

Challenges to Ekphrastic Poetry: Carol Ann Duffy's "Standing Female Nude"*

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ÖZET Bir görsel sanat yapıtını betimleyen şiirler, yazınsal metinler ve görsel sanatlar arasındaki farkların ortaya çıkmasını sağlarlar. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing'in *Laocoön* adlı kitabında sözünü ettiği gibi sanat yapıtı sessiz ve durağan olmasına karşın, yazınsal metin söze ve harekete dayanır. W. J. T. Mitchell *Picture Theory* adlı kitabında söz ve imge arasındaki böylesi ikili karşıtlığı cinsiyet rollerini de içerecek şekilde genişletir. İmge dişil, söz ise eril olarak ele alınır. Dişil imge bakılan nesne olmasına karşın, erkek yazar/sanatçı özne ve bakan konumundadır. Carol Ann Duffy "Standing Female Nude" adlı şiirinde, bu tür ikili karşıtlıkları sorgulayabilmek için erkek sanatçı yerine kadın modele söz hakkı verir ve bakma edimini de model üstlenir. Böylece, Duffy anlatıcının ister sanat yapıtı sahibi, ister sanatçının kendisi, isterse de yapıta bakan bir erkek olduğu resimbetimsel şiir geleneğini reddederek sanatçı ve modeli arasındaki güç ilişkisini sorgular.

ANAHTAR KELİMELEER Carol Ann Duffy, resimbetim, "Standing Female Nude", feminizm, yapıtbozumculuk.

ABSTRACT Ekphrasis rests on the paragone between the sister arts, namely verbal and visual arts, the word and the image. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in his *Laocoön* claims that the image is silent and fixed while the literary work is based on voice and action. W. J. T. Mitchell in his *Picture Theory* enlarges this binary opposition between the word and image in terms of gender roles: the female image versus the male word. The female image is objectified and gazed, while the male author/artist is the subject and the gazer. The poet laureate Carol Ann Duffy's poem "Standing Female Nude" challenges such binary oppositions by giving voice not to the male artist but to his female model, and by attributing the role of gazing to her. Hence, the aim of this article is to display how Duffy deconstructs the ekphrastic tradition in her poem in order to subvert the domineering relationship between the artist and his model.

KEYWORDS Carol Ann Duffy, ekphrastic poetry, "Standing Female Nude," feminism, deconstruction.

Ekphrastic poetry, which involves the description of an art object, foregrounds the opposition between the sister arts, namely literature and the visual arts. As Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in his seminal work *Laocoön* purports, the visual art work is silent and still, whereas the literary work is based on speech and action. W. J. T. Mitchell and James Heffernan enlarge this binary opposition between the word and image in terms of gender roles: the female image versus the male word. The silent female image is objectified and

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gazed upon, while the eloquent male author/artist is the subject and the gazer. The poet laureate Carol Ann Duffy's poem "Standing Female Nude" challenges such binary oppositions by giving voice not to the male artist but to his female model, and by attributing the role of gazing to her. In this respect Duffy defies the tradition of ekphrastic poetry, where the speaker is either a gazer as in Wordsworth's "Lines Suggested by a Portrait from the Pencil of F. Stone," or the owner of the artwork as in Browning's "My Last Duchess," or the artist who is also the gazer as in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "The Portrait." The aim of this article is to display how Duffy deconstructs the ekphrastic tradition in her poem, subverting the domineering relationship between the artist and his model through the interior monologue of a socially marginalized woman.

The binary oppositions in the sister arts, characterized by the theories of Leonardo da Vinci and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing are:

Image	Word
Eye	Ear
Fixed	Moving
Space	Time
Silent	Eloquent

Lessing claims that painting, which appeals to the eye, uses "figures and colors in space," while poetry, which appeals to the ear, uses "sounds in time."¹ As Lessing asserts, since objects in space are the subjects of painting, the images in painting are fixed. Unlike visual art works, "actions are the true subjects of poetry,"² and therefore literature is characterised by time. As opposed to the silent images in painting, a literary work, which makes use of language, gives voice to images, objects and events.

W. J. T. Mitchell and James Heffernan expound that the paragon between the word and the image is unavoidably gendered.³ Mitchell in his *Iconology* claims, "Paintings, like women, are ideally silent, beautiful creatures designed for the gratification of the eye, in contrast to the sublime eloquence proper to the manly art of poetry."⁴ Hence, the opposition between the sister arts could be enumerated as:

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1. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön* [translated by E. A. McCormick] (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), p.78.
 2. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön*, p.78.
 3. James Heffernan in his *Museum of Words* claims "this struggle for mastery between word and image is repeatedly gendered" (6).
 4. W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), p.110.

Image	Word
Female	Male
Body	Mind
Gazed	Gazer
Object	Subject

In the ekphrastic poems by male poets the objectified female images remain mute under the oppression of the male artist, the beholder or the collector. For instance, the male onlooker in William Wordsworth's "Lines Suggested by a Portrait from the Pencil of F. Stone" describes the untouched beauty of the young woman in the British painter Frank Stone's painting but does not give voice to her, hence sustaining her position as a passive, beautiful art object. In Robert Browning's ekphrastic dramatic monologues, apart from "The Statue and the Bust" where the woman wants her statue to be made as a sign of her husband's entrapment, the female figures/models never have the chance to speak. His much acclaimed dramatic monologue "My Last Duchess" voices the Renaissance duke Ferrara Alfonso II's views about his ex-wife and her portrait, while silencing the Duchess first in Fra Pandolf's painting and then by killing her. The possessive pronoun "my" in the very first line of the poem –"That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,"– indicates that the duke considers not only his wife, but also her painting as his possession. Even after her death, the duke retains his authority by hiding the portrait behind a curtain so that the woman in the painting would be banished from people's gaze. As in most ekphrastic poetry the gazed and silenced object is the woman, whereas the gazer and the speaking subject is the male. The pre-Raphaelite painter and poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poems also dwell on the dichotomy between the word and the image by describing silent and fixed female figures. In his poem "The Portrait" for instance, the male persona recounts his painting about his dead lover. Like Wordsworth and Browning, Rossetti also uses the silenced fixed image of the woman as opposed to the speaking male subject who gazes at the woman.

Before I discuss how Carol Ann Duffy challenges the norms in ekphrastic poetry, I will briefly summarize the characteristics of nudity in art as the title of the poem, "Standing Female Nude," foregrounds. Kenneth Clark in his seminal book *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* differentiates the naked from the nude saying, "To be naked is to be deprived of our clothes," whereas the nude suggests "a balanced, prosperous, and confident body: the body re-formed."⁵ Clark's deliberation underlines the transformation of the

5. Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956), p.3.

body into an ideal form through its representation in art. Although Clark does not construct his argument on gender relations, many art critics after him associate the nude with gender politics, be it the male artist's use/abuse of his model, or the bourgeois male beholder's demands to see female images. Referring to Clark's analysis, Lynda Nead claims that the male and the female nude should be differentiated from one another for their cultural connotations.⁶ She asserts that the female nude "stands as a paradigm of the aesthetic of the beautiful, a testimony to wholeness and integrity of form. The female nude is precisely matter contained, the female body given form and framed by the conventions of art."⁷ The problem in nudity, according to Nead, arises from the female "playing out the roles of both viewed object and viewing subject, forming and judging her image against cultural ideals and exercising a fearsome self-regulation."⁸ As Carol Duncan, in her article on the virility of the male artist in 20th century female nude paintings, posits "Most images of female nudity imply the presence (in the artist and/or the viewer) of a male sexual appetite."⁹ She further declares that as a consequence of capitalism, the artwork focusing on the female body is presented for the appreciation of wealthy male collectors.¹⁰ Hence, the male artist depends on the financial support of the bourgeoisie for survival.

Unlike the ekphrastic poems by male poets, Duffy's poem "Standing Female Nude" describes a male artist's process of painting a standing nude woman from the mouth of its female model. The poem evokes many of the aspects of the nude discussed by the art critics: the model, as in many of the nude paintings, is a "river-whore"¹¹ whose image will be presented to the appreciation of the bourgeoisie, so she is the viewed object. However, unlike traditional ekphrastic poems, she also becomes the viewer subject. Gaining the right to speak in a dramatic monologue, a poetic form whose renown could be attributed to Robert Browning, she contests the gendered attributes of the word and the image formulated by Mitchell and Heffernan. She poses for six hours, trying not to move or talk as the painter has ordered her. Although she will be represented as a still object on the painter's canvas, she nonetheless reminds the reader that she is not an object, but has a life of her own: "At night I fill myself," she claims, "with wine and

6. Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p.14.

7. Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*, p.29.

8. Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*, p.10.

9. Carol Duncan, "Virility and Domination in Early Twentieth-Century Vanguard Painting," in Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (eds.), *Feminism and Art History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), p.298.

10. Carol Duncan, "Virility and Domination in Early Twentieth-Century Vanguard Painting," p.311.

11. Carol Ann Duffy, "Standing Female Nude," *Standing Female Nude* (London: Anvil Press, 1985), p.46.

dance around the bars.”¹² Duffy’s socially marginalized persona refuses to be commodified and silenced by patriarchy through her provocative monologue.

The persona shows her eloquence by expressing her comments and criticisms about the society and the painter. In the first stanza, she makes fun of the bourgeois values of art, saying that once her painting is exhibited “in great museums. The bourgeoisie will coo / at such an image of a river-whore. They call it Art.”¹³ Here she bitterly criticises the male authority who has the ultimate power to decide what could be considered great art. She also implies that it is this bourgeois sense of art that the artist has to obey, that he has no other choice but paint female nudes in order to survive. The artist, then as Carol Duncan asserts, “must be dependent on and serve the pleasure of the very bourgeois world [...] that his art and life appear to contest.”¹⁴

Duffy deconstructs the traditional relationship between the painter and his model, the painter dominating the woman. In the first stanza, the persona asserts that the painter “drains the colour from [her]”¹⁵ and gives directions, such as turning to the right. He is also concerned with her weight, telling her not to get thinner. The model, however, is aware that the painter can possess her only on canvas, but he does not have “the money for the arts [she] sell[s].”¹⁶ Economically speaking, they are actually on the same level; as the persona claims, they are “[b]oth poor,”¹⁷ and the painter does not have enough money to make love to her. By depreciating his authority over her through her address as “Little man,”¹⁸ the persona reverses the role of the passive woman. Moreover, throughout her speech she emphasizes that “both she and the artist depend on her modelling for survival, be it aesthetic or economic.”¹⁹

With her critical comments about the painter and his profession the persona reverses the body/mind dichotomy between the genders. Although the painter solely focuses on the body of the model as “a site conflating commodification and desire”²⁰ – which the persona describes as “Belly nipple arse in the window light,”²¹ – she cannot merely be

12. Carol Ann Duffy, “Standing Female Nude,” l. 25-26.

13. Carol Ann Duffy, “Standing Female Nude,” l. 6-7.

14. Carol Duncan, “Virility and Domination in Early Twentieth-Century Vanguard Painting,” p.311.

15. Carol Ann Duffy, “Standing Female Nude,” l. 3.

16. Carol Ann Duffy, “Standing Female Nude,” l. 20.

17. Carol Ann Duffy, “Standing Female Nude,” l. 21.

18. Carol Ann Duffy, “Standing Female Nude,” l. 19.

19. Danette Dimarco, “Exposing Nude Art: Carol Ann Duffy’s Response to Robert Browning,” *Mosaic*, 31/3 (1998), p.35.

20. Linda Kinnahan, “‘Looking for the Doing Words’: Carol Ann Duffy and Questions of Convention,” in James Acheson and Romana Huk. Albany (eds.), *Contemporary British Poetry: Essays in Theory and Criticism* (NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), p.258.

21. Carol Ann Duffy, “Standing Female Nude,” l. 2.

reduced to the body. Conversely, analytical creativity is attributed to the male painter – that “he’s a genius”²² – but as the persona declares, he is distracted by the model:

there are times he does not concentrate
and stiffens for my warmth. Men think of their mothers.
He possesses me on canvas as he dips the brush
repeatedly into the paint.²³

“The masculine act of painting”²⁴ – suggested by “stiffening” and “dipping the brush repeatedly into the paint” – is undervalued by the persona due to his incapacity to possess her for economic reasons.

Like the power of speech, the gaze, which is a central issue in ekphrasis, is subverted in this poem to enhance the power of the woman over the artist. Traditionally, in male writing, it is the artist or the owner of the artwork and the male poet who looks at the aesthetic beauty. In line with Nead’s argument that the woman becomes the viewer subject as well as the viewed object, the female model of “Standing Female Nude” becomes the critic of the painter’s art. Even though she is well aware that when the Queen of England beholds the painting, her evaluation of it will be “[m]agnificent,”²⁵ the model’s immediate reaction is “It does not look like me.”²⁶ She defies art which tries to entrap and objectify the silent female image within a frame. In other words, the speaker transgresses the boundaries of being a silenced figure by criticising her representation on canvas. The two pronouns in this statement resplendently display the juxtaposition between the representation and the self. Linda Kinnahan considers the last line of the poem “as a triumph for the speaker, and an assertion of a self, a ‘me’ that the artist and the system cannot assimilate and possess, a ‘me’ that escapes the tyranny of representation, a ‘me’ that is essentially unique and coherent and cannot be replicated.”²⁷

In conclusion, Carol Ann Duffy in “Standing Female Nude” subverts the gender constructs in the ekphrastic tradition by concentrating on nudity in art. As in many of her poems which deal with the theme of otherness, Duffy writes from the viewpoint of an outsider, in this case of a prostitute who works as a model for an artist to earn her living.

22. Carol Ann Duffy, “Standing Female Nude,” l. 22.

23. Carol Ann Duffy, “Standing Female Nude,” l. 16-19.

24. Ian Gregson, *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism: Dialogue and Estrangement* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), p.102.

25. Carol Ann Duffy, “Standing Female Nude,” l. 13.

26. Carol Ann Duffy, “Standing Female Nude,” l. 28.

27. Linda Kinnahan, “‘Looking for the Doing Words’: Carol Ann Duffy and Questions of Convention,” p.260.

Moreover, the poetess glorifies the outsider female model through her affiliation to the role of an art critic condemning the male artist and bourgeois values in art. The persona rejects her transmutation into an art form mainly because of the fact that she will be silenced, commodified and gazed at once the painting will be completed. Unlike all expectations of ekphrastic poetry, the female persona silences the male artist through her monologue and thus defies the traditional characteristics between the sister arts.

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