

Hello! I am Robin Seiler-Garman and I am a double major, literature and history. Thank you all for coming and hearing about the incredible work we've been up to in the English Department. My honors thesis is titled "Lesbian Love Poetry: Adrienne Rich and Carol Ann Duffy". In it, I use a mix of looking at the tradition of sonnet sequences and queer theory to analyze the depictions of gender and sexuality in Rich's collection *Twenty-One Love Poems* and Duffy's collection *Rapture*. I'm going to quickly give some quick background on these poets and collections and then read from some excerpts of my thesis.

Many of you probably know who Adrienne Rich is but for those who don't, she is an American poet, essayist, and feminist, 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 is her coming out collection, so to speak, as it is the first time she explicitly writes about relationships between women. Carol Ann Duffy was born in 1955. She is a Scottish poet and playwright. In 2009, she was named Poet Laureate of Britain, making her the first Scot, first woman, and first openly LGBTQ+ person to receive that honor. *Rapture*-her 4th collection of poetry- was published in 2005 and received the T.S. Elliot prize.

When I was doing preliminary reading for my honors thesis, I kept being struck by the gendering of the beloved in these two collections. Given that both Rich and Duffy draw from sonnets and sonnet sequences, *Twenty-One Love Poems* and *Rapture* can be read as a chronological sequence of poems, charting the rise and fall of a relationship between two people. In romantic sonnet sequences, there's what I like to refer to as the "speaker-poet", the dominant narrative voice who may or not be representative of the actual poet and the "beloved", the person who the sequence is focused around. Because these are sequences depicting non-heterosexual relationships—both Rich and Duffy identify as lesbians—the gendering of the speaker-poet and the

beloved as women is vital to conveying the relationship. Now, with some background information and context: The gendering of the beloved in *Twenty-One Love Poems* and *Rapture*

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. The tradition of sonnet sequences with its gendered contest provides an intriguing lens for examining the depiction of gender, and as an extension sexuality. Although Rich and Duffy draw on many of the same sonnet traditions and elements, there is one major difference between the two sequences—the 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.

The speaker-poet is gendered as a woman early on in both sequences but the same cannot be said for the beloved. In *Twenty-One Love Poems*, it becomes apparent to the reader early on 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 (12), 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. Poem VI (6) begins with “Your small hands, precisely equal to my own—/only the thumb is larger, longer” (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.

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). 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 (7-11)

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.

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 (11), which begins with "Every peak is a crater./ This is the law of volcanoes, making them eternally and visibly female" (30). "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. 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). In *Twenty-One Poems*, 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.

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” (25).

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” (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. Just a couple poems earlier the speaker-poet juxtaposes their relationship with heterosexual couples around them

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.

The heterosexual couples—who at this time could get married while the speaker-poet and the beloved could not—are comfortable with publicly showing affection, existing in their relationship openly, demonstratively. In contrast, speaker-poet and the beloved are far more

physically restrained publically. 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 expects societal norms and the pressure that places on the women. 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 sexuality binary between heterosexuality and homosexuality as well as reaffirms a gender binary between men and women. 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.

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 poet-speaker predominately refers to the beloved with the gender-neutral “you.” This is not uncommon in both sonnet sequences and modern poetry, however it is uncommon that the pronoun—with its inherent lack of gender—is so dominate. The first poem in the sequence in simply titled “You,” introducing the prominence of that specific, genderless, pronoun persisting through most of the collection (1). This lack of gendering of the beloved can be found throughout Duffy's love poetry. The poem “Give,” almost halfway through the sequence, exemplifies the differencing in the gendering of the poet-speaker

and beloved. The poet-speaker writes that the beloved “sprawled on my breast” but refers to the beloved’s “arms” and “moonlight on your throat” (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 or the sequence, but such intimacy attempts to operate outside a gendered context.

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 the world around her. In the poem “Forest” the speaker-poet writes “You were the water, the wind” (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. (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. Catherine 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 half way 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. (13-18)

Along with the continual association and even submerging of the beloved with nature, “Answer” beings 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” (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 (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” (4-5). Despite lacking a sexual binary, Duffy, like Rich, reaffirms binaries between men and women through assuming that physical gendering is adequate to imply gender and thus sexuality.

However, 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 “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” (3, 23-4). These are the only instances when the beloved is referred to in feminine terms and they are not even the speaker-poets words. Even though the beloved’s body becomes gendered, the speaker-poet is reluctant to further gender her.

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 analysis there, however, would be overly simplistic. Duffy deliberately neglects to continuously “reveal” the beloved’s gender, instead only leaving sporadic hints throughout the sequence—gendering the body but avoiding gendered pronouns. Although utilizing elements of sonnet sequences, an incredibly gendered tradition, Duffy is adverse to place her collection *Rapture* in these contexts. Unlike Rich, Duffy does not depict any norms that her speaker-poet and beloved would deviate from, no binary of sexuality. Duffy, through absent or downplayed gender, turns to depicting authenticity of emotion in the relationship between two women rather than depicting the struggles that result from such a relationship.

Although the speaker-poets in both *Twenty-One Love Poems* and *Rapture* are revealed to be women relatively early on in the sequences, the gendering of the beloved varies. The beloved



in *Twenty-One Love Poems* is gendered as a woman both through physical metonymy and gendered language. This continual stating of gender and juxtaposition with society constructs a binary between heterosexuality and homosexuality. The beloved in *Rapture*, on the other hand, is identified more with nature than a particular gender. Her body becomes more gendered as the sequence progresses but it never reaches the gendering in *Twenty-One Love Poems*. This different depiction of sexuality—binary and non-binary—is one of the major differences between the two sequences, highlighted by looking through the gendered lens of sonnet sequences.