# Anne Hathaway

## SUMMARY

The speaker describes the bed in which she and her husband made love as its own revolving world. This world was filled with dramatic, diverse landscapes—from forests and castles to cliffs and oceans, into which the speaker's husband would dive in search of treasure. Her husband's words were bright and forceful like stars shooting across the sky and then falling onto the speaker's lips in the form of kisses. Their bodies were in sync, like a pair of rhyming words, the speaker's body softly echoing her husband's, just as vowels echo each other in the poetic device known as assonance. His touch was like a verb gracefully performing an action upon the speaker, the noun in this sentence. Some nights the speaker would dream that she was one of her husband's plays or poems, as though their marital bed was a blank page upon which he wrote her into existence. Their bed was a stage for both romantic and dramatic performances, acted out using all the senses. The couple's guests slept in the best bed in the house, their drool-filled sleep akin to plain, unpoetic language. The widowed speaker, meanwhile, still holds her vibrant, good-humored husband alive within the metaphorical coffin of her memories, just as he used to hold her in their second-best bed.

## THEMES

### LOVE AND PASSION AS ART

"Anne Hathaway" celebrates love at its most glorious. Told from the perspective of Shakespeare's widow, Anne Hathaway, the poem presents the couple's love as filled with physical and emotional passion. To this speaker, love and sexual intimacy can feel as transportive, transformative, and enduring as any work of art.

Fondly recalling her marriage to Shakespeare, Hathaway describes how the lovers delighted in one another's bodies. She calls "the bed we loved in [...] a spinning world / of forests, castles, torchlight, cliff-tops, seas / where he would dive for pearls." Their passion was thrilling and even a bit disorienting in its power, making the world itself spin and transporting the lovers to far-off lands.

Not coincidentally, this is also what writing (at least good writing!) does. Furthering the link between sexual passion and art, the speaker's description of lovemaking frequently alludes to her husband's literary profession. She calls their nights together "romance and drama played by touch, by scent, by taste." The bed in this metaphor becomes a stage, the couple's nights of lovemaking plays acted out using all the senses.

Also note that the line about diving for pearls above, in addition to being a euphemism for oral sex, is probably an allusion to Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*—and specifically to a song about transformation and change. Physical passion, this allusion subtly suggests, is akin to a precious, transformative kind of magic. The speaker even says she'd often dream that her husband had "written me," turning the bed itself into "a page beneath his writer's hands." Again, sex is likened to a creative act, a kind of artistic collaboration between the speaker and her husband.

While the couple's sleeping "guests" may occupy "prose," the speaker's passionate love is poetry: a kind of song filled with devices like "assonance" and "rhyme." Like the delicate balance of sounds in a sonnet (a form Shakespeare used in his own poetry, and the form this poem itself follows), the lovers' bodies complement and echo each other, together creating something beautiful.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-14

### GRIEF AND THE POWER OF MEMORY

In addition to celebrating the speaker's passion for her husband, "Anne Hathaway" is also a poem about grief and the way that people may live on in the minds of those who love them. The speaker compares the way her husband "held" her in this bed to the way she now holds him in the metaphorical "casket" of her "widow's head"; though he's dead, her memories allow her to keep a part of her husband alive within herself.

Upon his death, Shakespeare famously left the "second best bed" to his wife in his will (rather than an insult from beyond the grave, this is probably because this was their marital bed; the "best," meanwhile, was usually set aside for guests). Where others might see this bed as ordinary or mundane object, Hathaway sees a portal into entire worlds constructed by their nights of passion. She spends the poem explaining how the couple would make love in this bed and recalls intimate details of their relationship.

Through these recollections, Hathaway keeps a part of Shakespeare alive. So vivid are her memories that she even dips briefly into the present tense in the poem, the immediacy of "my body now a softer rhyme" and "now echo" reflecting just how close she still feels to Shakespeare. She still senses Shakespeare as a real presence in her life, describing him as her "living laughing love"—perhaps showing how reliving her memories helps her deal with her grief and makes her feel less

alone.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-10
- Lines 12-14

## THE ENDURING POWER OF LITERATURE

Hathaway's descriptions of Shakespeare as a lover also suggest Shakespeare's enduring power as a *writer*: she compares their passion and intimacy to poetry, implying not simply the power of *love* but also of *language* to transport and transform audiences. Beyond honoring passionate love, then, "Anne Hathaway" can also be read as a poem in praise of writing itself.

The poem is brimming with allusions to Shakespeare's work, which ground its celebration of love in a celebration of classic literature:

- The bed Hathaway shared with her husband is a "spinning world," for example—likely a reference to the Globe theater where many of Shakespeare's plays were performed.
- Their lovemaking, meanwhile, transported the couple to "forests, castles [...] cliff-tops, seas / where he would dive for pearls." These are all settings and images that can be found within Shakespeare's plays (*As You Like It*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *The Tempest*, just to name a few!).
- Hathaway says that Shakespeare's words were so powerful that they were like "shooting stars" landing on her lips, a clear testament to the force of his love *and* of his writing. She later adds that, during their lovemaking, she felt like he was writing her into existence.
- Even the poem's form references Shakespeare's work: "Anne Hathaway" is a sonnet, the form favored by the man it praises.

All these nods to Shakespeare as a *writer* imply that both passionate love *and* literature can be deeply thrilling and stoke the fires of the imagination. Hathaway's memories further suggest what remains powerful in Shakespeare to readers today: her experience of being swept up in loving sex with him is like readers' experience of his art. Just like Hathaway would be transported to entirely different worlds through their love, so too are readers of Shakespeare taken to strange and magical places through his plays. And it's in this sense that Shakespeare remains a "living laughing love"—his worlds being created anew through the active engagement of those read, perform, and watch his work.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-12

# LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

## BEFORE LINE 1, LINES 1-3

*"Item I gyve ...*
*... dive for pearls.*

The poem opens with an epigraph:

> *Item I gyve unto my wief my second best bed...*

This is a quote taken from William Shakespeare's will, in which the playwright leaves his "second best bed" to his wife. While this sounds like an insult, it probably wasn't: in Shakespeare's day, the "best bed" was usually reserved for visitors and later bequeathed to one's children/heirs. The "second best bed," here, is actually the bed that Shakespeare and his wife, Anne Hathaway, would have shared!

Using the bed as a kind of launchpad for her fond memories, the widowed Hathaway wastes no time in portraying her marriage as a loving, passionate one:

> The bed we loved in was a spinning world

This metaphor depicts the couple's marital bed as an exciting, intensely intimate place—an entire world unto itself, one that revolves on its own axis. (The "spinning world" also probably alludes to the Globe Theatre, where many of Shakespeare's plays were first performed.) Through their lovemaking, the couple was figuratively transported to "forests" and "castles"; to worlds lit up by "torchlight"; to the tops of "cliffs" and even into the ocean. Love and sex, here, are like writing: able to break open the imagination and conjure up entire worlds.

Not coincidentally, all of these locations appear in Shakespeare's plays: readers might think of Elsinore, the royal castle of *Hamlet*; the idyllic Forest of Arden from *As You Like It*; the foreboding cliffs of *King Lear*. Of course, lots of other plays fit the bill here too! Indeed, the asyndeton in the line—that is, the lack of an *and*—suggests these are just a few imagined places among many. The important point is that the poem establishes a link between passionate love and creative work.

Hathaway also refers to "seas / where [Shakespeare] would dive for pearls." This is, in all likelihood, a sensuous euphemism for oral sex. It's also probably an allusion to *The Tempest*—more specifically, to a famous song sung by the spirit Ariel:

> Full fathom five thy father lies;
> Of his bones are coral made;

Those are pearls that were his eyes;
Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.

This song is about change and transformation, again suggesting that lovemaking, too, can be a transformative act.

Finally, these opening lines establish the poem's meter: Duffy uses a lose iambic pentameter here, meaning there are five iambs (feet with a da-DUM rhythm) per line. The meter isn't perfect—even line 1 has a variation on the third foot ("in was"):

The bed | we loved | in was | a spin- | ning world

Still, the iambic rhythm is pretty clear. Shakespeare famously used iambic pentameter in his own sonnets, and its appearance here thus links the poem to Shakespeare through both its images and its form.

## LINES 3-5

*My lover's words ...*
*... on these lips;*

There's a full stop caesura in the middle of line 3 (following "pearls"), after which the speaker switches gears. Now, Hathaway recalls the sweet nothings Shakespeare used to whisper to her when they were in their marital bed. This moment, once again, implies the seductive power of words—and, more specifically, Shakespeare's mastery over the English language.

Deploying a metaphor worthy of Shakespeare himself, Hathaway describes his words as "shooting stars which fell to earth as kisses / on these lips." Shooting stars are typically considered rare, beautiful, and lucky. This metaphor thus speaks to just how special Shakespeare's words make Hathaway feel. Also notice that they're brought down "to earth," transformed from something lofty and distant to something immediate and physical: "kisses."

Fitting for a poem that's in part about the power of language, these lines are filled with poetic devices. Sibilance, for example, makes the words themselves sound like an intimate whisper between lovers (listen to the /s/, /z/, and /sh/ sounds of "lover's words [...] shooting stars [...] as kisses [...] these lips"). And the enjambment between lines 3-5 creates a falling motion, the lines tumbling down the page like a "star" hurtling towards the earth:

My lover's words
were shooting stars which fell to earth as kisses
on these lips;

## LINES 5-7

*my body now ...*
*... of a noun.*

Hathaway begins to talk about lovemaking using language typically used in reference to writing and poetry. She likens her and her husband's bodies to two rhyming words, hers a "softer" (perhaps meaning more feminine) rhyme in comparison to his. This implies a sense of harmony and perfection, as though their bodies were made to be together. They "echo" each other, the speaker continues, and then mentions "assonance" (a term that refers to the repetition of vowel sounds in close succession).

Notice how Hathaway has slipped into the present tense for a moment, as though the bed (or thinking about the bed) has taken her back in time to relive these nights with her husband. The diacope of "now" ("my body now a softer rhyme / to his, now echo") signals the immediacy of these sensuous feelings. There are no conjunctions here either, perhaps creating a sense of breathless excitement.

At the same time, caesurae slow down line 6, these pauses filling the line with breath:

to his, now echo, assonance; his touch

Next, the speaker recalls how Shakespeare's touch was (or *is*, in her memory) "a verb dancing in the centre of a noun." In this metaphor, Hathaway conceives of lovemaking like the writing of a sentence: she's the noun, the object that the verb acts upon. More specifically, her husband "danc[es] in the centre" of this noun, a metaphor that suggests the grace of their lovemaking (the image also subtly suggests penetration).

These descriptions portray Shakespeare as an attentive and sensitive lover—and implicitly link his genius as a writer with these same qualities.

## LINES 8-12

*Some nights I ...*
*... dribbling their prose.*

Sometimes, the speaker says in lines 8-9, she would dream that Shakespeare had written her into existence, as though their shared bed was "a page beneath his writer's hands." This metaphor again presents sex and passion as creative, akin to writing poetry or plays.

Building on this idea, the speaker next conceives of the bed itself as a stage upon which "romance and drama" are acted out through the couple's senses, "played by touch, by scent, by taste." Again, the poem is alluding to Shakespeare's writings (he wrote many romances and tragedies) and depicting lovemaking as something creative and imaginative.

Listen to how the anaphora here suggests continual action (and attentiveness):

and drama played by touch, by scent, by taste.

The asyndeton (the lack of any "and") adds urgency and excitement to this list.

All this energy and passion creates a striking juxtaposition with the image that the speaker turns to in the next lines. Hathaway explains how, while she and her husband were creating and exploring entire worlds, "in the other bed, the best, our guests dozed on, / dribbling their prose."

Prose, of course, is the *opposite* of poetry. Here, it suggests dullness and predictability; it grossly "dribbl[es]" from guests' mouths like drool. The full-stop caesura after "prose" emphasizes the guests' inertia, their lack of motion, creating a little pocket of sleepy silence in the middle of line 12.

### LINES 12-14

*My living laughing ...*
*... next best bed.*

Readers can almost hear Hathaway sigh sadly here as she calls out to her deceased husband. She calls him "My living laughing love," the "My" signaling her sense of closeness to Shakespeare. The triple hit of alliteration—"living laughing love"—elevates the poem's language as well. In doing so, it reinforces the idea that, while others lived dull, prosaic lives, Shakespeare and Hathaway's love was the stuff of *poetry*.

Notice, too, how "living" and "laughing" suggest continuous (and perhaps unending) action, implying that Shakespeare remains alive *through* Hathaway's memories.

Hathaway ends the poem with a metaphor in its closing couplet ("I hold [...] next best bed"). Not coincidentally, Shakespearean sonnets also end with pithy rhyming couplets that respond in some way to everything that's come before. This poem is paying homage to Shakespeare not just through its language, but its *form*.

Here, Hathaway compares her "widow's head" to a "casket," or a coffin, in which she holds Shakespeare close to her—just like he used to grip her tightly in their "next best bed." This is an intimate and perhaps slightly haunting image, one that acknowledges Shakespeare's death while also keeping him alive through tender memories.

Notice the symmetry between "I hold him" in line 13 and "he held me" in line 14. The alliteration here calls attention to these mirror images: Shakespeare tenderly holding his wife in life, and his wife holding him tenderly in death.

## POETIC DEVICES

### ALLITERATION

"Anne Hathaway" uses alliteration to add emphasis and lyricism to its language. Alliteration, consonance, and assonance all work together to signal that this is a work of *poetry* rather than *prose*. This is an important distinction: Hathaway herself implicitly deems her loving relationship with Shakespeare the stuff of poetry while dismissing the drab, "dribbling [...] prose" of visiting guests. Fittingly, then, moments of alliteration give the poem a kind of electric crackle and spark, hinting at the passionate nature of the couple's relationship.

Take line 2, for example, where the bright, crisp /c/ and /t/ sounds of "castles, torchlight, cliff-tops" make these imagined worlds seem all the more vivid on the page. Later, the flitting /t/ sounds of "touch" and "taste" have a sensuous tenderness to them, perhaps evoking the delicate hands of a lover.

Some of the most striking examples of alliteration occur in the last three lines, ramping up the poem's music and emotion as things come to an end. Hathaway calls Shakespeare her "living laughing love," for example, the triple hit of alliteration adding intensity and drama to this description.

The alliteration in lines 13 and 14 then highlights the chiasmus of the poem's final moments:

I hold him in the casket of my widow's head
as he held me upon that next best bed.

The two images here ("I hold him," "he held me") mirror each other, reflecting the enduring bond between Hathaway and Shakespeare; just as he held her in *life*, so she will hold him in *death*. The poem then closes with a final, powerful punch of alliteration: the bold /b/ sounds (and /eh/ assonance) of "best bed" end things on a memorably musical note.

**Where Alliteration appears in the poem:**

- **Line 2:** "castles," "torchlight," "cliff-tops"
- **Lines 3-4:** "words / were"
- **Line 10:** "touch," "taste"
- **Line 11:** "bed," "best"
- **Line 12:** "living laughing love"
- **Line 13:** "hold him," "head"
- **Line 14:** "he held," "best bed"

### ALLUSION

The poem makes a few subtle allusions to Shakespeare's work. These allusions emphasize the link between romantic/sexual passion and literature: both, the poem implies, are creative forces, able to transport and transform lovers/audiences.

The very first line of the poem might be one of these allusions:

The bed we loved in was a spinning world

The metaphor of the bed as a "spinning world" doesn't just speak to the imaginative power of the couple's love: it's also, perhaps, a reference to the Globe Theatre that famously

staged many first productions of Shakespeare's plays. Within the confines of a humble construction of wood and plaster, Shakespeare conjured entire worlds out of words. Similarly, Hathaway recounts feeling transported to new worlds through their love.

When Hathaway goes on to describe some of the landscapes within this "spinning world," she makes subtle allusions to the various settings of Shakespeare's plays. "Forests," for example, might be an allusion to the Forest of Arden from *As You Like It*; "castles" suggests Elsinore Castle in *Hamlet*; "cliff-tops" suggests the misty cliffs from *King Lear*; "torchlight" perhaps evokes the dimly-lit corridors of *Macbeth*; and "seas" calls to mind the mysterious watery world of *The Tempest*.

This final allusion is the most specific: the mention of "div[ing] for pearls" is a euphemism for oral sex that also suggests a famous song sung by the spirit Ariel:

> Full fathom five thy father lies;
> Of his bones are coral made;
> Those are pearls that were his eyes:
> Nothing of him that doth fade
> But doth suffer a sea-change
> Into something rich and strange.

Ariel is a magical character, and this song is, in part, about transformation (a "sea-change"). The allusion thus suggests the magical, transformative power of the couple's sexual passion.

Of course, all these allusions are subtle and vague enough that readers might have their own theories about which plays Hathaway has in mind with these references. By making these allusions, Hathaway is also subtly gesturing towards Shakespeare's genius and the enduring power of his work.

**Where Allusion appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 1-3:** "The bed we loved in was a spinning world / of forests, castles, torchlight, cliff-tops, seas / where he would dive for pearls."

## ASSONANCE

Assonance adds music, intensity, and lyricism to the poem's language, never letting readers forget that this is a work of *poetry* rather than *prose*. Take the insistent long /ee/ sounds of "dreamed he'd written me" in line 8, for example, which lends musical emphasis to the speaker's admission.

Assonance often combines with alliteration and consonance as well, adding yet more intensity to the speaker's description of her relationship. Take the /er/, /w/, and /l/ sounds that overlap in lines 1-4, creating a musical echo that flows down the page:

> The bed we loved in was a spinning world
> [...]
> where he would dive for pearls. My lover's words
> were shooting stars which fell to earth as kisses

These sonic devices combine elsewhere as well: "bed, the best, our guests" in line 11, for instance, is perhaps deliberately showy, exhibiting the speaker's poetic skill right before she dismisses the guests "dribbling their prose" nearby. Likewise, the shared /eh/, /b/, /s/, and /t/ sounds of "next best bed" end the poem on a distinctly musical note that lingers in the reader's ear.

Assonance also links words together conceptually. "Hands" and "Romance" in line 9 (which, again, also features consonance, this time of the /n/ sound) mark Shakespeare's hands as tools for the *expression* of romance, both through sex and through writing. Hathaway also calls the couple's "guests" ordinary folk who "doze[] on,/ dribbling their prose." This assonance/consonance calls attention to the sleepy, dull, boring nature of "prose" when compared to the couple's poetry.

**Where Assonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "world"
- **Line 3:** "pearls," "lover's words"
- **Line 4:** "were," "earth," "kisses"
- **Line 5:** "lips," "body," "softer"
- **Line 8:** "dreamed he'd," "me"
- **Line 9:** "hands. Romance"
- **Line 11:** "bed," "best," "guests," "dozed"
- **Line 12:** "prose"
- **Line 13:** "head"
- **Line 14:** "he," "me," "next best bed"

## CAESURA

Caesura slows the poem down, allowing certain words and images to linger in readers' minds. It also works alongside enjambment to keep the poem's language sounding at once natural—like an intimate conversation between lovers—and distinctly poetic.

Many of the sentences here spill smoothly across line breaks before coming to a rest in the middle of later lines. Listen to lines 2-3, for example:

> of forests, castles, torchlight, cliff-tops, seas
> where he would dive for pearls. My lover's words

Notice how the sentence of line 2 stretches into line 3, finally coming to a firm pause after "pearls." The full stop caesura here, on the heels of so much movement, calls readers' attention to this word/image, and in doing so gives the reader a beat to catch onto Hathaway's euphemism.

The full stop after "prose" in line 12 brings the line to a similarly evocative pause, one that suggests the dullness and inactivity

of the couple's guests (who doze in the "best bed" while Hathaway and her husband engage in passionate intimacy):

> dribbling their prose. My living laughing love –

Elsewhere, caesura lends the poem tenderness, as though mirroring the loving and considered way in which Shakespeare would touch Hathaway's body. Notice how, in the following lines, pauses create a sensation of delicate movement:

> on these lips; my body now a softer rhyme
> to his, now echo, assonance; his touch
> [...]
> a page beneath his writer's hands. Romance
> and drama played by touch, by scent, by taste.

Each caesura slows the poem down, perhaps evoking the way that Hathaway wishes to relish in her husband's touch.

**Where Caesura appears in the poem:**

- **Line 2:** "forests, castles, torchlight, cliff-tops, seas"
- **Line 3:** "pearls. My"
- **Line 5:** "lips; my"
- **Line 6:** "his, now echo, assonance; his"
- **Line 8:** "me, the"
- **Line 9:** "hands. Romance"
- **Line 10:** "touch, by scent, by"
- **Line 11:** "bed, the best, our"
- **Line 12:** "prose. My"

## ENJAMBMENT

Most of the lines here are enjambed, allowing the poem to flow smoothly and swiftly down the page. The fact that so many clauses rush past line breaks without pause also creates a sense of breathlessness and excitement. The first end-stop doesn't show up until halfway through the poem, in fact. The first six lines are all enjambed:

> The bed [...] spinning world
> of forests [...] seas
> where he [...] lover's words
> were shooting [...] kisses
> on these lips [...] rhyme
> to his [...] his touch
> a verb [...] a noun.

It's as though Hathaway is recalling those nights in the "second best bed" with such intensity and emotion that they threaten to break free from the poem's sonnet form.

Notice, too, how enjambment can evoke the motion of the images being described. Here are lines 2 and 3:

> of forests, castles, torchlight, cliff-tops, seas
> where he would dive for pearls. [...]

The poem "dive[s]" down to the next line, mimicking Shakespeare's "div[ing] for pearls" (a reference to oral sex). Then, in lines 3-5, enjambment creates further downward motion to match Hathaway's metaphor of falling stars:

> [...] My lover's words
> were shooting stars which fell to earth as kisses
> on these lips [...]

Here, Shakespeare's words are shooting stars falling onto Hathaway's lips. The end words fall across the line breaks, bringing the metaphor to life on the page.

**Where Enjambment appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 1-2:** "world / of"
- **Lines 2-3:** "seas / where"
- **Lines 3-4:** "words / were"
- **Lines 4-5:** "kisses / on"
- **Lines 5-6:** "rhyme / to"
- **Lines 6-7:** "touch / a"
- **Lines 8-9:** "bed / a"
- **Lines 9-10:** "Romance / and"
- **Lines 13-14:** "head / as"

## JUXTAPOSITION

Towards the end of the poem, Hathaway juxtaposes her passionate relationship with her husband with the boring sleep of visiting guests:

> [...] Romance
> and drama played by touch, by scent, by taste.
> In the other bed, the best, our guests dozed on,
> dribbling their prose. [...]

Hathaway is making a point about the unique passion she and Shakespeare shared. Their love was the stuff of poetry; it was filled with music and "rhyme," "Romance" and "drama" that touched all the senses. Ordinary folk, by contrast, would spend the night dribbling out in "prose"—the *opposite* of poetry.

The speaker isn't saying that the guests were literally writing in their sleep. Instead, she's metaphorically commenting on how dull, boring, and plain their lives seemed. They slept while Hathaway and Shakespeare were wide awake and making love.

The poem also juxtaposes two beds: the "best bed" on which guests sleep and the "second best bed" that Shakespeare famously left Hathaway in his will. This "second best bed," the poem insists, referred to the bed that the couple shared. It might not be the fluffiest or comfiest, but it's the one that holds

the most meaning for the speaker.

**Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 9-12:** "Romance / and drama played by touch, by scent, by taste. / In the other bed, the best, our guests dozed on, / dribbling their prose."
- **Line 14:** "as he held me upon that next best bed."

## METAPHOR

The whole poem is a series of inventive metaphors. They fly and the reader thick and fast, illustrating the power of the speaker's love *and* the power of the written word. That is, the metaphors here are an example of language's ability to stir the imagination and transport readers to new worlds—something that the speaker insists her relationship with her husband did, too.

Most of the metaphors here are closely related and paint a picture of the speaker's relationship as one of immense passion, magic, and vitality. For example, the bed is a "spinning world" that transports Shakespeare and Hathaway to distant "forests," "castles," and so on. Hathaway describes her husband's "words" as "shooting stars" that land on her lips "as kisses," another metaphor that plays on the idea of sexual intimacy as a creative, artistic act.

As the poem goes on, Hathaway draws on more language specifically tied to writing and poetry to describe their lovemaking. She calls their bodies harmonious "rhyme[s]" that "echo" each other; his touch is a "verb" (an action) "dancing in the centre of a noun" (the speaker's body). She even imagines that Shakespeare writes her into existence, transforming their bed into a blank "page" and then a stage on which the "Romance and drama" of their love is acted out. Again, all of this metaphorical language links love and sex to literature and art.

Finally, she calls her mind a "casket" (a coffin) in which she now "hold[s]" her husband. This closing metaphor shows how she keeps her husband alive through her memories.

**Where Metaphor appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-12
- Lines 13-14

## REPETITION

"Anne Hathaway" uses repetition three times. First, in lines 5-6, Hathaway repeats the word "now"—seeming to slip into the present tense even though she's talking about the past:

> [...] my body **now** a softer rhyme
> to his, **now** echo, assonance; his touch

This is an example of the device known as diacope. This quick, simple repetition makes Hathaway's memories of these passionate nights seem all the more vivid and immediate, as though they still hold the same emotional (and physical) charge "now" that they did at the time.

Later in the poem, Hathaway talks in more detail about the couple's love-making:

> [...] Romance
> and drama played **by** touch, **by** scent, **by** taste.

The anaphora (the repeated "by") and parallelism (the identical grammatical structure of each clause) create a sense of building excitement and momentum. They might also suggest the tender attentiveness with which the couple expressed their love, exploring each and every part of each other's bodies.

Finally, chiasmus occurs in the closing couplet:

> I **hold him** in the casket of my widow's head
> as **he held me** upon that next best bed.

Hathaway expresses how she holds Shakespeare in her memory as a way of reciprocating the way he held her in their "second best bed." The word essentially order reverses here, creating a kind of mirror image between the lovers that suggests their union is as strong in death as it was in life.

**Where Repetition appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 5-6:** "my body now a softer rhyme / to his, now echo"
- **Line 10:** "by touch, by scent, by taste"
- **Lines 13-13:** "I / him"
- **Line 13:** "hold"
- **Line 14:** "he held me"

## VOCABULARY

**Dive for pearls** (Line 3) - A euphemism for oral sex, and a possible reference to Ariel's Song from Shakepeare's play *The Tempest*.

**Dozed** (Line 11) - Slept heavily.

**Dribbling** (Line 12) - Letting out in a trickle or drops; drooling.

**Casket** (Line 13) - Coffin.

**Next Best Bed** (Lines 14-14, Line 14) - As the poem's epigraph points out, William Shakespeare left the "second best bed," to his wife Anne Hathaway. This wasn't necessarily a slight: in Shakespeare's day, the "best bed" would typically have been reserved for guests and left to one's heirs/children. The "second best bed," meanwhile, likely refers to the bed that Shakespeare and Anne shared.

## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"Anne Hathaway" is a riff on the sonnet, a form famously mastered by Shakespeare himself. By writing in the sonnet form, Hathaway pays tribute to her late husband *and* exhibits his continuing influence over her life.

Sonnets have 14 lines and they're often written about love and passion. In that sense, "Anne Hathaway" falls in line perfectly. But this is a modern sonnet, and it breaks with tradition in terms of its rhyme scheme:

- Shakespearean sonnets feature three quatrains (four-line stanzas) with an alternating rhyme pattern (the first and third lines of each quatrain rhyme, as do the second and fourth).
- A Shakespearean sonnet then ends with a concluding couplet, which usually responds in some way to the previous 12 lines of the poem.

The first chunk of "Anne Hathaway" doesn't fit this form: there aren't any steady quatrains here. And yet, the poem does end with a rhyming couplet:

> I hold him in the casket of my widow's **head**
> as he held me upon that next best **bed**.

In a way, then, the poem mirrors the sentiment in lines 5 and 6:

> on these lips; my body now **a softer rhyme**
> to his, now **echo, assonance**; his touch

In terms of its form, it's as though this poem is an "echo" of Shakespeare's poetry, just as Hathaway's body was an "echo" of her husband's. That is, it's like a fainter, softer version of his work.

It's also worth noting how the poem uses enjambment and caesura throughout. The end of sentences rarely corresponds to the ends of actual lines of verse, and, as a result, it feels as though the poem is pushing and pulling against its own shape. This, perhaps, subtly mirrors the way that Hathaway and Shakespeare seemed to transcend the formal constraints of their bed, traveling to new worlds through their love.

### METER

"Anne Hathaway" uses a loose iambic pentameter, the traditional meter of sonnets. All this means is that each line has five iambs, poetic units that feature an unstressed beat followed by a stressed one: da-DUM.

Here's line 10 as an example:

> and dra- | ma **played** | by **touch**, | by **scent**, | by **taste**.

Iambic pentameter, of course, is the classic Shakespearean meter—he uses it throughout his plays and all but one of the sonnets. Here, then, it places the poem in close relationship with Shakespeare's work itself.

The meter isn't perfect, however; Duffy keeps things sounding pretty natural rather than stiffly sticking to iambs throughout. Take line 1:

> The **bed** | we **loved** | in was | a **spin-** | ning **world**

It's possible to scan this differently, but the most natural reading places an unstressed beat on "in," turning that third foot into a pyrrhic (two unstressed beats in a row).

Variations like this keep things from feeling too rigid or predictable.

### RHYME SCHEME

Though it's a sonnet, "Anne Hathaway" doesn't follow a conventional rhyme scheme.

Shakespearean sonnets feature an ABAB CDCD EFEF GG pattern. In other words, the first three quatrains feature an alternating pattern (lines 1 and 3 rhyme with each other, as do lines 2 and 4), while the final two lines create a couplet.

The first four lines of "Anne Hathaway" might look like they're going to follow this pattern, given the slant rhyme between "world" and "words" (lines 1 and 3). But rhymes then disappear until the poem's final couplet:

> I hold him in the casket of my widow's **head**
> as he held me upon that next best **bed**.

The absence of rhyme up to this point makes this final moment—a clear allusion to the Shakespearean sonnet form—ring out all the more strongly in the end.

Elsewhere, the lack of rhyme perhaps keeps the poem feeling modern and intimate rather than overly controlled. It also might fit with Hathaway's description of her body as "a softer rhyme / to his [Shakespeare's]." The poem is an "echo" of his writing, not an exact copy.

## SPEAKER

As the title suggests, this poem is written from the perspective of Anne Hathaway, William Shakespeare's widow.

Shakespeare, of course, is one of the most famous writers of all time, known for his masterful use of the English language across both plays and poems. But while readers have undoubtedly heard of Shakespeare, most probably know little, if anything, about his wife. This poem doesn't delve too far into

her actual life, instead imagining her perspective on her husband's death. Using Hathaway's voice here allows the reader to consider Shakespeare as a *person* and not just as a poet/playwright—that is, to see the man behind the myth.

Hathaway has nothing but good things to say about Shakespeare in this poem, and she joyously recalls the nights they spend together in their "second best bed" (their marital bed). Hathaway appears passionate, loving, and admiring of her husband's skills as both a writer and a lover.

Indeed, the Hathaway of this poem clearly has immense respect for Shakespeare's talents, drawing on writing-related metaphors to illustrate the beauty and passion of their lovemaking. She states at the poem's end that she preserves her husband within the coffin of her own mind, holding onto his memory just as he once "held" her in their bed.

## SETTING

The poem takes place sometime after the death of Renaissance poet and playwright William Shakespeare, who died in 1616 in Stratford-upon-Avon. This was the town he called home when he wasn't working in London.

The poem imagines Shakespeare's widow, Anne Hathaway, reflecting on her physical relationship with her husband, perhaps in their shared home after learning that he'd left her their "second best bed"—that is, their marital bed—in his will. This humble setting sharply contrasts with the diverse landscapes that the speaker says she and her husband traveled to while making love: "forests, castles, torchlight, cliff-tops, seas." This contrast speaks to the power and passion of their love, which was able to metaphorically transport the couple around the world.

## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

Carol Ann Duffy is among the most acclaimed and high-profile poets in the contemporary UK. Born in Scotland in 1955, she became the UK's first female poet laureate in 2009 and served in the position for the next 10 years.

"Anne Hathaway" was published in Duffy's fifth poetry collection, *The World's Wife* (1999). In this collection, Duffy writes from the viewpoints of the wives, sisters, and female contemporaries of famous and infamous men. Some of her characters include Mrs. Pilate, Queen Kong, Mrs. Sisyphus, Frau Freud, Circe, Elvis's Twin Sister, and Pygmalion's Bride. In witty, conversational language, *The World's Wife* subverts traditional male perspectives, examining instead the ways that women's stories have been ignored or overlooked.

Duffy was deeply influenced by Sylvia Plath, whose *Collected Works* she received for her 25th birthday. She would go on to edit an edition of Plath's poems, and to write a piece for *The Guardian* about how Plath's work, with its revolutionary interest in women's internal lives, blazed a trail Duffy would follow in her own poetry.

William Shakespeare, of course, needs little introduction. The famous Renaissance author is perhaps best known for his many plays (including works subtly alluded to here, such as *The Tempest* and *Hamlet*), but Shakespeare's sonnets have also become some of the most widely read and popular poems in the English language. The sonnet form itself was popularized in the 14th century by the Italian poet Francesco Petrarch, who wrote many sonnets about unrequited love. Many of the sonnets written in the next 400 years were, in some way or another, also about love, and Shakespeare's sequence of 154 sonnets is no exception.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Duffy was born in Scotland in 1955 and came of age during second-wave feminism. While early feminism had been focused primarily on securing women's right to vote, second-wave feminism addressed a wider range of issues including reproductive rights, domestic violence, workplace equality, and more. Second-wave feminism was responding to many of the restrictive gender norms of the mid-20th century, including the idea that women's purpose in life was to become demure mothers and wives.

Of course, the poem itself has little to suggest the period in which it was written. Anne Hathaway was Shakespeare's real-life wife, and the poem is spoken from her perspective after his death, effectively situating it between 1616 and 1623. Hathaway was a little older than Shakespeare; they were 26 and 18, respectively, when they married. Not much is known about Hathaway's personality nor about the relationship between her and Shakespeare (though this poem speculates that they were a loving and tight-knit couple).

Shakespeare really did leave the "second best bed" to Hathaway in his will. There was no actual mention of the "best bed," and scholars have debated Shakespeare's logic. Some see it as a slight, while others (including Duffy in this poem) take the view that the second best bed was in fact the bed that a couple shared.

## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Duffy's Influence — Read an article by novelist Jeanette Winterson in which she discusses Duffy's poetry, focusing on Duffy's belief that poetry should be a pleasure. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/17/jeanette-winterson-on-carol-ann-duffys-the-worlds-wife)

- Biography of Carol Ann Duffy — Learn more about Duffy's life and work via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/carol-ann-duffy)
- Duffy on the Power of Poetry — Read an article about Duffy's recent Pandemic Poetry project, in which she discusses how poetry can help people through troubling times. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/apr/20/carol-ann-duffy-leads-british-poets-coronavirus-imtiaz-dharker-jackie-kay)
- Anne Hathaway's Story — Learn more about Shakespeare's wife. (https://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare/shakespedia/william-shakespeare/william-shakespeares-family/anne-hathaway/)
- Shakespeare's Will — Check out a scan, transcription, and analysis of Shakespeare's will. (https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/museum/item.asp?item_id=21)

## LITCHARTS ON OTHER CAROL ANN DUFFY POEMS

- A Child's Sleep
- Before You Were Mine
- Death of a Teacher
- Education For Leisure
- Foreign
- Head of English
- In Mrs Tilscher's Class
- Little Red Cap
- Medusa
- Mrs Midas
- Originally
- Prayer
- Stealing
- The Darling Letters
- Valentine
- Warming Her Pearls
- War Photographer
- We Remember Your Childhood Well

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