference in the relationship of the lover and the beloved, and the inadequacies of language to articulate the nature of that experience” (30). In the poem “Forest”, the speaker-poet described an implied sexual encounter with “we knelt in the leaves,/kissed, kissed; new words rustled nearby and we swooned./ Didn’t we?” (Duffy 5-6). The doubt of the speaker-poet and the discovery of “new words” in an attempt to articulate this sexual experience beyond kissing without necessitating gendering the beloved is an explicit subversion of the gendered dynamics of the sonnet sequence (Duffy 6). The speaker-poet, and by extension Duffy, is attempting in a space of desire that is not implicitly gendered with all the power hierarchies that follows gendering.

The desire to describe sex without bringing gendered dynamics into play perhaps describes why the speaker-poet tends to limit herself to non-gendered interactions or the implication of interactions. As the sequence progresses, the beloved’s body does become more gendered but the explicit is far more rare than the implicit. Mary K. Bloodsworth-Lugo argues that “the pursuit of disembodiment is an fundamentally flawed endeavor since the presence of the body can never really be denied” (24). The poem “Treasure” begins with “a soft ounce of your breath/in my cupped palm” (Duffy 1-2). The speaker-poet is hinting at touching one of the beloved’s breasts but to say so would

implicitly gender the beloved. By hinting, the speaker-poet can convey the sexual aspects of the relationship while still attempting to avoid operating in a completely gendered space.

### Binaries

While the speaker-poet in *Twenty-One Love Poems* attempts to carve out space for presence, for belonging, for legitimacy, the speaker-poet in *Rapture* does not seem aware that there is even an argument to be made. Rather than construct herself and the beloved against society, she at first appears to opt out of the whole discussion altogether. To stop there, however, would be overly simplistic. Duffy deliberately neglects to continuously “reveal” the beloved’s gender, instead only leaving sporadic hints throughout the sequence. Antony Rowland connects the lack of gendering with stating the ambiguity surrounding gender in Duffy’s love poems “point either to the ambiguous gender identity of the lovers or to a metaphysics of genderless amorous subjects” (66). Duffy, through absent or downplayed gender, turns more to authenticity of emotion outside of constructed categories. In the poem “Tea” about a quarter of the way through the sequence, the speaker-poet expresses ungendered intimacy

I like pouring your tea, lifting  
the heavy pot, and tipping it up,  
so the fragrant liquid streams in your china cup.  
Or when you’re away, or at work,  
I like to think of your cupped hands as you sip,  
as you sip, of the faint half-smile of your lips.

I like the questions – sugar? – milk? –  
 and the answers I don't know by heart, yet,  
 for I see your soul in your eyes, and I forget.  
 Jasmine, Gunpowder, Assam, Earl Grey, Ceylon,  
 I love tea's names. Which tea would you like? I say  
 but it's any tea for you, please, any time of day,  
 as the women harvest the slopes  
 for the sweetest leaves, on Mount Wu-Yi,  
 and I am your lover, smitten, straining your tea.

(Duffy 1-15).

Even though the reader is aware that the speaker-poet is a woman, she only refers to herself as “your lover”, deliberately choosing to remain less gendered in this depiction of an intimate moment. The physical parts of the lover's body are ungendered, helping to create this space of ambiguity where the reader cannot bring in preconceived notions about gender or sexuality.

*Rapture* by Carol Ann Duffy follows the standard sonnet sequence, charting the inception and demise of a relationship between two people. Although the speaker-poet is gendered as a woman fairly early on, she plays with a particularly performative form of gender. The beloved is far less gendered, referred to by gender-neutral terms with only a few exceptions and her body only slowly becomes gendered as the sequence progresses. Like *Twenty-One Love Poems*, there are definite structural and thematic sonnet influences on this collection, ranging from structural—the poem “Rapture” is a technical sonnet—to thematic where Duffy reshapes tropes of distance and

romanticization. Instead of constructing a binary of sexuality, Duffy attempts to deconstruct the binary by minimally gendering the beloved to operate as much as possible outside this binary constructed by poets like Adrienne Rich.

## Conclusion

The different binaries at play in Adrienne Rich's *Twenty-One Love Poems* and Carol Ann Duffy's *Rapture* are tied to larger debates in the lesbian community and queer community about identity and politicization of sexuality. Yorke puts these debates in a historical context by quoting Faderman

“this younger generation of lesbian authors simply takes for granted lesbian- feminist principles rather than foregrounding them in their work. For example, lesbian love poetry is less likely now to be presented in a political context than it was during the height of lesbian-feminism” (79)

Adrienne Rich has often been described as political, but it is worth examining the multifaceted definition of political. *Twenty-One Love Poems* has been described as outwardly political (Ann Smith 7). The version of political exemplified in that collection, Rich's literary work, and the conceptualization of feminism and lesbian identity in the 70s at large is often defined as “a woman who separates herself from male power” (74). This can be done by resisting patriarchal power structures or by focusing on women, much like how Rich builds a world focused around women in the sequence.

Peters explains lesbian speech-act theory in *Twenty-One Love Poems*, arguing “words hold a performative power when they speak ‘the unspeakable’ and describe lesbian existence and love: the articulation of past silence is a creative act which does not simply describe the world, but changes it” (4). Yorke argues that by writing their experiences, a lesbian “defiantly identifies herself *for* herself: she makes herself, her sexuality, and her body visible” (188). Lesbian identity, then is identity constructed against the larger patriarchal forces. This conceptualization of lesbian identity is



depicted in Adrienne Rich's *Twenty-One Love Poems* through the sustained binary of sexuality.

Many critics who have written about the sequence see *Rapture* with its lack of focus on the gender of the women lovers as inherently not-political. Lanore argues by "refusing to disclose the female gender of the beloved, *Rapture* strays from feminism" (5). A few critics, however, disagree and argue that the interpretation of gender in Duffy's poetry is political. One of them, Jane Thomas, writes "Duffy's interrogation of the way language 'speaks' the individual and the implications of this process for women whose subjectivity and social existence is negatively constructed on this way" (121). However, like so many other critics, Thomas does not bring in Duffy's lesbian identity in her discussion of politicization of poetry. Yorke extends this argument of the politicization of Duffy's lesbian identity with

Duffy's work actively refuses the politically correct stance, the shoulds and oughts and musts of lesbian moral imperatives and invites her readers to engage directly with that which is not contained within the culture - whether of lesbian activism, or of conventional heterosexual morality. (86)

Duffy does not depict an oppositional lesbian identity, nor is she as focused as Rich on depicting one at all. Rather, her focus is on authenticity of emotion and experience. By locating her love poetry in non-gendered spaces, Duffy focuses more on the individuals rather seeing them through the gendered lens of society.

Duffy and Rich conceptualize lesbian identity differently because they operate in different historical contexts. These collections are set almost three decades apart, written in very different political climates. Rich, as depicted in the opposition to society

and construction of a binary of sexuality views lesbian identity as outwardly political and oppositional. Duffy, as depicted in her deconstruction of binaries, views lesbian identity as far more internal and her portrayal can be read as critiquing another aspect of society, not necessarily as a mobilizing force. *Twenty-One Love Poems* by Adrienne Rich and *Rapture* by Carol Ann Duffy are both located in their historical and political contexts, harkening back to the tradition of sonnet sequences and reshaping it for their time.

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