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Maureen Duffy's *Rites*: A Tale about Women's Anger and Violence in a Women's Public Lavatory[1]

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Abstract

Maureen Duffy (1933~) is one of the important contemporary female British writers. Not only as a novelist and a poet, Duffy is also a famous playwright, and especially Rites (1969) sets up her reputation and becomes her most performed play. Based on Euripides' The Bacchae (406 B.C.), Rites was written at the time when the women's movement in England was getting stronger in the second half of the 20th century; however, Duffy has foreseen the hidden danger in it since she wrote the play in 1969. Having an all-female cast, Rites takes place in a women's public lavatory and delineates women's complaints about men. The play ends with the killing of a masculine intruder, who turns out to be a woman, by all of the angry female characters. Through the play, Duffy gives people a warning and reminds them of a possible violence in themselves no matter what sex they are. Overall, the paper aims to analyze women's anger and violence in Duffy's Rites and then takes a step further to criticize ideas based on gender stereotypes.

Key Words: Maureen Duffy, *Rites*, anger, violence, women's public lavatory

Introduction

A prolific playwright, novelist, and poet, Maureen Duffy (1933~) is one of the important contemporary British writers; especially the play *Rites* (1969) is her most performed play ("Maureen Duffy" 209). Actively involved in feminist movements, Duffy is alert to sexism and concerned for women's right (509). *Rites* exactly shows Duffy's interest in gender relations. Premiered at the National Theatre Repertory Company in London in

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1969, *Rites* was written at the time when the women's movement, the so-called second-wave feminism, was getting stronger in England. The play is loosely based on Greek dramatist Euripides' *The Bacchae* (406 BC). As a revision of an ancient myth of Dionysus, *Rites* transforms the protagonist from Pentheus to Agave and changes the ancient rites of the bacchantes in Thebes into daily rituals of working-class women in England. Like what Duffy declares, "*The Bacchae* is Pentheus' story; *Rites* is Agave's" (350), *Rites*, containing the allusion to the myth of Dionysus, has a deeper meaning and connotation, and it thus becomes a modern revision of *The Bacchae* retold from a woman's perspective.

Rites, however, is not a feminist play which celebrates women's self-consciousness or feminist awareness; instead, it is a feminist play that cautions people about gender stereotypes based on the fallacy of biological essentialism. Having an all-female cast, *Rites* takes place in a ladies' public lavatory, and it describes women's anger at men and the male-dominated society. The play ends with the killing of a masculine intruder, who at the end turns out to be a woman, by all of the female characters. While women are stereotypically described as being silent and emotionless, Duffy empowers the women to have the emotion of anger in the play; thus, the first part of the paper begins with a discussion of women's anger. Women's anger moves their dissatisfaction into a social change, just like the women's movements in the 1960s and 1970s, but some blind anger may also cause a war between two sexes. Then the next part problematizes women's anger when it blinds them to the real sexual identity of the intruder. Analyzing the site of violence, a women's public lavatory, the second part argues that the women's violence exposes that women are not more peaceful than men by nature, so as any idea based on gender stereotypes should be reconsidered. The paper finally concludes with the importance of "revision," and it proposes that the play itself is a cautionary tale for both men and women.

Women's Anger

"An angry mother is out of control; an angry father is exercising his authority" (70), Jane Marcus observes. The ambivalence about anger in society shows a kind of sexual discrimination: when men are angry, they are "godlike" (69); when women are angry, they are "out of control" (70). Therefore, women are trained to erase the emotion of rage. The success of the women's movement in the 20th century, however, mainly relies on women's anger. As claimed by bell hooks, "Anger led me to question the politics of male dominance and enabled me to resist sexist socialization" (10). Because of anger, women begin to think about the society they live in and the interaction between women and various social institutions. Since women have been trained to be silent and emotionless, it is important for them to realize, express and further release their anger. Brenda R. Silver believes that naming

anger is an "act of judgment" (363); more crucially, "This act of judgment [. . .] carries with it the potential for insubordination and change; by becoming angry, by judging, we make ourselves equal to the person we judge and assert the validity of our own standards and views" (363). Thus, women's anger is a judgment and it asserts equality with men.

Furthermore, Jane Marcus appropriates Freud's theory to affirm that anger is a way to protect one's subjectivity and also a way to look at one's identity. She states, "Anger is a form of primary narcissism, a result of the ego's first struggle to maintain itself, to find an identity separate from the mother. Self-preservation is the source of anger" (71). By anger, one's identity would not be assimilated or erased by the other, so anger helps to separate one from the other, particularly when the other is the powerful or the dominator, like men. Therefore, anger is a way to criticize the other and simultaneously to set up one's identity.

While Duffy created angry women in *Rites* in the 1960s, England was full of irate women at the same time. Margaret Walters surveys the history of feminism in England, and she finds that since 1969, women have been participating in meetings and parades a lot in order to announce their demands. The banner in a march in London in 1970 saying "we're not beautiful, we're not ugly, *we're angry*" (108 emphasis added) expressed that women's rage indeed motivated liberation movements. In the 1960s and 1970s, women demanded "equal pay, equal education and opportunity, 24-hour nurseries, and free contraception and abortion on demand" (108). Women's anger was real and practical. Their anger and demands represented a resistance to being inferior to men; rage could not be disregarded because it was spreading everywhere. Adrienne Rich explains, "Both the victimization and the anger experienced by women are real, and have real sources, everywhere in the environment, built into society. They must go on being tapped and explored by poets, among others. We can neither deny them, nor can we rest there" (25). Women's anger is not a temporary emotional release; neither does it happen in a certain place or time only. Rather, the rage is real, all over, and needs to be noticed carefully.

Women's anger was so strong that it pushed society to improve and change, and the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s was a successful example of moving women's anger into a political act (Silver 362). When *Rites* was performed in 1969, the society was full of women's dissatisfaction and expectation for change. Duffy describes a group of women complaining about men. Women's anger in *Rites* emphasizes a strong female identity different from male and rejects having anything like men. Their anger is so strong that it is not an "act of judgment" insisting on equality with men (Silver 363); it in the end becomes a declaration of war between men and women. In other words, what concerns Duffy in *Rites* is that radical and fierce rage rather than ending the sexist oppression; it instead increases more conflicts between men and women if the rage goes to the extreme.

In *Rites*, Ada, Duffy's Agave, is a woman who is proud of her independence from men. She is the manager of the ladies' lavatory by day and a prostitute by night. Unlike Meg, a cleaner in the lavatory, who reads the horoscopes only in the newspaper, Ada studies the financial pages. She claims that she neither works for men nor needs men. When women in the lavatory find a girl who is attempting to commit suicide and is locked in a cubicle, it is Ada who insists that no man can enter her ladies' lavatory, even for the purpose of saving someone's life. Ada declares, "I'm not having any man down here" (*Rites* 371). Despite the girl's life being in danger, Ada insists that women can do everything without men. Men, for her, are like animals. Her hatred of men is also displayed as she and other women murder the intruder together. She is the one who incites the other women in the lavatory to kill the intruder. After the murder, Ada angrily announces, "Look at it [the corpse]! I've seen prettier in the butcher's shop. Animals! Bastard men" (375). Owing to her hatred of men, Ada holds extreme views toward love and marriage, and she asserts, "I'll tell you about your kind of love: a few moments pleasure and then a lifetime kidding yourselves. Caught, bound, even if you don't know it. Or a lifetime looking, like Meg, and wailing what you've missed" (370). Ada is boiling with anger and blinded by her extreme hatred of men.

Like Ada, three Office Girls all have negative evaluations of men. When First Office Girl finds the graffiti in one of the cubicles, she insists that it must have been painted by men. She argues, "No decent woman'd write things like that. You must've had a bloke in here" (357). Her impression of men is stereotypical and conventional; particularly when she is shocked to learn that men would cry (367). Second Office Girl, also named Norma, does not share as strong of a hostile attitude toward men as Ada, but she still complains about her boyfriend and her male boss. Third Office Girl, like Ada, claims that she does not need men, and she is the one who climbs into the cubicle without assistance from men to save the girl who tries to commit suicide.

While women are described as man-haters, men on the other hand in *Rites* are portrayed very negatively. In addition to comparing men to animals, Second Woman comments, "All men are babies" (367). Three Office Girls all agree that men are obsessed with reading pornography and always think of sex. Therefore, the image of men through the eyes of the women in the play is nothing more than animals or babies who simply want sex. Interestingly enough, Duffy does not give names to most of the women in the play; rather, she names them: First Office Girl, Second Office Girl, Third Office Girl, First Woman, Second Woman, Third Woman, Old Woman, and Girl. Without providing most characters with names, Duffy seems to indicate that there are many women like them at the time, who are angry at men and male-dominated society, so it is not necessary to distinguish them by different names. More

precisely, *Rites* reflects a strong atmosphere of the hatred against men in the 1960s, which is "the very early stages of the feminist movement in Britain" (Winkler 221).

The intensity of women's anger increases sharply as the play describes two generations of women who both suffer from sexist and patriarchal society, and by extension, the play further suggests that women in history all encounter with such sexist oppression. In *Rites*, Dot and Nellie are two widows in their sixties. They symbolize traditional good women in the house whereas Ada and the others represent modern women who have jobs outside house. The two old women were not allowed to work outside by their husbands. Never having a job, Nellie delineates the life she had when her husband was alive: "You get used to being alone. Thirty-six years I waited all day for him to come home in the evening except for popping out for a bit of shopping or when you came Dot" (363). She further expresses that she cleaned her husband's shoes every day and prepared him fish every Friday. All she could do was to wait her husband at home every day. Her life centered on her husband, but she states that she never saw his naked body (369). Nellie and Dot are portrayed as "the angels in the house," who live for their husbands and children, not for themselves. However, their hatred of men is still vivid as they join the other women to murder the intruder who they believe is male.

Restricted to a sexist job market, women expand their anger at men to include jobs. In *Rites*, comparing with Dot and Nellie who do not have jobs, Ada and the other women all work outside. Although "[w]ork outside the home, feminist activists declared, was the key to liberation" (hooks 95), *Rites* seems to question whether having a job can liberate women or not. Three Office Girls have secretarial work. First and Second Office Girl complain about their work and boss; but Third Office Girl is satisfied with her work because she used to have a worse job, working in a factory on a production line. The ungrammatical language they use indicates they are not educated well and further suggests that they may not get good pay. Ada is always expecting to get a promotion; the play implies that she might encounter a glass ceiling. Meg, a cleaner, complains about her job all the time and hopes Ada will take her with her if she gets a promotion. Overall, women who have jobs all complain and even hate their work; hence, the play suggests that working outside is not the key to women's liberation. They cannot make enough money, or Ada would not work as a prostitute by night. Having a job cannot promise women economic self-sufficiency, and the sexist oppression at work still restricts women's development.

It is obvious that all the characters are deliberately created as stereotypes: women are angry at men and jobs; men are animals or big babies who are obsessed with sex. Duffy exaggerates gender differences in order to show that hostile and blind rage cannot improve gender relations. In the play, women's anger at men is so fierce that it eventually bursts out into violence. When women in the lavatory find a masculine intruder, they believe the person

is male, so they all together murder her. Women are blinded by their own hatred of men, and their anger leads them to hurt their sister, another innocent woman. As Norma horrifically shouts, "Christ! It was a woman" (375). Mistaking a woman as a man represents that women are drunken with rage. They regard all men as the enemies of all women, and this blind rage is derived from stereotypes of gender roles—this is what the play intends to criticize.

Although Silver suggests that women's anger can be transformed into "collective, public concepts associated with social and political change" (361), Duffy in the play warns us that anger should be used properly. Women's rage "may have been a catalyst for individual liberatory resistance and change;" bell hooks comments, but it "did not strengthen public understanding of the significance of authentic feminist movement" (33). Their rage and hostility make the women's movement "a declaration of war between the sexes than a political struggle to end sexist oppression" (33). *Rites* explicitly conveys the idea of how to use anger in a proper way and displays a warning for people.

Women's Violence

Rites describes a group of women talking and complaining about men in a ladies' public lavatory. The climax takes place when they violently murder an intruder who they think is male. The reason why the women lose their mind and attack the person in this place is worthy of note. The story happens in a women's lavatory; it is one of the few places which women can control. The first half of the play emphasizes women's anger and hostility at men. As the rage gradually comes to the highest point, they happen to see a stranger in this women's domain and then their anger bursts out into violence. This part first discusses the importance of the women's lavatory in order to further explain the reason for the explosion of violence following the unfolding of the women's anger, and it then examines the meaning of the women's violence.

Space is gendered (Spain 3). Conventionally, women are forced to stay in the private, such as at home, whereas men are in the public, such as at work. The female characters are all working-class women in the public space, which is to say that they are in the male-dominated domain. The women's public lavatory, however, is the place where they can be totally in control in the public sphere. As Kath Browne explains, the usage of public toilets for women is "citizenship" and "access to public spaces" (336), so the need of the public toilet is not simply biological. According to Ruth Stumpe Brent's research, one of the functions of "public restroom lounges" serves as a kind of "leisure" area for women (57). What Brent means "public restroom lounges" refers to "the area adjacent to the toilet area of a ladies' restroom that has seating available" (58). The women's public lavatory in *Rites* is a "public restroom lounge," which combines toilets and a small space that provides seats. Meg's job is

to clean the lavatory, including "wiping the seats" (*Rites* 353); Ada likes to put make-up on in front of the mirror in the lavatory (353); the Figure, also named Old Mother Brown, likes to have her breakfast in it (355). It is apparent that there is a small area near the toilets that provides chairs for the purpose of seating, talking, eating, and resting in the lavatory.

More significantly, this leisure area for women is not a place for "wasting time;" instead, women make friends and develop their friendship there (Brent 59). The lavatory, therefore, is a place that provides women "a sense of belonging" (60) and protects women "from men, inclement weather, and certain social threats" (60). This sense of belonging offers women "emotional support" (57), and the public lavatory functions as a "support system." Brent explains it well,

> Those lounges designed to encourage social activity and that do in fact function as public social spaces act as "support systems" for the individual users. That is, the physical and social qualities of a public social space may serve to anchor a person's identity and provide physical and/or emotional support to an individual. (57)

Concluding all the functions of the public lavatory, we may claim that it is a place where women develop their sisterhood, a close and loyal relationship among women who have similar ideas and values. In light of such a function in a public lavatory, *Rites* emphasizes the sisterhood established by women who share the same hatred of men with each other. This women's space is important; especially it helps women to get together and develop a strong power to fight for themselves. *Rites* consists of different women: old women, such as Nellie and Dot; a manager, such as Ada; working-class women, like Meg and three Office Girls; a member of the younger generation, like the Girl who tries to commit suicide in the cubicle; mothers, such as First Woman. Different in social status, class, and age, those women gather in the lavatory and express or complain about their similar problems: anger at men and at their jobs.

Designed for women only, a public restroom is a place where women gain a sense of belonging and emotional support, and it protects women from the threat of men. In *Rites*, finding a girl trying to commit suicide in a cubicle, all the women work together to save her by themselves without men's help. After their success in saving her, the women all shout out, "We don't need them [men]. We can do without them" (374). Then they even dance and sing together like a traditional ritual to celebrate their triumph. Finding the person they murder is female, all the women work together again to throw the corpse into an incinerator in the lavatory. After the disposition of the body, Ada claims, "We all did it. Every one of us" (376). Obviously, the women in the lavatory establish a sisterhood, sharing their similar experiences and complaints, having the same target, and doing things together.

However, since the women's lavatory is a space of sanctity, where men are forbidden to enter, no wonder the women become so angry when they find a "male" intruder. Regarded as a man, the "masculine woman" is punished to death by the other "normal women," and this violence reveals that the public lavatory is a gendered place where the boundaries between men and women are clear and cannot be transgressed. It is a site "where gender is tested and proved" (Browne 338); more importantly, the gender identity of a toilet-goer must be readable immediately (339). Hence, the women's public lavatory is not for women only; rather, it is for "feminine women" only. Masculine women or so-called abnormal women are not allowed to be there. As Browne explains,

> As these women move across the boundaries and borders of man/woman, male/female their existence in woman only sites can result in genderist behavior and violence (gender bashing) in order to 'protect' 'real' women. These 'real' women are being (re)created as 'naturally' existing in these locations through the regulation of 'unnatural' bodies . . . . (339)

Brown points out two crucial comments. First, the punishment of non-real women is necessary in order to protect the real, normal women. Second, this punishment symbolizes the discipline of becoming a woman. The women's lavatory is a field which coaches a woman to be the woman expected by the patriarchal society. Masculine women and the women who transgress the biological sex or socially-constructed gender are also forbidden in the lavatory. From this perspective, the masculine intruder in *Rites* deserves to be punished by the other women for the reason that Ada and her sisters perform justice to maintain the order of gendered society.

Duffy's criticism on essentialism and biological determinism is strong when the innocent woman regarded as a male spy dies at the end. The sisterhood established by women in the lavatory hurts and murders another sister due to their blind anger at men and at so-called abnormal women, who are not seen as women by society. The women's violence in the play reiterates gender norms in the patriarchal society. Judith Plaskow argues, "Also, as bathrooms are one of the few gender-segregated spaces in our society that are largely taken for granted, they have a great deal to teach about the social construction of gender. Toilet design and distribution both reflect and enforce cultural gender norms" (56). Going to a women's lavatory or a men's manifests one's sexual and gender identity, but the decision of going to which lavatory is not made by oneself; instead, it is made by social gender conventions based on biological essentialism.

It is clear that *Rites* intends to reverse gender stereotypes based on biological essentialism. While men are stereotypically believed as being violent and brutal due to their physical strength, *Rites* reveals the possible violence in women. While public lavatories are

conventionally gender-segregated due to two sexes, *Rites* shows that they could be intruded and transgressed by gender ambiguous humans. It is important to notice that the playwright strengthens the cooperation of men and women in order to create a comfortable environment for both sexes. Although Ada and other women claim that the women's lavatory is for women only, they are unaware that the lavatory is built by men. In other words, the place for women only still needs assistance from men. The play begins with a procession of workmen constructing the lavatory.

> A procession of workmen bearing laminated plastic sheets for the walls of the cubicles and doors which they fit up and hang. A workman or perhaps two bring in a large mirror. Others put up the side wall with the incinerator opening. A foreman directs them silently. When six cubicles are erected down one side and the seventh, opposite number One, by itself, the workmen go out and return in solemn file with lavatory bowls which they place inside the cubicles. They come to the doors. The foreman bows, they bow and go off to return with sanitary bins. (353)

The space of the women's lavatory is for women, but it is a place created by men. While women claim that they do not need men, they in fact have benefited from the place men built. Although the women's lavatory built by men may indicate that women's space is still under men's control, over-emphasis on gender hostility definitely does not improve gender relations but causes trouble only.

Women, in the play, argue that "men are made different" (*Rites* 360), but ironically, their violence in murdering an innocent person reveals that both women and men are not different by nature. bell hooks observes, "Participants in feminist movement acted in accord with sexist mystification of women's experience by simply accepting that women are different from men; think and act differently; conceptualize power differently; and therefore have an inherently different value system. It simply is not so" (86). Nellie and Dot believe that girls are made of "sugar and spice and all things nice" (*Rites* 368), and Ada responds that boys are made of "snaps and snails and puppy dogs' tails" (368). They insist that men and women are different by nature, so men would draw graffiti in the lavatory whereas women would not. However, graffiti made by women in fact has increased a lot by the end of the 20th century (Bartholome and Snyder 88-89).

bell hooks criticizes this kind of naïve thinking that women are better and more peaceful than men by nature. If people believe women would not act brutally or violently, they fall into the fallacy of biological determinism. hooks confirms, "So far feminist movement has primarily focused on male violence and as a consequence lends credibility to sexist stereotypes that suggest men are violent, women are not; men are abusers, women are

victims" (118). The violent murdering in the end of *Rites* precisely reveals that women, like men, are not different by nature, and "Duffy's conclusion is a clear-cut rejection of all stereotyping, whether on the part of men or of women" (Winkler 222).

Conclusion

Overall, the paper focuses on women's anger and violence in *Rites*. As a modern revision of *The Bacchae*, Duffy tells the story from Ada's point of view, and she rewrites the myth in order to uncover the silenced women and women's issues hidden in old myth. Adrienne Rich explains well the importance of revisionary myth for women:

> Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. (18)

Looking back by retelling myth not only re-creates the silenced women in the past, but it also helps women to survive nowadays, to know themselves, to search for their identity, and to refuse the domination of patriarchy.

Duffy dramatizes women's anger and violence in *The Bacchae* and transforms them into *Rites*. Women's anger or other emotion is erased in the old myth; women's violence in *The Bacchae* is manipulated by Dionysus. On the one hand, *Rites* rewrites the silenced bacchantes in the myth to expose their emotion; on the other hand, it follows the trend of the women's movement in the 1960s to retell the myth in order to reflect the situation of the women in the 20th century. More crucially, Duffy in this revision further warns a possible danger in women's anger and possible violence from women themselves. Conventionally, violence is gendered and seen as the behavior of men only (Pilcher and Whelehan 173). People prefer to discuss men's violence against women (173), but Duffy displays women's violence in order to disillusion the stereotype of male violence and the fallacy of biological essentialism. In short, *Rites* was created when the women's liberation movement was getting stronger, but it has foreseen the latent danger and crisis in it. Duffy declares, "In the very moment when the women have got their own back on men for their type-casting in an orgasm of violence they find they have destroyed themselves and in death there is certainly no difference" (351). In order to improve gender relations and equality between the sexes, *Rites*, the revision of *The Bacchae*, becomes a cautionary tale for every man and woman.

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