

Rita Horvátb

ON ANNE SEXTON'S *TRANSFORMATIONS*: INNER STRUCTURE AND THE "QUEST MOTIF"

Anne Sexton's fifth volume of poetry, in which she retells seventeen of the Grimms' fairy tales, was written within an eight-month period in 1970. This was an extremely productive time in her life, similar in its intensity to her first "binge" of creativity which resulted in the poems constituting *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* and *All My Pretty Ones*. At this time she was working simultaneously on three different books: *Transformations*, *The Book of Folly*, and *The Death Notebooks*. It is valid to say that during this peak period of her life, which coincides with a traditionally reevaluating, summarizing period, viz. she was forty two at the time, she re-addressed important questions which had concerned her before. Among other crucial problems which the poet deals with again is the motif of the quest, its role, aim and necessity. Anne Sexton's drives, her devices, and even the target of her inquiry changed over the years from being scientifically psychological toward being more transcendental, but the desperate intensity and her commitment to the painful but promising quest for some kind of meaning or truth remained the same.¹ Naturally, in order to follow the changes, she rethought from time to time her attitude to this process, which was tormenting not only for herself, but for her loved ones and for the audience as well.²

1 "The insistence on the conduct of the quest [...] may be taken as a distinctive trait identifying her own voice within the confessional canon." Cf. Marras 30. Diana Hume George's choice of title for her book, *Oedipus Anne*, is intended to emphasize this aspect of Anne Sexton's poetry, rather than the other obvious Freudian connotation.

2 Middlebrook's biography tells us that Anne Sexton's extremely creative period in 1970 was also a mentally very troubled one, although it was kept under control Cf. Middlebrook 333-336.

Her new approach to the quest motif is one of the major themes of the first poem of the book *Transformations*, "The Gold Key" (Sexton 223-224), which is extremely important since it serves as a general prologue to the rest of the poems. In order to understand and appreciate the novelty of her view about this important issue, it is necessary to review the stages of the whole development of the quest motif.

In 1968, in the course of an interview to the question, "Do you feel that writing about the dark side of the human psyche takes a special courage?" she replied: "Of course, but I'm tired of explaining it. It seems to me self-evident. There are warnings all along the way. 'Go - children - slow.' 'It's dangerous in there.' The appalling horror that awaits you in the answer."³

It looks as if the same kind of "tiredness" comes across from "The Gold Key" as well. In the poem she merely states the fact that the inquiry is necessary, it is a natural life-function:

Let me present to you this boy.
 He is sixteen and wants some answers.
 He is each of us.
 I mean you.
 I mean me.
 [...]

 we must have the answers.

Anne Sexton herself speaks about this kind of duality in the prologue preceding "Red Riding Hood":

Many are the deceivers:

[...]

 And I, I too.

 Quite collected at cocktail parties,

 Meanwhile in my head

 I'm undergoing open-heart surgery.

(Sexton, 1981:269).

Anne Sexton frequently used three periods as punctuation, so to indicate ellipsis I place brackets around the periods.

3 Kevles 6.

The fact that the boy "wants some answers" characterizes him in the same way as his age. Even the punctuation, the frequent use of periods at the ends of short sentences, conveys the feeling of firmness. The slight irony incorporated in the phrase, "This boy!" (This boy!/Upon finding a nickel/he would look for a wallet./This boy!), comments only on the impatient insatiability of the inquirer, not on the act itself. Anne Sexton does not spend time explaining and defending the necessity of the quest, she does not even emphasize its heroic nature. She did that thoroughly in her first volume, in the motto and also in the poem which refers directly to the motto: "For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further." (Sexton 34-35). The motto itself is an extract from a letter of Schopenhauer to Goethe dated November 1815:

It is the courage to make a clean breast of it in face of every question that makes the philosopher. He must be like Sophocles's Oedipus, who, seeking enlightenment concerning his terrible fate, pursues his indefatigable enquiry, even when he divines that appalling horror awaits him in the answer. But most of us carry in our heart the Jocasta who begs Oedipus for God's sake not to inquire further... (Sexton 2).

The importance of "For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further" is emphasized by its position as the opening poem of the second part of *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*. In this poem Anne Sexton gently, patiently, even a little bit timidly explains why she writes about such embarrassing and personal subjects. This poem on one level is a direct answer to John Holmes, her mentor, who tried to persuade her out of publishing the intensely personal poems which reveal so much about her own family and her mental illness⁴. The poem actually accomplishes much more: it is Anne Sexton's defence and justification of the confessional genre.

She lists accurately the charges: the ugliness ("Not that it was beautiful"), the limitedness in size and scope and the insignificance of a personal view ("It is a small thing / to rage in your own ball", "there is no lesson here", "narrow diary of my mind"). The last quotation contains a nicely interrupted phrase, narrow minded, which reveals the insulting nature of the accusations as well. Against all this she offers two arguments to support her efforts. First, that she "found some order there", which according to a letter to W. D. Snodgrass is a great need of

⁴ Sexton - Ames 58-60

hers: "my own need to make form from chaos."⁵ Then she names the main, the most powerful reason, which is that she believes her poetry has immediate utility for others:

that the worst of anyone
 can be, finally,
 an accident of hope.
 [...]
 There ought to be something special
 for someone
 in this kind of hope.
 (Sexton 34-35)

To strengthen this argument in the line "or my own selfish death" she indicates that the only charge which she feels herself guilty of is selfishness. She also humbly admits that the starting point was her own closed universe but "Then it was more than myself, / it was you, or your house" Later, in "The Gold Key" as well, she feels necessary the use of this warm, emphatically individual manner of generalization: "I mean you. / I mean me" (Sexton 223) or "My face, your face" (Sexton 35) in order to establish a very personal contact, a bonding.

Anne Sexton's poetry has a general quality of tenderness. To a certain degree tenderness is present almost in all of her poems. She herself felt this, in an interview she compared herself to Sylvia Plath: "She had dared to write hate poems, the one thing I had never dared to write. [...] I think the poem 'Cripples and Other Stories,' is evidence of a hate poem somehow, though no one could ever write a poem to compare with her "Daddy"⁶. However, those poems are very rare in which this tenderness sets the basic tone. "For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further" is one of these rare works.

One of the main reasons for her gentleness is not that she is not sure of being right, but that she needs the love and approval of her beloved mentor, and more widely, the approval of her readers. Maxine Kumin interprets this poem as an attempt "to seek to make peace"⁷. With her tenderness she gives weight to the expression in the above cited motto, that we carry Jocasta "in our heart", which means simultaneously the internalization of common fears and values and our

5 Sexton - Ames 43.

6 Kevles 12.

7 Kumin, "How It Was" XXIV.

love for them. Anne Sexton goes as far as to say that if the reader is not ready to receive her gift, she will stop writing, she will stop throwing her insights at us:

And if you turn away
 because there is no lesson here
 I will hold my awkward bowl,
 with all its cracked stars shining
 like a complicated lie,
 and fasten a new skin around it
 as if I were dressing an orange
 or a strange sun.
 (Sexton 34-35)

The images which express her "generous" offer are remarkably ambivalent. Indications of opposites like the sun and stars, night and day, undressing at night and dressing up in the morning, etc. are present. Also there is a great tension created by the antagonism between the cruelty directed toward her own self, the pain of the vivisection conducted, and the tender protection directed toward others, which manifests itself even in a readiness to hide the results of the brutal inquiry if others are scared away by all the ugliness and pain involved. However, by rendering the image "dressing an orange" instead of peeling it, she stresses the unnaturalness of this act. Moreover, in the last part of the poem she restates the advantages of her poems and she even adds a warning by calling attention to a very possible motivation for our intense rejection: our own fears, because we see ourselves in her troubles. We are very ready to make the necessary connection.

At another level of the poem she shows her own vulnerability, as if to emphasize the heroic aspect of her determination in order to show its value. She compares her delicate head to a glass bowl which she taps against the wall. She even caresses it by saying "It is a small thing," which phrase, despite the punctuation, simultaneously refers to the scale of the quest and to her head. The punctuation merely sets the primary direction of the reader's train of thought.

At the time of writing *Transformations* she wasn't interested in the heroic nature of the quest any longer. Her opinion changed in another respect as well. In "The Gold Key," she states that the poems are merely devices to conduct the search: the key opens "this book of odd tales," and not the means to change the reality that we discover with their help. This view is drastically less ambitious than her previous direct action-provoking one, as can be illustrated by the following statement of hers:

That poem about losing his daughter brought me to face some of the facts about my own life. I had lost a daughter, lost her because I was too sick to keep her. After I read the poem, "Heart's Needle," I ran up to my mother-in-law's house and brought my daughter home. That's what a poem should do - move people to action.⁸

In the book *Transformations*, the narrator, "the middle aged witch," accomplishes brilliantly what she is contracted for. During the interpretation and retelling of seventeen fairy tales, she discovers extremely important social and psychological truths. For example, she investigates and exposes the terrible and degrading roles forced on women. The speaker does not offer any solution, but she believes or hopes that for others the sharp presentation of the devastating situation can work as an alarm, as an urge to change it. A positive outcome is possible but she also lets us know that for her personally this quest ends in total defeat. We can learn this from the last poem of the collection: "Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)" (Sexton 290-295). This demonstrates that the result of the essential quest is uncertain. The discovered and carefully articulated truth can be empowering, but it can be paralyzing as well. This will be addressed in detail later.

Another possible reason for not spending time on explaining the role of the quest, besides the "tiredness of explaining," could be the fact that the primary audience of the poems are fellow mental patients. In this way she addresses directly this part, this aspect of the readers, *viz.* the prospective mental patient. And on that point there is nothing to lose, the only positive action one can take is the search for some kind of truth. In other words, to take on the task of a thorough analysis of present and past, the mental, personal and social situations which brought him/her there.

The total failure of the thoroughly conducted scientifically psychological quest shown in *Transformations* brought about a completely new attitude of Anne Sexton to the quest. One can detect that the search for God, a previously latent theme, becomes her main concern in the last three books she prepared for publication: *The Book of Folly*, *The Death Notebooks* and *The Awful Rowing Toward God*. The opening poem of *The Death Notebooks*, "Gods" (Sexton 349), shows it in summary.

⁸ Kevles 8.

In the poem Anne Sexton enumerates the inevitable stages of a heroic, large-scale quest, which is at the same time naive, ordinary, and above all ridiculous. She begins the search for gods according to a child's imagination, and rushes through to find answers in science, art, other belief systems, fashionable Eastern religions, and pantheism. The poem is ironic and self-ironic, as it describes so accurately the stages of this intellectual journey experienced by many who grow up in a western, Judeo-Christian based cultural tradition and value-system. In my opinion the most shockingly ironic and accurate part is: "She prayed in all the churches of the world / and learned a great deal about culture." The major difference between this and her earlier attitude toward the process of the quest is not the change of goal, but that she is now searching for something which is entirely outside of her, an objective truth. She is not taking an active part any longer in the creation of the truth she is looking for. The only action she takes is the ridiculous and totally unnecessary monumental search. The needlessness of "going out" is stated, since at the end she finds the gods in her own lavatory. On the one hand, Anne Sexton insists on her earlier premise that the places where truth can be discovered are not "beautiful", but disgusting and shameful. She creates extra tension by using the most distinguished word for the bathroom. On the other hand, it is entirely outside of her self. It means that looking out is necessary even if "going out" is not.

Now let us concentrate on the *Transformations*. Fairy tales have been in the center of public interest in the second half of the twentieth century. Naturally, this culmination was preceded by a long tradition represented by Freud, Jung, Walt Disney, etc. The turn to this subject can be illustrated with the massive volume of works done in the sixties and seventies, widely ranging in style, genre, and aim, from a scientific analysis, through experimental fiction, to literature. Works hall marking this tendency include Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Donald Barthelme's *Snow White*⁹, and Bruno Bettelheim's epoch-making book, *The Uses of Enchantment*. Bettelheim approaches fairy tales from a single psychoanalytical point of view, that is, he investigates the ways in which these tales help children to overcome the psychological obstacles that growing up imposes on them. They address such severe problems as Oedipal conflicts, separation, individuation, sibling rivalry, parental rejection, sexual awakening, oral fixation, fear of being annihilated, and so on. Bruno Bettelheim proves that,

9 Middlebrook 333.

first of all, the tales take the children's problems very seriously, and secondly, that they provide models, and show the possibility of overcoming their difficulties.

The heated debates which *The Uses of Enchantment* provoked gave yet another strong impulse to the thorough analysis of all aspects and implications of fairy tales. On the one hand, there are several other possible and in fact necessary points of view, like the ethnographic, historical¹⁰, literal, etc., approaches. On the other hand, a crucially important body of criticism of Bettelheim's work has been done by feminist and Marxist scholars who accepted one of Bettelheim's main points, that these tales help children to integrate themselves into society, to understand and internalize its value-system, and are concerned about and appalled by the values that are encoded in the tales and reinforced in new generations. They realized that fairy tales, as effective part of the socialization process, help to preserve the social and gender status quo¹¹. In other words, they convey negative values things as well as positive ones. For example, they prescribe restricted social roles for women.

Thus by dealing with fairy tales, Anne Sexton met a deep need of the public. This was the main reason for the resounding success of the collection. Not only did it turn out to be Anne Sexton's most popular book, it was also adapted and staged quickly as an opera by the Minnesota Opera Company.

The funny colloquial language used and the pop art¹² style she employs indicate unquestionably that the book was intended to be popular. However, precisely because of the easily perceptible differences from her earlier works, her publishers and the poet were afraid at first of the reaction of the audience¹³. Thus Anne Sexton was forced to think over thoroughly her relationship toward this book. This is reflected in a charming letter addressed to Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., in which she asks him to write an introduction to her *Transformations*.

The enclosed manuscript is of my new book of poems. I've taken Grimms' *Fairy Tales* and "Transformed" them into something all of my own [...] I feel my *Transformations* needs an introduction telling of the

10 Cf. Darnton.

11 Cf. Bottigheimer, Gilbert - Gubar, Franz.

12 She connects her work to pop art by the last lines of "The Gold Key":

As if an enlarged paper clip
could be a piece of sculpture.
(And it could.)

13 Sexton - Ames 359.

value of my (one could say) rape of them. Maybe that's an incorrect phrase. I do something very modern to them (have you ever tried to describe your own work? I find I am tongue-tied). They are small, funny and horrifying. Without quite meaning to I have joined the black humorists. I don't know if you know my other work, but humor was never a very prominent feature... terror, deformity, madness and torture were my bag. But this little universe of Grimm is not that far away. I think they end up being as wholly personal as my most intimate poems, in a different language, a different rhythm, but coming strangely, for all their story sound, from as deep a place [...]14

The letter shows clearly that Anne Sexton was very well aware of the fact that, although the book *Transformations* is different from her earlier works, it still fits coherently into her oeuvre.

The organic continuity in terms of subject matter between Anne Sexton's earlier works and *Transformations* was ensured by her method of selecting tales to "transform."¹⁵ She describes this in an 1973 interview:

...and if I got, as I was reading it, some unconscious message that I had something to say, what I had fun with were the prefatory things, ... that's where ... I expressed whatever it evoked in me - and it had to evoke something in me or I couldn't do it.¹⁶

It is remarkable that Anne Sexton, whose valuable and psychologically valid insights Bruno Bettelheim praised¹⁷, and whose work antedates his approach and the bulk of scholarly analyses provoked by it, is concerned simultaneously with the psychological and social aspects of the tales. Moreover, she is able to ensure that the psychological content of the tales and the social criticism coincide and amplify each other's shocking effect. This achievement is most evident in her obsession with food and devouring. This theme is the keynote of the book.¹⁸ The tales are jam-packed with the imagery of food and eating. Among the senses, taste and touch are addressed and whipped up by the tales most often. Thus the close connection between infantile oral fixation and consumer society presents itself

14 Quoted by Sexton - Ames 367.

15 The title was suggested by Maxime Kumin. Cf. Kumin "A Friendship Remembered" 237.

16 Hall 92.

17 Bettelheim 412.

18 "As Sexton noted to friends, fairy tales - both the originals and her own - were full of food imagery and mouth imagery, and the theme is keynoted in the dedication of *Transformations*: 'To Linda, who reads Hesse and drinks clam chowder'" Cf. Middlebrook 335-336.

naturally. The society she presents is an ultimately dreary, violent, and infantile one, in the sense that oral fixation /consuming has such an important role. One feels that to be a devourer or to be devoured, or both, are the only options, as in the case of the witch in "Hansel and Gretel" (Sexton 286-290). Infantilism manifests itself in the close connection between eating, killing and sexuality. In other words, the world Anne Sexton shows us has the "id"¹⁹ as its main governing force, and the "id's" needs hide behind all actions.

Another marvelous poetical achievement of Anne Sexton is that her fairy tale versions act on both the conscious and unconscious levels of the reader's mind. On one hand, by interpreting the tales she forces the readers to understand some psychological and social messages which she articulates for him/her, on the other hand, by retelling the tales quite faithfully in terms of plots, she lets them communicate their messages to his/her unconscious as well.

We know from Maxine Kumin that Anne Sexton wanted to know, and thus to analyze the original Grimm tales, so she asked Kumin's "daughter to translate and retranslate some tales from the German so that she could be sure she had gotten every final variant on the story"²⁰. This shows that the real challenge is to show that the tales contain extremely personal meanings for the poet as they are, they do not need to be altered, only interpreted. This conception is yet another answer of Anne Sexton to the common charge against her which she mentioned in "For John, Who Begg Me Not to Enquire Further," namely that she was concerned with too small, too personal problems. She calls attention to the fact that she could take traditional material intact from the common heritage of our western Judeo-Christian culture, something which is unquestionably outside her personal history, and she could demonstrate that it still concerns her.²¹ Thus she implies the universality of her own experience.

To increase the feeling of familiarity and also as a device of interpretation Anne Sexton modernizes the tales. It is not only the language which is twentieth century, but to understand her images and allusions one has to be familiar with the twentieth century culture, especially with its great traumas. For example, the book is filled with references to wars, especially to the Second World War. Alicia Ostriker calls attention to the naturalness of the process of adapting tales in order

19 Pleh 179; Bettelheim 51.

20 Kumin "A Friendship Remembered" 237.

21 "Sexton's interpretations discover and release elements already implicit in the stories." Cf. Ostriker 259.

to make them locally meaningful. This is "what peasants and poets have done with traditional lore for millennia. The stories would never survive without it"²². The anachronistic language is partly responsible for the book's double impact: it shocks and entertains the reader at the same time.

Another form of modernization through bathetic humor is shown in the following passage:

Gretel,
 seeing her moment in history,
 shut fast the oven,
 locked fast the door,
 fast as Houdini,
 and turned the oven on the bake.
 The witch turned as red
 as the Jap flag.
 Her blood began to boil up
 like Coca-Cola.
 Her eyes began to melt.
 She was done for.
 Altogether a memorable incident.
 (Sexton 289)

The last statement with its cold, low-key tone contradicts the strong emotion aroused by the previous lines. Thus the last line works like a little ironic snap.

Although most of the critics emphasize the differences between Anne Sexton's earlier work and *Transformations*²³ I would like to emphasize the continuities and the similarities among her works. There is continuity not only in terms of psychological subject matter or in terms of the omnipresence of her delightful "black humor," which seemingly she herself fails to recognize²⁴, but most interestingly also in her instinctive tendency toward the symbolism and the imagery of fairy tales and her concern about women's roles. These tendencies manifest themselves clearly in her "program" poem, "Her Kind" (Sexton 11-16).

This is an early poem of hers appearing in the first book she published: *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*. It was intended to be a key poem in the first place, since Anne Sexton needed an emphatic topic-poem, around which all the other

22 Ostriker 259.

23 Ostriker 255.

24 Cf. Sexton-Ames 367; "It's about time I showed some signs of humor" (Sexton-Ames 365).

poems in the first part of the book could be organized²⁵. The poem did not only set the keynote of her first book, but it became the "program" poem of her entire oeuvre. She was well aware of the summing-up nature of "Her Kind" and used it to identify herself: she included this poem as part of the provocative, spectacular, nearly ritual beginnings of her public readings:

Anne Sexton liked to arrive about ten minutes late for her own performances: let the crowd work up a little anticipation. She would saunter to the podium, light a cigarette, kick off her shoes, and in a throaty voice say, 'I'm going to read a poem that tells you what kind of a poet I am, what kind of a woman I am, so if you don't like it you can leave.' Then she would launch into her signature poem: 'Her Kind.'²⁶

The topic of the poem is the accurate description of the awful roles available for women in our society: the witch, the madonna (the virgin, the mother, the home-maker aspects) and the whore. All these roles are presented in *Transformations* as well. The important aspect now is that she finds fairy tale images most appropriate to describe the roles: the witch's image, which dominates the first stanza, and the allusion to Snow White in the second.

The poem makes it clear that the problem with rolecasting is twofold. First of all, the roles themselves are terrifying. All of them, even those which seem to be nice at the first glimpse. For instance, the Snow White scene full of nice cozy soft words, nouns and adjectives like worm and silk also contains words to contradict these and transmit the lurking horror, such as worms and whining. The other infuriating element is the mere existence of these prefabricated roles.

Although the poem is especially powerful there is a certain feeling of tenderness about it which works against the shock of the revelation. Maybe its tenderness manifests itself only in the full and serious attention she gives to the problem. She enumerates these roles very objectively, although admitting that she knows them from inside. The mere fact that she takes the issue seriously is so unusual, and the finality accompanied with simplicity as she states: "a woman like that is misunderstood." She does not open this issue up for discussion, she simply and firmly states it. By this, she confirms a lot of female experiences, validates and provides background to a lot of thoughts and feelings. On top of it all, despite the presence of the word "I" and the continuous process of personal identification, the

25 Middlebrook 113.

26 Middlebrook XIX.

poem succeeds in giving a safe sense of unimpassioned discovery of a social law. This distance and the air of objectivity make it a perfect program poem.

The refrain, the constant identification of the speaker with those roles ("I have been her kind."), serves as a constant consolation. It feels as if she is taking the reader by the hand, and helps her to identify as well. It also emphasizes the fact that these roles are stages and can be surpassed. Although it does not promise anything positive to expect especially if we take into consideration that the last stanza's penultimate line ends with the word "to die", still the roles are so terrible that the mere fact that it can be surpassed is a relief.

The surprising order of the stanzas suggests the arbitrariness of the roles. The mentioning of many separate parts of the body (fingers, arms, tights) lends a touch of horror by alluding vaguely to an autopsy.

I wish to turn my attention back now to the book of *Transformations* and take a close look at the "bleak, devastating" roles for women available for the heroines of Anne Sexton's versions of fairy tales. "In these poems Sexton's protagonists are silenced, acted upon, and they acquiesce almost helplessly in continuing silence themselves. The devalued products of patriarchy, of a process of socialization that inscribes male power, are viewed as commodities, as objects [...]"²⁷

The young women in the stories are either "lifeless dolls" like Cinderella and Snow White, who behave exactly according to the roles prescribed for them, or if they show any sign of personality they get defeated totally, like the protagonists of "The Twelve Dancing Princesses" (Sexton 276-281) or the princess in the fairy tale "The Frog Prince" (Sexton 281-286). In the tales passivity, helplessness and beauty are rewarded, or rather seem to be rewarded, whereas actions draw severe punishment. Active, at least partly self-conscious women are seen as evil, scheming witches, and Anne Sexton renders perceptible their "well deserved" physical or spiritual punishments with great accuracy and cruelty. For example she gives graphic descriptions of the death of Snow White's stepmother:

The wicked witch was invited to the wedding feast
and when she arrived there were
red-hot iron shoes,
in the manner of red-hot roller skates,
clamped upon her feet.

²⁷ Leventen 136.

First your toes will smoke
 and then your heels will turn black
 and you will fry upward like a frog,
 [...]
 (Sexton 228-229)

and of the unbearable loneliness of Mother Gothel:

As for Mother Gothel
 her heart shrank to the size of a pin,
 never again to say: Hold me, my young dear,
 hold me,
 and only as she dreamt of the yellow hair
 did moonlight sift into her mouth.
 (Sexton 249)

However, there is one act of rebellion against the emptiness of the society depicted. Very gentle, isolated, but none the less beautiful: the tortured queen in "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" (Sexton 224-229) dances, and the protagonists of "The Twelve Dancing Princesses" also choose dance as a means to rebel. In other words these active women set dancing, which represents beauty, joy, and art, against the whole mutilating patriarchal value-system.

Perfect marriages, the ultimate reward which the characters can hope for in Anne Sexton's disillusioned interpretation mean boredom, which is a death-like state, as the endings of the "The White Snake" (Sexton 229-232) and "Cinderella" (Sexton 255-258) confirm:

They played house, little charmers,
 exceptionally well.
 So of course,
 They were placed in a box
 and painted identically blue
 and thus passed their days
 living happily ever after -
 a kind of coffin,
 a kind of blue funk.
 Is it not?
 (Sexton 232)

Cinderella and the prince
 lived, they say, happily ever after,
 like two dolls in a museum case

[...]
 their darling smiles pasted on for eternity.
 Regular Bobbsey twins.
 That story.
 (Sexton 258)

Marriage can also mean imprisonment, like in the case of the princess in the tale of "The Frog Prince." Moreover, marriages are not even safe, considering the inevitable outcome stated in connection to Snow White:

Meanwhile Snow White held court,
 rolling her china-blue doll eyes open and shut
 and sometimes referring to her mirror
 as women do.
 (Sexton 229)

The main themes of the tale titled "The Maiden Without Hands" (Sexton 273-276) are misogyny and mutilation. The three ill-famed manifestations of misogyny (foot-binding, suttee, and genital mutilation), to which the women's movement has called attention, pervade Anne Sexton's work: the main image of "The Moss of His Skin" (Sexton 26-27) is suttee. Her legs and foot-binding become major images of her inventory, like a part of the first stanza of the poem "Barefoot" shows:

Loving me with my shoes off
 means loving my long brown legs,
 sweet dears, as good as spoons,
 and my feet, those two children
 let out to play naked. Intricate nubs,
 my toes. *No longer bound.*
 [Italics mine.] (Sexton 199-200)

And in "The Maiden Without Hands" she writes about mutilation. In fact not only here, since mutilation and feet are important themes in the tale of "Cinderella" as well. The protagonist of "The Maiden Without Hands" lets herself be mutilated, but Cinderella's evil stepsisters do it to themselves in order to meet the prince's requirements. This element touches upon the question of internalization of patriarchal values. Society "enables" the sisters to take an active part in their own mutilation, since that contains the possibility - not even the certainty - of a reward. Even the agents who convey these cruel values are women

who have internalized the same set of rules earlier. In this case the agent is the mother of the victims, just as genital mutilation is performed on young Kikuyu girls by older women. The chain of associations flows from the necessity and beauty of small feet, through foot binding, and restriction of movement, to disability, and "a desire to own the maiming" (Sexton 273), leads us back to "The Maiden Without Hands."

"The Maiden Without Hands" is a unique poem, in the sense that this provides the only occasion where the narrator expresses her desperate anger toward the protagonist in the prologue: "If someone burns out your eye / I will take your socket / and use it for an ashtray." It is interesting to note that with the exception of Briar Rose, the narrator is not sympathetic with the helpless female protagonists of the tales at all. She does not even take pity on them. However, she expresses her deepest sympathy and even identifies with the witch figures, with the mad and consequently defenceless Iron Hans, and with the deformed, schizophrenic and impotent Rumpelstiltskin. Moreover, she insists upon the identification, or at least on forming some kind of intensive bonding between her listeners and the victims of the Wonderful Musician, the protagonists of "The Twelve Dancing Princesses," and the middle-aged wife of the miller in "The Little Peasant" (Sexton 237-242). She evokes this directly in the prologues, and she also acts upon the need of the reader to identify with someone. The poet demonstrates that the character through whom a reader would normally penetrate the story is impossible to relate to, and by the same token, she offers a suitable candidate by assigning a problem to that character which is likely to strike us immediately. In the case of "The Little Peasant" it is the problem of staying young:

*The men and women
cry to each other.
Touch me,
my pancake,
and make me young.
And thus
like many of us,
the parson
and the miller's wife
lie down in sin.
[Italics mine.] (Sexton 237)*

The author uses exactly the same technique to ensure our identification with Mother Gothel: "A woman / who loves a woman / is forever young" (Sexton 244-245). The other way of forcing the reader to identify is the frequent use of generalizations such as are seen in the quote above or in the first lines, "Inside many of us / is a small old man," of "Rumpelstiltskin" (Sexton 233-237).

The poet also uses a peculiar, but extremely effective, method of penetrating the tales which clearly relates to the game of identification which she plays with the readers and with herself. She creates many personae, assigning separate voices to different aspects of herself, among whom the most dominating is the "middle-aged witch." An interesting example of her manipulation with her personae is that she simultaneously enumerates herself as one of the mad people she introduces in the prologue of "Iron Hans" (Sexton 249-255), and as their mother: "I am mother of the insane. / Let me give you my children."

Although my main concern in this section has been to show the terrible roles available for women in the society described by Anne Sexton, her criticism of the society goes deeper. She indicates that in this patriarchal society which she depicts everybody is trapped and the whole thing is wrong. Fear is the main motivation, the male protagonist in "The Maiden Without Hands", for example, is attracted to the maiming because he is terrified: "A desire to own the maiming / so that not one of us butchers / will come to him with crowbars." Moreover, she shows that marriage is awful for both participants. After all, they both get "painted identically blue" (Sexton 232), and become "Regular Bobbsey Twins" (Sexton 258). Men clearly oppress women in the society reflected in the tales, but they do not enjoy themselves either. This society is a trap where everybody is caught.

She refers to specific twentieth-century American problems, like putting old people away, with icy sarcasm:

On his way to the castle
he met an old old woman.
Age, for a change, was of some use.
She wasn't stuffed in a nursing home.
(Sexton 279)

(This old woman is, incidentally another example of the women who help patriarchy by betraying other women.) Anne Sexton is also concerned with social problems as old as human society itself, such as the exploitation of, and cruelty toward, defenceless people, which is also one of the main themes of "Iron Hans."

Critics who express their dissatisfaction with the editing and structuring of Anne Sexton's other books, praise these very aspects of *Transformations*²⁸. Yet even they fail to realize that there is a deep underlying structure to the collection. We can even detect a personal story through the analysis of this structure. The clues given us to conduct this analysis are in the last poem of the collection, "Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)," which is a unique poem in a number of ways. It is the only tale which has both a prologue and an epilogue. In fact, the ratio between tale and commentary is reversed: the commentary is considerably longer than the actual tale. In addition, Briar Rose is the only young female protagonist in the book who has a voice of her own, and whose mind the reader is allowed to see into.

The change in the proportion between tale and commentary formally mirrors a tragic and ironic shift. Also, the powerful analyzing voice of the "middle-aged witch" becomes at the end the thin voice of a frightened child. To state what happens here plainly, the narrator who has transformed sixteen fairy tales gets transformed by the last one. This means that this was the very tale which struck her: this was her tale. The truth she discovered was too overwhelming, it was powerful enough to trap her in the "time machine"²⁹ - as the poem suggests, forever.

The poem works like a whirlpool, drawing her into itself and trapping her within its circle, where all actions repeat themselves endlessly. The poem straightforwardly states that she needs to be awakened over and over again by the prince, she utters the same words every time, and the poet makes the same highly ironic comment every time, that "she's out of prison!"

The tale itself is a shocking description of incest and the feelings of the abused child. The truth she revealed is unbearable partly because of the guilt associated with it. The guilt about having invited incest to happen, having in some way initiated it. Thus her natural Oedipal feelings, because of the abusive father became her worst source of guilt. It is somewhat similar to what happens when the body's immune system does not work, so the organism is killed by the bacteria with which it normally lives in symbiosis, i.e. in a mutually nurturing and satisfying relationship.

28 Cf. Ostriker 253; Vendler 440.

29 For a deep analysis of the concepts of the different levels of time, which are present in the poem see Miller 288.

The last transformation which changes the narrator into a frightened child shows the ultimate failure of the whole inquiry. In "The Gold Key" we were invited precisely to the time "voyage" described in "Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)". Thus this voyage leads to total defeat for the speaker. She discovers an overwhelming truth which she cannot cope with. Desperate loneliness of the endless time loop radiates from the poem. The book seems to conclude with the feeling that it is not enough to uncover the truth if it is so devastating.

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