

White America Then and Now through Anne Sexton's *Transformations*: A Close Reading¹

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Abstract: *This article examines Anne Sexton's transformations of Grimm's Fairy Tales in her eponymous poem collection from 1971 with which the American poet makes a harsh commentary on White America of the times. Through a close reading of selected tales, I will establish a relationship between the situation then and now, which underscores the relevance of Sexton's unexpected ferocious critique of white American culture and attack on a certain former political figure – Harry S. Truman. Given that Sexton was already a well-known confessional poet, Transformations seemed to signal a change of voice – from the personal to the impersonal, but as Sexton herself argued, the poems (tales) in the collection were as personal as anything else she had written. Adopting this perspective, the article claims that Sexton has succeeded in making important comments on the epoch, which have not lost their relevance, while holding on to her tried and true confessional mode. Thus, through autofiction she managed to create a significant document for her times which has remained in cultural memory as a point of reference, a mirror against which we can see the progress we have made within the framework of the tales' universalia.*

Keywords: *confessional; transformations; lived experience; tales; universal; autofiction;*

Changing from a humble unknown housewife into an acclaimed national poet at the end of the 1960s (a 1967 Pulitzer Prize winner), Anne Sexton underwent a true Cinderella-like metamorphosis and her poetry collection *Transformations* from 1971 confirmed not only her strong poetic voice realized through the power of the confessional, but also her newfound ability to use lived experience as a political stance. The choice of the subject was both original and very effective – Grimm's *Fairy Tales* applied to early 1970s America where the specificities of German folklore turned out to have a capacity for the universal and where the Tales proved to be a fertile ground for poignant commentaries on the current American culture. Labelled “cheekily nihilistic and cheerfully cynical” (Langer), Sexton's elegant presentation of the astonishing transformations has received due recognition – not only in the times when the collection appeared but in the 21st century as well, as attested to by Amanda Golden, who in her *reassessment* of the poet from the year 2016

¹ Based on the author's monograph *Feminine Selves in Sylvia Plath's Prose and Poetry: The Perspective of Lived Experience in Fiction* (2021). – a. n.

acknowledges that Sexton had gone way beyond the “instinctual poet” (Spivack 55) that she once was, claiming, “Sexton’s skillful employment of the fairy tale genre is one of the most memorable and accessible aspects of her body of work” (Golden 12). It is enough to recall that only 3 years later Sexton put an end to her own life and her ingenious rewriting of the Tales, while having “a deeper significance than her own troubled psyche” (Gill 17), the writing originally suggested by Sexton’s favorite psychiatrist, Martin T. Orne (Dr Martin), as a therapy, offered no cure.² Despite the medical failure for the author, it did succeed where fiction should succeed – in creating engaging texts for the readers’ immersion in a magical world which can be delightful, uplifting, strangely edifying in its transgressive ways while remaining often challenging, even cathartic. The best way to describe the Tales with one word was probably provided by Philip McGowan, who in his *Geography of Grief* calls them “metatales” (McGowan 75), since their oppositional structure “sets one language or literary register against another” (75) And that allows Sexton to sound so modern, at the same time universal, still nation-specific, as if becoming a wise anonymous oral narrator whose tales are miraculously given a reading form through the written text, or as McGowan puts it, “where Sexton’s poetic art finds a voice that speaks outside of language” (75). Moreover, the fairy-tale universals and magic atmosphere certainly allowed Sexton to get her messages across in a manner that was perceived as less offensive to prudish male and female readers alike, acquiring a voice that aimed at authority and globality, something that only the male confessionals (the likes of Robert Lowell, John Berryman and W. D. Snodgrass) had been able to achieve until then, the confessing woman being seen as “testifying only to her own anguish [...] simply revealing the awfulness of femininity which was ‘known’ to be there all along” (Rees-Jones 285). If there was some reluctant acceptance by such a public, it came with the first reading. Jeanne Marie Beaumont observes the different levels of understanding of the Tales, which become accessible through reciting and rereading, and succinctly summarizes the accumulated effect:

I was subsequently able to return to *Transformations* with a new appreciation of it as a collection of small comic masterpieces: grotesque, erotic, sly, and playful at their best. With each rereading, the deeper into the woods I am able to travel with them, not just as poems, but as markers for where Sexton was in her life and craft as she wrote them, and as a particularly revealing document of mid-century culture

² While writing may not have a therapeutic effect on the writer, the written text may have such an effect on the reader – see Boev, *Feminine Selves in Sylvia Plath’s Prose and Poetry* (67).

and its adult psyches, for they are nothing if not culturally and psychologically preoccupied. (Beaumont 218)

In this article through a close reading of selected tales I make a claim that Sexton's cunning critique of her times in said collection is still relevant in the post-pandemic, post-Trump / possibly *avant*-Trump America. Also, I argue that the seemingly obscured personal experience in *Transformations* has allowed Sexton to speak even more powerfully by disguising herself as the witchy omniscient narrator with what Kamran Javadizadeh calls “an institutional voice” (Javadizadeh 73), which can sound “both personal and impersonal at once” (Javadizadeh 80). In a more veiled manner than what Linda Sexton ironically calls “my mother's flagrant literary exposures” (L. Sexton 52), Anne Sexton had to project her own reality against the German folklore and yet acquire a voice that would give her a storytelling authority within that American reality, “one who tells tales in the community, about the community and on behalf of the community” (Beaumont 219). However, that the Tales were as personal and heartfelt as the rest of her work we can see in a letter of hers to Paul Brooks, where she intimates, “it would further be a lie to say that they weren't about me, because they are just as much about me as my other poetry” (Sexton 325). As if against her will, Sexton shares with Kurt Vonnegut, the author of the “Forward”, that she is completely aware of the purport of the poems and what they amount to, writing, it seems, in spite of herself:

I do something very modern to them [...]. They are small, funny and horrifying. Without quite meaning to I have joined the black humorists [...]. 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. (Sexton 330).

In *The Matrix* (1999) Neo is offered two pills by the rebel leader, Morpheus – a red and a blue one with the enigmatic warning: “You take the blue pill...the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill...you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes” (*The Matrix*). This could serve as a fair description of what would happen if a child could choose between the original Grimm's fairy tales and Sexton's reading of them despite what could appear to be a justified objection – the deceptive closeness to the original (Beaumont 217). The first thing that Sexton does is present the storyteller who is introduced thus: “The speaker in this case/ is a middle-aged witch, me” (Sexton 223) so we have everything from the perspective of a witch who is potentially going through a witchy middle-age crisis and the resulting transformations are

a result of that. In “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs” the speaker addresses the issue of the oriental appreciation that Snow White commands in the Western world which unifies Western and Eastern reception as being identical, thus insisting that both men and women from these two worlds subscribe to stereotyped patriarchy: “No matter what life you lead/ the virgin is a lovely number” (224), which idolizes virgins. Sexton’s Snow White, and Grimm’s for that matter, is no intellectual, unlike Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* (*La Belle et la Bête*) “cheeks as fragile as cigarette paper,/ arms and legs made of Limoges/ lips like Vin du Rhône,/ rolling her china-blue doll eyes/ open and shut” (224), thus ridiculing the original wishful creation of the girl by the mother who pricks her finger with a needle and drops of blood fall on the white snow. Furthermore, Sexton suggests that this symbolic purity is just an illusion – Snow White acts like a good girl during the day, but when everyone is asleep, including herself, she has wild sexual fantasies welcoming a Freudian interpretation: “shut for the thrust/ of the unicorn” (224). Fantasizing leaves her visibly untarnished and pure for the world: “white as a bonefish”, the simile strongly implying that she is dead in her artificiality and false pretenses even though everyone, including herself, is unaware of that. Snow White is also given her age – 13, which criticizes not only America’s perceived worship of virgins, but also their ever-attenuating age significance in the epoch (also reflected in Nabokov’s *Lolita* from 1955), being in her very early teens. As such, the virgin is seen as precious commodity, but at the same time, already somewhat arcane. The evil stepmother in Sexton is the same despotic figure as in Grimm’s tales since she condemns Snow White to death by hacking with an axe, expressing the desire to eat the virgin’s heart, a possible reincarnation of the blood-thirsty Elizabeth Bathory who believed in bathing in virgins’ blood as a method for remaining continually rejuvenated. Sexton, however, suggests that in the stepmother lives any other woman, only here her unspoken desires are externalized for everyone to see, and that women are fiercely competitive with one another, an idea present in the original text as well. Out in the world and away from the stepmother, Snow White provokes sexual fantasies in all animals: “and at each stood a hungry wolf,/ his tongue lolling out like a worm./ The birds called out lewdly [...] and the snakes hung down in hoops/ each a noose for her sweet white neck” (226). Something else that needs to be discussed is Sexton’s emphasis on the white color. There can be multiple interpretations here: the animals themselves, for instance, could be members of other races, some of them admiring her, others wishing to eliminate her as a weird mythological creature, like the lascivious unicorn from her dreams. Once in the dwarfs’ house, and not needing to play to any decorum, Snow White reveals herself as not so different from her stepmother: “Snow White ate seven chicken livers” (226), thus implying Snow White’s ravenous nature, being wonderfully unaware of the original tale’s conventions – that she should

always be a paragon young lady, rendering herself attractive for the male gaze and patriarchal appetites.

When the stepmother in disguise reaches the presumed haven for the runaway stepdaughter, the dwarfs' abode, she fastens the lacing very tightly around Snow White's bodice in a covert desire to stifle her stepdaughter's burgeoning femininity. The second attempt on her life is through a poisoned comb (a curved scorpion, a little detail by Sexton) – an attack on a prominent feminine attribute. The poisoned apple – the enlightened/ gluttonous woman, if knowledge can be poison, finally does the trick (the three attempts identical with the original). The rest of the story follows the original almost exactly, but we have a nicely knitted concluding loop: “Meanwhile Snow White held court,/ rolling her china-blue doll eyes open and shut/ and sometimes referring to her mirror/ as women do” (229).

In this story, presented in verse and through the mouth of the middle-aged witch, the speaker, Sexton accentuates the profound universality of the tale, making small but significant changes to the original. As Sylvia Plath said in her *Journals*, “we're not always right and pure” (Plath 47), referring to America as the white America that dropped the atomic bombs in Japan and that with its internal and foreign policies left both the USA and the world divided. With Sexton's transformation of Snow White, we have not the dazzling white maiden who is naïve and good-natured, but a regular white American girl who provokes both envy and admiration in the others, and who, upon a closer look, will be unveiled as unimpressive, with imperfections that will start appearing on her face, like on her stepmother's. She lacks intellect and, not having a good nature as an excuse for naiveté, she may be said to be devoid of intelligence as well, falling for the same traps as the original girl from Grimm's tale fell. But here, not being naïve (the unicorn dream), she is guilty of exaggerated women's vanity – the lacing and the comb; stupidity – not recognizing the scorpion curved into a comb; racism – not paying any special attention to the dwarfs despite the unicorn dream – she could accept a relationship with an unknown other, but only as a fantasy; and gluttony – not knowledge, earning Sexton's/ the speaker's comment “dumb bunny” (228) – since she does not take just a little from the dwarfs' soup, as any 19th century girl in a marrying age would have done (Dickens's angelic daughters are excellent examples³). This Snow White is a 1950s/1960s, early 1970s American girl who, not having anyone to control her, in the dwarfs' house, eats 7 chicken livers. Apart from the surfeit of the stomach's exertion, we should ask ourselves the question if they were cooked at all – no information in Sexton's poem about that. Despite numerous parodical variations of the tale where Snow White engages in some group orgies with the seven dwarfs, Sexton stays true to the original, but also

³ See Boev, “Anorexia Mirabilis Decoded” 40-53.

to her portrayal of American girls of the times, where whites would prefer love partners from the same race, and the same could be said about color people with the well-known notable exceptions. Finally, Sexton's Snow White follows in her stepmother's footsteps, and from the final lines we have reasons to believe that she will be as despotic and vain as her stepmother has been.

If we transpose the mid-20th century white girl in "Snow White" to our times of global insecurity, after the COVID-19 pandemic, the ongoing military conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East with their potentially dangerous spillover and escalation into a nuclear war, as well as to the Age of Trump, aka Post-Truth, in retrospect reaching to 2015, at least two high-profile cases of adult lewdness and sexual abuse come to the fore on American soil, which have involved as victims numerous girls and women of different color, still predominantly white: the Keith Raniere's NXVIM cult,⁴ which ended with its founder's sentencing to 120 years of imprisonment on October 27, 2020 and Jeffrey Epstein's multiple trials for sex trafficking of underage girls,⁵ which culminated with opening a case against him on July 6, 2019 and ending it with his death in prison (possibly murder) on August 10 in the same year. Epstein's case featured potentially culpable public figures from both sides of the Atlantic, among whom Donald Trump himself and Prince Andrew, Duke of York. While the former, despite the numerous ongoing trials against him, may yet become an American President for the second time, the latter was consequently stripped of his military affiliations and charitable patronages in 2022. In both cases, the offending men (the wolf and the unicorn) were assisted by willing women – Nancy Salzman, a former nurse (NXVIM) and Ghislaine Maxwell (Epstein's partner in crime), a socialite. A victim turned into offender was the *Smallville* American actress Allison Mack (NXVIM). While the first two women could be related to the knowing witch from Sexton's twisted tales, the third one was clearly a victim of her ignorance and naivete and could be related to Snow White's Wildean resisting a temptation – by yielding to it. Senseless food consumption underscoring a perceived lack of spirituality has been exposed as an evolving trend – from Morgan Spurlock's sequel to the 2004 *Supersize Me – Supersize Me 2: Holy Chicken* (2017) and other movies such as Stefanie Soechtig's *Fed Up* (2014).

Sexton attains new levels of satirical brilliance in "Rumpelstiltskin" where the evil imp is presented to the reader in the following manner, identifying with President Truman from the beginning of the 1950s: "Inside many of us/ is a small old man/ who wants to get out./ No bigger than a two-year-old/ whom you'd call lamb chop/ yet this one is old and deformed./ His head is okay/ but the rest of him wasn't Sanforized./ He is a monster of despair./

⁴ Two excellent documentaries provide insightful information on NXVIM – the TV series *Seduced: Inside the NXVIM cult* (2018-2020) and *The Vow* (2020-2022).

⁵ A very good documentary is *Jeffrey Epstein: Filthy Rich* (2020).

He is all decay./ He speaks up as tiny as an earphone/ with Truman's asexual voice:/ I am your dwarf/ I am the enemy within./ I am the boss of your dreams" (Sexton 233). Sexton's sharp satirical version underscores what has come to be known as the "Rumpelstiltskin Principle", which states: "the value and power of using personal names and titles is well established in psychology, management, teaching and trial law." The imp is conjured up out of the need for desperate actions when the girl in the fairy tale is challenged to prove in an isolated environment – a room where she is locked with a spinning wheel – that she can turn straw into gold. Sexton continues with the ventriloquistic presentation of Truman: "No. I am not the law in your mind, the grandfather of watchfulness./ I am the law of your members,/ the kindred of blackness and impulse./ See. Your hand shakes./ It is not palsy or booze./ It is your doppelgänger/ trying to get out./ Beware... Beware..." (233). This intrusive figure stunted into the shape of a dwarf lives within many Americans, which makes the people a nation possessed with Sexton's representation of Truman as an evil spirit, strongly suggesting that the politicians that get to govern, regardless of how hateful they become to their own people, inevitably resonate with most of them. The miller's daughter is yet another American girl: "Poor grape with no one to pick./ Luscious and round and slick./ Poor thing./ To die and never see Brooklyn" (233-4). The Truman-like dwarf is given additional traits of ugliness: "The door opened and in popped a dwarf./ He was as ugly as a wart" (234). Sexton takes her time to unveil many other unpleasant aspects to the president-imp in his Canterbury tale-like prologue, containing a blunt self-disclosure, no doubt a vitriolic critique of Truman's authorizing the use of the atomic bomb and praising it as "a lives' saver on both sides", as well as the intervention in the Korea War in 1950, and his rather authoritarian rough handling of the Railway Strike of the same year. To top it off, Truman was justly accused of cronyism, and in Sexton's story he is a rather garrulous little man seeking attention and complaining about the fact that he is childless: "I am a dwarf./ I have been exhibited on Bond Street/ and no child will ever call me Papa./ I have no private life. [...] I am your evil eye/ and no child will ever call me Papa" (234). Truman had had a child by then, but because of his rather short stature by American standards, he was not the representative American daddy of the 1950s.

Just like Chaucer's lively interactions among the pilgrims, the dwarf is upstaged by the American damsel in distress: "Stop this Papa foolishness,/ she cried. Can you perhaps/ spin straw into gold?" (234). The tale follows its original course and when the girl gives birth to a baby, the dwarf appears to claim it: "I have become a papa!/ Cried the little man" (235). Although she is ready to part with everything else, the dwarf is adamant. Sexton is again quite ironical of the girl, now queen: "The queen cried two pails of sea water./ She was as persistent/ as a Jehovah's Witness" (235) until the dwarf relents and

offers the guessing game, some of the names offered being again pejorative for the dwarf: “Spindleshanks? Spiderlegs?” (236). After guessing the name, the ending is way more brutal and sinister than the original story: “He stamped his right foot into the ground/ and sank in up to his waist./ Then he tore himself in two./ Somewhat like a split broiler./ He laid his two sides down on the floor,/ one part soft as a woman,/ one part a barbed hook,/ one part papa,/ one part Doppelgänger” (236).

Again, as with “Snow White”, Sexton does not deem it appropriate to make many changes to the original, preserving the plot and its wide folkloric appeal. However, by focusing on the dwarf with the key story elements in place, she allows the portrait of the president to emerge as a brilliant caricature which borrows complementary information from his actual presidency and appearance while the poem is being read. This open attack on the former American president appears strikingly bold, and one may wonder how the poem was even published in 1971, considering the reformulation that Robin Morgan had to make to be able to publish her accusation against Ted Hughes after 1972 in *Monster*. But perhaps an important British poet in the prime of his life, well known in the USA by that time also thanks to his suicidal wife, the poet Sylvia Plath, was worthy more than a former president aged 87 with only one year left to live. The president’s being psychologically and physically reduced to an evil dwarf in Sexton’s poem mirrors Truman’s perceived public image and also calls into question his tenability as a viable candidate in retrospect: he became known for his gambling, bourbon swilling and profane talking which occasionally resurfaced to the press – these were, of course, simply not known to the wide public before he became president, but one carries one’s habits with oneself regardless of the societal ascent or descent one takes. The vivisection Sexton makes of the self-destruct dwarf in the end literally and figuratively delivers the *coup de grâce* to the president, but also to all the Americans who appear to have elected a zoomorphic alien creature whose most human part is that of a “woman”, the rest of the four parts are indeed the constituents of fast-decaying bodies, containers of an unnamable evil as in the 3rd Season of *Twin Peaks* or of *Alien*.

The American girl who becomes mother in this poem is no different from Snow White, she has the same personality as the porcelain beauty, but we are to imagine that she must be a countryside girl. Being a miller’s daughter (as in the original), she is plump as a grape, and by marrying into wealth may not even manage to see the city of Brooklyn, remaining confined to a big family mansion – the palace of the king – which suggests that she is as good as dead to city culture. The birth of the child and the child’s ugliness, which she fails to recognize (“ugly as an artichoke/ but the queen thought him a pearl” (235)), further attests to her lack of intelligence. She is in all aspects ordinary and probably white. With this marriage of mediocrity to wealth, Sexton instills

the idea that the highest chances for continuation into the next generations stand girls of average intellectual capacities, and that their propagation through securing alliances with the well-off condemns the nation to regressing mediocrity, which is the United States' future. By contrast, the original tale has a neutral tone: there is no comment on the girl's intelligence, while her marrying the king and bearing him a child is a reflection of the collective consciousness of the people to establish a relationship between the ruler of the land and his subjects, thus producing an heir (the baby) who will be half noble, half peasant.

In today's America Donald Trump is the most likely candidate to win the presidency in 2024, in his campaign emphasizing on anti-immigration, anti-NATO rhetoric, which greatly disfavors parts of the non-white population of the USA, and which openly encourages a Russian attack on a NATO state. According to a recent speech of his, as many as 18 million people could see themselves deported, while "delinquent" (non-paying to the full) NATO states would have no protection from the USA. It is interesting to observe that Truman's short stature (1.75 m) is short only if compared to that of the presidents that followed: Eisenhower (1.79 m), John F. Kennedy (1.85 m), Lyndon Johnson (1.92 m), Nixon (1.82 m), and from the more recent ones: Obama (1.87 m), Trump (1.9 m) and Biden (1.83). Logically, Nikki Haley (1.68 m) keeps losing to Trump in the republicans' competition due to two main factors – first she is a woman (The USA have not had a single woman president yet out of 46 served), and second, she is inferior to Trump when it comes to height. If Truman's *asexual* voice and *unmanly*, often unglamorous, behavior were repugnant to Sexton, Trump has been consistently likened to a clown in a sinister circus, openly criticized in his presidency by public figures such as Stephen King. The numerous legal charges levelled against him (91),⁶ among which such of conspiracy to defraud the US and conspiracy against the rights of citizens, to which could be added his inciting an insurrection and even engaging in pedophilia, if the suspected election fraud in 2016 and the Epstein case proceedings are to receive some new incriminating updates, certainly create a precedent. If he is proven guilty of most of the charges and still elected president due to his immunity to legal sentencing, this will certainly mean that moral relativism has become the norm in America. As for the rural girl marrying into riches, this is hardly a highlight anymore; hencewith, Brooklyn remains open to insightful urban discoveries.

I finish my discussion of Sexton's *Transformations* with her "Rapunzel". In this poem Sexton has yet another bold take on a sensitive issue: relationship between women. Sexton had many men and women friends in life,

⁶ See *A Guide to Donald Trump's Four Criminal Cases*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-61084161> - a. n.

and despite her daughter's alleged misdemeanors on part of the mother⁷ and Sexton's liberated self, the poet remained openly heterosexual. Her treatment of the popular fairy tale by Grimm, however, certainly raises questions. With LGBT and feminism on the rise in the 1970s, the grounds were prepared for the 1980s more prominent feminist manifestations, one of which was an essay by Adrienne Rich. Her "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980) opens with a statement that its author proceeds to challenge, and namely that: "Biologically men have only one innate orientation – a sexual one that draws them to women, – while women have two innate orientations, sexual toward men and reproductive toward their young" (Rich 130). That naturally places women in the position of progenitors and guarantees a caring instinct for their offspring. Are there any limits to that care, though? Could that presuppose an intimate relationship between a mother and her son or daughter? Naturally, if this were to happen, it would be a crime in today's Western world, and it was a crime in Sexton's epoch as well. What if the women were unrelated or their blood relation was not of the first order? The case in question is of a middle-aged woman and a small girl. Both the original and Sexton's version provide answers to this question, but these answers differ.

The LGBT movement as we know it has its roots in the 1960s and 1970s, 1950s America being overwhelmingly heterosexual, with few important activists such as Dale Jennings, the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) organization, and Frank Kameny. For practicing their gay sexuality, they suffered persecutions, trials, and firings from work, which brought about the Second Wave of Feminism. In her influential essay, Rich addresses issues that she is convinced have existed since time immemorial – that is since patriarchy started ruling the world. Rich insists that lesbian experience is no "mere 'sexual preference'" (131) and lists important points according to which she sees male socio-politico-economic dominance over women as restrictive of women's free sexual choices (132). She argues that heterosexuality has been imposed on women by men and that women not only are expected to comply with it but are rather forced to accept it as their only "natural" choice. On this premise, we can say that Sexton, far from being gay, anticipates Rich's essay in the ironic but also favorable light in which she views the archetypal relationship between Rapunzel and the witch.

In the fairy tale, Rapunzel has been given to the witch to take care of her and she believes the witch to be her mother. At the age of 12, the witch locks her up in a tall tower so she cannot escape. The witch asks Rapunzel to let down her hair so she can climb every time she wants to visit her. The very act of incarceration in the story determines what can be seen as compulsory lesbianism at the most or overzealous protection from premarital relationships

⁷ See L. Sexton (120).

at the least, since Rapunzel is thus denied the possibility of making a free choice as far as her sexual orientation goes. The original story does not specify until when and with what purpose the witch locked her in the tower – except keep her for herself as long as possible. Both versions affirm the girl’s innate heterosexuality: eventually the girl manages to escape, have children, and reunite with the children’s father, both Rapunzel and the prince having to pay a dear price for their heterosexual love. It is worth paying close attention to a few elements in Sexton’s version, comparing the girl that emerges from it to the girls we have already met in the previous two poems.

Identifying with the witch – the opening to *Transformations*, Sexton begins in the following stirring manner that is bound to unsettle the reader, startling him/ her into a new awareness: “A woman/ who loves a woman/ is forever young./ The mentor/ and the student/ feed off each other./ Many a girl/ had an old aunt/ who locked her in the study/ to keep the boys away./ They would play rummy/ or lie on the couch/ and touch and touch/ Old breast against young breast...” (Sexton 244-5). It seems Linda Sexton was telling the truth – about her mother touching her inappropriately, bearing in mind the dynamic distinction between the *literal* and the *literary* contained in the autobiographical “I” employed by the poet (Salvio 4). But, if we forget about that for a moment and consider this passage in the larger context in which it is put, Sexton talks about the many natural situations in which aunts, being the closest females who are not mothers to the girl, find themselves spending time with their niece not infrequently playing games. Some of these games may go just a little wrong. However, we have the whole story clearly from the witch’s perspective, so she continues: “Let your dress fall down your shoulder, come touch a copy of you/ for I am at the mercy of rain,/ for I have left the three Christs of Ypsilanti,/ for I have left the long naps of Ann Arbor/ and the church spires have turned to stumps./ The sea bangs into my cloister/ for the young politicians are dying, are dying so hold me, my young dear, hold me...” (245).

The middle-aged woman breaks into a rant in which she speaks about her self-denial, referring to a psychiatric case study by Milton Rokeach, which must have been fascinating for Sexton, referencing a city in the state of Michigan, and then she invokes the sea which is besieging them – in their cloister for all of these have become some immaterial white noise and the young girl, being with her, is protected by the witch, safe from getting lost. In this free association of images, suddenly appear the young politicians who are dying, which is repeated with emphasis, undoubtedly a reference to the assassinations of JFK (d. 1963) aged 46 and his brother RFK (d. 1968) aged 42. So, if the fine young promising men of America are slain, who in this world can the girl really trust? In the next stanza the witch continues painting surrealist landscapes while still asking the girl to hold her ever more closely:

“The yellow rose will turn to cinder/ and the New York City will fall in/ before we are done so hold me,/ my young dear, hold me” (Sexton 245).

Asking the girl to come nearer and nearer while mumbling incantations which mix some witch mythology and actual reality, the witch is aiming for a kiss – of the nether lips of the girl, thus implying that the girl is also an archetype that can potentially be turned into a lesbian nymphette, an inversed “Lolita” who will be corrupted by the aunt, if only she has not been corrupted beforehand. The images change fast, and one turbulent scene is replaced by another, so the witch goes on: “and I will give you angel fire in return/ We are two clouds/ glistening in the bottle glass./ We are two birds/ washing in the same mirror./ We were fair game/ but we have kept out of the cesspool [...] Hold me, my dear, hold me” (246).

The lesbian fantasies envisioned by Sexton are detailed with vivid and striking imagery making references to a wide array of subjects – psychology, politics, music, mythology, poetry, nature – which should be fascinating to every little girl. The witch/ aunt relation is also archetypal and interchangeable, each aunt potentially turning into a witch at any moment and vice versa – in Sexton’s poem it just happens in a new stanza. A major difference between these homoerotic lucid dreams and the heterosexual ones in “Snow White” is that the one with the unicorn is given in one line. As for the subsequent animalistic ones, they are all suggested and are quite abhorrent to the imagination. And here comes the third major distinction – Rapunzel is “a beautiful girl” (Sexton 247). Nowhere do we find this information in “Snow White” or in the would-be-queen miller’s daughter. Sexton also provides the witch with a clear purpose, which is based on meanings derived from the original: “None but I will ever see her or touch her” (247).

In this lengthy prelude to the meeting with the prince, we have a magical lesbian world which is compared to a much more mundane one of male courtship. Another psychological element – a true experiment, just like with “Rumpelstiltskin” – is the fact that Rapunzel has never seen a man to this moment and so she asks him questions containing her clear amazement: “What is this beast, she thought,/ with muscles on his arms/ like a bag of snakes? What is this moss on his legs?/ What prickly plant grows on his cheeks?” (248). In their interactions Sexton shows the errant prince and the long-haired girl as two worlds that touch with all the wonder of it, but no detail or dreams as in the lesbian prelude. When they are finally together, Sexton is again laconic: “They lived happily as you might expect/ proving that mother-me-do/ can be outgrown [...] The world, some say,/ is made up of couples./ A rose must have a stem” (249). As for Mother Gothel, the witch, she withers not having a girl to play with (249). Sexton’s own commentary is contained in these three short sentences, strongly suggesting that the couple is a heterosexual one, obviously the witch and the girl do not subscribe to that category – they have to hide and

can never show themselves as being inseparable to the world – but this is just someone’s opinion like any other. Some say so, some do not. Another careful metaphor is *the rose* and *the stem*, suggesting that for beauty to blossom, it needs solid support, which can only be provided by a man. And last, but not least, not having found another girl, evidently Mother Gothel in Sexton’s version loved Rapunzel very much and would not replace her with another.

The examined poems might not have been so shocking in the year of their publication, 1971, when the USA had gone through its sexual revolution. It had led to huge numbers of hippies living in communes where free love (also group orgies) was practiced, with the most notorious of them bringing an abrupt end to the 1960s – the summer of ’69 when members of the Manson’s family committed their heinous crimes. In the poem cycle the witch-narrator addresses several children and tells them adapted versions of the beloved Grimm’s tales, with minimal modifications, to a major transformative effect. While the first two can be cautionary tales about mediocrity in modern girls, as well as about the unacceptance of the other, the last story is a clear case of imposed lesbian experience not only on Rapunzel, but also, as an example, on the listeners who were hardly aware of these underlining motifs in the original. We should say that Rapunzel is entirely unaware in either version and that in both versions, she gets a timely rescue before things spin out of control, or shall we say, before compulsory lesbianism becomes the only norm for her, which will determine her sexual preferences.

With the post-pandemic rise of the far right in the Western World and neofascist calls to respecting traditionalism, it can be said that the LGBTQ movement is facing new (old) challenges, which reechoes Adrienne Rich’s claim to society’s “imposed heterosexuality”. On the other hand, Sexton’s implied warning that within the house any transgression may remain not only hidden from the public eye but also unidentified as such should not be underestimated. Trump’s 2016 acronymed slogan MEGA (Make America Great Again) which won him great popularity, and which has been linked to tyrannical rulers such as Hitler (about Germany) and may be behind Putin’s expansionist agenda in Europe (with Russia in mind), should not sound very promising to the liberal world and the Fourth Wave of Feminism in its gender-neutrality and support for transgender people, if Trump is to make good on some of his ideas against non-white *otherness*. In the context of the Tales, and America then and now it should be clear that perceptions of imposed homosexuality or heterosexuality need to be regarded with due diligence, so that we, as individuals, are better prepared, informed and can react if need be. Most importantly, an increased awareness seems the way to go, and Sexton’s version of Grimm’s *Fairy Tales* may be as good a place to start as any other. Being a thought-provoking cultural commentary of its times, Sexton’s

criticism of white mediocrity and consumerism remains as poignant as ever, continuing its relevance into the present.

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