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QUEERING THE FAIRY-TALE IN ANNE SEXTON'S *TRANSFORMATIONS*

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ABSTRACT. ***Queering the Fairy-Tale in Anne Sexton's Transformations.*** The current paper explores Anne Sexton's volume of poetry, *Transformations* (1971), from a queer, feminist perspective. Each of the seventeen poems offers a distorted retelling of a Brothers Grimm fairy-tale, often replete with pop culture references and black humor. The paper examines the strategies of queering that the poet employs in her deconstruction of myths, storytelling, family relations (such as motherhood and fatherhood), gender roles, deformity and disability, and many other difficult subjects. The author makes use of feminist and queer theory, while also casting light upon the construct of the fairy-tale and why it offers a space for queer exploration. The fairy-tale allows the poet to examine aspects of trauma and intimacy at a remove, but with a view towards catharsis.

Keywords*: fairy-tale, queer, queer theory, retelling, feminism, abject.*

REZUMAT. ***Invertirea basmului în volumul „Transformations" de Anne Sexton.*** Lucrarea de faţă îşi propune să exploreze volumul de poezie „Transformations" (1971) al poetei Anne Sexton din perspectivă feministă, „queer". Fiecare dintre cele şaptesprezece poezii oferă o repovestire distorsionată a unui basm cules de fraţii Grimm, repovestire care abundă în referinţe culturale şi umor negru. Lucrarea examinează strategiile de invertire („queering") pe care poeta le foloseşte în demersul ei de a demonta mituri culturale, arta povestirii, relaţiile de familie (cum ar fi maternitatea şi paternitatea), rolurile de gen, diformitatea şi dezabilitatea şi multe alte subiecte dificile. Autoarea întrebuinţează teoria feministă şi „queer", punându-se accent şi pe structura basmului şi pe motivul pentru care această specie literară oferă spaţiu de explorar „queer". Basmul permite poetei să exploreze anumite aspecte ale traumei şi intimităţii de la distanţă, scopul final fiind catartic.

Cuvinte cheie*: basm, invertire, teorie „queer", repovestire, feminism, abjecţiune.*

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In the foreword to the poetry volume *Transformations* (1971), Kurt Vonnegut refers to Anne Sexton as a poet who "domesticates my terror, examines it and describes it, teaches it some tricks which will amuse me, then lets it gallop into my forest once more" (Apud McGowan 73). Vonnegut suggests that Sexton offers the reader a reprieve by making the unknowable inside each of us knowable for a few brief moments. She still releases the unknown back into the "forest", meaning that she leaves our mystery intact, but this dual effect is certainly part of the allure of *Transformations*, where Sexton rereads and retells famous Grimm fairy-tales in a nonconventional fashion. The poet takes familiar narratives, embedded in our collective consciousness, and turns them inside out, domesticating their terror while also multiplying it. Many of the retold fairy-tales in *Transformations* are, as Vernon Young opines, "occasionally vulgar, often brilliant, nearly always hilarious" (Apud Colburn 255), the overall effect being that of a satirical distortion rendered from a feminist point of view. The following paper will examine the ways in which Sexton modifies the fairy-tale and ultimately "queers" the main tenets of its narrative by disrupting and inverting gender roles, as well as questioning performative aspects of compulsory heterosexuality.

To "queer" a narrative, a text, or a system of beliefs is to render it bare and to question its "timelessness and fixity" (Hall 14). The action of queering does not altogether dismantle old tenets, but rather, it "presses upon them, torturing their lines of demarcation, pressuring their easy designations" (14). This is most obviously achieved in the recasting of normative sexuality and its tributary identities. Social identity has always been a precarious construct; on the one hand, it has tried to ground itself on concrete symbols of power (race, class, gender), while on the other hand, it has eschewed the elements which cannot be governed or tamed into stability, such as sexuality and desire. Sexuality and desire pose a particular problem to the hegemonies in place because they are "so very amorphous, so hard to know or pin down, so potentially changeable in small and sometimes dramatic ways over time" (Hall 14). Desire is eminently irrational and guided by aspects of the self which are difficult to grasp or even accept. More importantly, one's desires may disturb the old value systems by which normality and abnormality are clearly delineated (Hall 14). Sexual mores and ways of being which used to be carefully monitored and penalized in the nineteenth century have emerged as complicated manifestations of desire and identity which trouble heterosexual norms in patriarchal societies.

Societal norms that validate or invalidate certain sexual practices are also a more recent invention. In centuries past, men and women who engaged in various sexual practices that did not accord with the norms of society were not heavily disciplined because the norms themselves were subject to constant change, depending on circumstance. For instance, punishment for sodomy in male-dominant spaces such as aboard ships was often not enforced, unless the offender had committed other serious crimes (Neill 408). It was with the

advent of the industrial revolution and its market-based economy, as well as the "discursive explosion of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" (Foucault 38) that abnormal sexualities which threatened hegemonic interests became a matter of public opprobrium. This led to homosexuality being described as a pathology which defined the individual's very character. As Foucault attests in *A History of Sexuality*, homosexuality "was consubstantial with [the individual], less as a habitual sin than as a singular nature" (43). What was on trial was not an isolated sexual act or habit, but rather a deviancy in nature and character.

Due to their relatively recent institutionalization, these so-called "deviant" sexualities escape clear demarcations. The denomination "queer" itself is an umbrella term which is meant to include not only homosexual or lesbian practices and modes of being but various other manifestations that do not agree with pre-established norms. To be queer is to be unfixed, unmoored, and often indefinable. Queer theory itself is ultimately a discipline that "refuses to be disciplined" (Sullivan v), precisely because sexuality and desire, as mentioned previously, are so difficult to map. Therefore, to "queer" a text, as in our case, means to break down traditional literary analysis and put "pressure on simplistic notions of identity" (Hall 14), while at the same time disturbing "the value systems that underlie designations of normal and abnormal identity, sexual identity in particular" (14). With that in mind, the paper will look at the way in which Sexton disrupts and even collapses notions of identity, femininity and sexuality in her poetic retellings of classic fairy-tales.

Anne Sexton was a difficult poet of the post-war generation. Labeled a confessionalist for having the courage to include certain taboo aspects of her personal life in her work, Sexton was committed to a rebellious, authentic aesthetic that shone a light on "the female medical body" and its multifaceted presence in "beauty culture, domesticity, psychiatry, and medicine" (Salvio 18). She was in the position to do so since she suffered from clinical depression for most of her adult life and was frequently committed to mental institutions. Many of her poems give a first-hand account of what it is like to be "mad", to be – as she called herself repeatedly – a "possessed witch" (Sexton 15), a female presence who disrupts the rosy domesticity of middle class America. In that sense, one of the "terrors" in Sexton's poetry is the uncontainable mad woman, a glutton and a narcissist, a persona that threatens to upend the mores of her generation. This persona takes on various roles; in *Transformations*, Sexton focuses, among other things, on her role as a mother and the complications that her mental instability has wrought upon her relationship with her children. Sexton's speaker mirrors many of her own struggles. Indeed, the volume is addressed to her daughter, Linda, and she and her sister, Joyce, are meant to be the surface audience of these retellings. The mother engages in a subversive act by telling her children inverted bedtime stories and, from that perspective, the volume is not only an experiment with the format of the fairy-tale but also an attempt to explore what it means to be a mother, even a "failed" one. The fairy-

tale provides the space for such transgressive topics because it is, by its very nature, "queer", meaning eccentric and strange (Turner, Greenhill 4), but it also often deviates from what is prescribed, aligning itself with the theoretical definitions of "queer" (4). The fairy-tale is compatible with what Lee Edelman describes as the "unassimilable that troubles the relentlessly totalizing impulse informing normativity" (Apud Turner, Greenhill 5). Tales where people can be changed into animals and objects can metamorphose into human beings are more amenable to queer readings and interpretations (5) and at the root of it all is the idea of transformation. Jack Zipes considers "transformation" to be the constant in almost every fairy-tale, embedded in its structure and theme (xvii), allowing characters to undergo certain experiences that would not be sustainable in the real world. This leitmotif of transformation opens the gates for expressing ways of being that do not accord with the norms of reality.

Comprising 17 poems overall, *Transformations* is unified by the poetic persona of the mother who playfully introduces and catalogs each fairy-tale. The very first poem, "The Gold Key", is based on the fairy-tale *The Golden Key*, collected by the Brothers Grimm, in which a young boy finds an iron chest full of magical secrets. Yet we do not find out what those secrets are or if the chest is even magical, for when the story ends the boy is still turning the golden key inside the lock. The fairy-tale frustrates expectations and leaves the audience in a perpetual state of waiting. Sexton adopts this ambiguity and makes the poem and indeed, the entire volume, about the possibility and impossibility of finding answers: "It is not enough to read Hesse / and drink clam chowder / we must have answers" (Sexton 223). The poet poses this problem to her children as an essential aspect of life; we are all perpetually searching for something, chasing an elusive question mark regarding ourselves and others, and it is this search that unites the boy of the fairy-tale, the mother, and her children: "He is sixteen and he wants some answers / He is each of us. / I mean you. / I mean me." (223). This commonality places Sexton in the immediate vicinity of her offspring; she is just as restless as the younger generation and can give them no clarifications. Her authority as a mother hinges less on superior knowledge and more on her ability to offer a space for exploration, a space for "transformations". After all, the boy in the story hopes that the ordinary will be rendered extraordinary with the help of the magical chest: "Upon finding a string / he would look for a harp" (Sexton 224). Likewise, through her speaker, Sexton reminds her children that storytelling and fairy-tales can, if not answer their questions, at least provide the means for inquiry. The open-endedness of the endeavor is meant to attract rather than repel. The speaker summons not only her children, but also imaginary offspring whom she projects into the future, thus bridging the gap in age: "Alice / at fifty-six, do you remember? (…) Samuel, / at twenty-two have you forgotten?" (223). Her children are meant to be young enough to still have a passion for fantasy: "have you forgotten (…) the ten PM dreams/where the wicked king / went up in

smoke?" (223)", and yet old enough to understand the deeper, more ambiguous meaning beyond the story: "Are you comatose / Are you undersea?" (223), she asks them, probing their psyche. The children must employ critical thinking, but they must not be dead or "comatose" to the world of fantasy. The focus on the children's formation as future adults makes sense; the volume was first published when her eldest daughter, Linda, was eighteen – legally an adult, but still caught in-between adolescence and maturity.

The poet also prepares the children for the difficult experience of getting to know their mother. She announces at the beginning of the poem that, "The speaker in this case / is a middle-aged witch, me" (223). The use of "witch" comes with a double portend; Sexton is playing make-believe as a fairy-tale character, but she is also warning the children that the point of view from here on out is that of the outsider, the rebellious and villainous "witch" who presents a skewed vision of the world, namely *her* vision. In this manner, Sexton queers the very act of fairy-*telling*; the poet does not cater to her children's particular interests, she is not giving them familiar stories. She is telling *her* story, which de-familiarizes the fairy-tale and alters its overall effect. According to Jack Zipes, every fairy tale has a didactical purpose, facilitating a "learning process" (xix) through which the individual may be socialized and integrated within society (xix). Zipes argues that "listeners are enriched by encounters with extraordinary characters and situations" (xix). In this case, however, the children are enriched by the encounter with the voice of the mother. She is the "extraordinary" character who they come to know as a woman, as a deeply flawed human being, separate from her role of caregiver. This is one of the "transformations" that occur throughout the volume.

In the following poems, "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" and "The White Snake", Sexton plays with the idea of the unattainable as an impossible yearning which haunts the collective conscious. The traditional narrative of *Snow White* is foregrounded on the young princess' beauty as her defining characteristic and means of agency (Friedenthal 168). It is thanks to beauty that she overcomes many of the obstacles in her path; after all, the hunter and the dwarfs are kind to her primarily because of her physical appearance (168). In Sexton's poem, however, the focus is on Snow White's "purity", her status as an untouched virgin:

> No matter what life you lead/the virgin is a lovely number: / cheeks as fragile as / cigarette paper, / arms and legs made of Limoges, / lips like Vin du Rhone, /
> rolling her china-blue doll eyes / open and shut. / Open to say, / Good Day Mama, / and shut for the thrust / of the unicorn. / She is unsoiled. (224)

Snow White is likened to luxury commodities, such as porcelain and fine wine, expensive items which enhance her prestige. At the same time, she is mockingly reduced to "cigarette paper", her worth alternating according to the

consumer's tastes. There is something of artifice about her; she is a manufactured doll who is "unsoiled" and who firmly opposes any phallic "thrust" that might tarnish the illusion of her pristineness. Yet this vaunted virginity must only be a temporary digression until the prince arrives to assume his rights over the princess. If Snow White remains a virgin for too long, it may disturb the order of the world around her. The threat of a woman, particularly one so beautiful, going to waste or becoming a spinster is quite real; as Rachel Carroll argues, "the spinster is the one who has not fully acceded to her place within the order of reproductive sexuality" and as such, becomes "something other than a woman" (30). Snow White must manage to remain pure while also not rendering her purity a threat. She must deftly navigate the many phallic symbols placed in her path, from the "hungry wolf / his tongue lolling out like a worm" (Sexton 226) to "the snakes hung down in loops" (226) and the "dwarfs, those little hot dogs / [who] walked three times around Snow White, / the sleeping virgin" (226), while at the same time still making herself available to the men around her. When she is poisoned and put to sleep by the wicked queen, the dwarfs are not content with letting her virginal body go to waste; the poet describes the way in which they "washed her with wine / and rubbed her with butter" (228) as if to be consumed. Even in death, Snow White must not be an old maid.

The manner in which the poet concludes the fairy-tale is yet more subversive, deconstructing the happy marriage to the prince and reframing it as a regression for Snow White, who has now ironically taken up the role of her wicked stepmother:

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

Snow White already replicates the mannerisms and behavior of the previous generation and, like her stepmother, she refers to the mirror to remind herself of what she lacks. Once married, Snow White is no longer "unsoiled", no longer pristine and pure and hence, she searches for the unattainable purity which she has forever lost; she looks in the mirror for the next Snow White. Some of her artificial features remain, such as the "china-blue doll eyes", suggesting that her virginity may have been as much of a construct as her doll-like countenance. Marriage, in any case, is presented to the children as a reversal of fortune and an unexciting end to the fairy-tale, because what was really fascinating and even adventurous about Snow White was her unblemished state and whether she would manage to preserve it. The end of the fairy-tale is the end of possibilities for the heroine and it means the erasure of her very name: she is no longer Snow White but rather a woman among many ("as women do").

In the poem "The White Snake", the unattainable is no longer rooted in beauty and virginity but rather in language. In the Brothers Grimm fairy-tale, a

young servant partakes of the secret dish meant for the king, a white snake. After taking a single bite, the servant finds himself endowed with the power to speak with and understand the speech of animals, which leads him on a quest to prove himself and test his new abilities. Sexton begins the poem in the first person, placing herself at the center of the story as she did in "The Gold Key". She, like the servant, discovers an ability to communicate with the creatures around her:

> There was a day / when all the animals talked to me. /Ten birds at my window / saying, / Throw us some seeds, / Dame Sexton, / or we will shrink. / The worms / in my son's fishing pail / said, It is chilly! / It is chilly on our way to the hook! /
> (…) And then I knew that the voice/ of the spirits had been let in – / as intense as an epileptic aura – / and that no longer would I sing / alone (229).

In the poet's case, the ability to hear the voices of the animals coincides with the "epileptic aura", the shadow of mental illness. In the world of the fairy-tale, hearing "voices" is a gift and a marker of strength, while in the real world it is proof of disorder and disability. Yet the poet questions the estrangement of Man from animals. In Biblical terms, the failure to understand the beasts of the land was a consequence of the Fall (Fudge 102). Adam was able to name the animals because he was in communion with them, just as he conversed freely with God (103). The loss of intelligibility after the Fall signified decay and disorder and as such, the silence we take for sanity is a symbol of our disgrace, the condition of singing "alone", as the poet remarks. In choosing to comingle aspects of the fairy-tale with aspects of the psychical, Sexton blurs the lines between fiction and reality and queers the notion of madness. Later in the poem, when she begins to tell the tale of the servant, she describes the moment in which he starts hearing voices as both enlightening and terrifying: "He was inside / He had walked into a building / with no exit. / From all sides / the animals spoke up like puppets. / A cold sweat broke out on his upper lip / for now he was wise" (230). Alienation becomes a rite of passage and a necessary step in order to recapture the connection with the animal. The poet also reroutes the Fall of Man by having the servant give the princess the apple she hungers for, feeding her and also passing on to her the knowledge he acquired from the white snake: "The apple was as smooth as oilskin (…) Their bodies met over such a dish. / His tongue lay in her mouth/ as delicately as the white snake" (232). The poem thus inverts certain aspects of myth and tradition, emphasizing the queer potential of the human-animal bond and the forbidden knowledge it may unlock. The true "Fall" for Man comes with matrimony. Like in "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs", the couple is condemned to a lackluster marriage which smothers the creative magic of the white snake and renders them ignorantly happy: "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?" (232). The rhetorical question posed at the end expresses a clear choice; between the madness of 'speaking tongues' and the humdrum of patriarchal domesticity, the poet would choose the latter.

A similar cynical tone regarding marriage is employed in the poem "Cinderella". The poet humorously synthetizes the tale for her children as a reversal of fortune: "From toilets to riches / That story. (…) From diapers to Dior / That story. (…) From mops to Bonwit Teller / That story" (256). The fairy-tale is framed as a story of material advancement where the prince's ball is simply an occasion for making the right connections: "Next came the ball, as you all know. It was a marriage market" (256). The happy ending represented by the union of Cinderella and the prince is yet another form of deception. The two are described "like two dolls in a museum case / never bothered by diapers or dust, / never arguing over the timing of an egg (…) their darling smiles pasted on for eternity" (258). Such contemptuous depictions of conjugality reflect the mindset of the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s and the disavowal of marriage as the natural conclusion to romantic and sexual relationships (Hill 83). They also hint at the shortcomings of the heterosexual couple which is limited by conventions of gender and sexuality. Sexton describes Cinderella and her prince as "Regular Bobbsey Twins" (258), referring to the early twentieth-century mystery novels about two sets of upper-middle class twins who solve petty crimes committed in their neighborhood. The spouses are like the Bobbsey Twins because their approach to married life is infantile, their actions having as small a scope as the twins' sleuthing in their hometown. They are also less 'husband and wife' and more 'brother and sister', yet without the frisson of incest. In other words, they are dull and passive, never getting into an argument about "the timing of an egg" (258) or dealing with the less glamorous aspects of domestic life because avoiding communication suits them better and is the "proper" thing to do.

In sharing such disagreeable aspects of married life with her attentive audience, the children, Sexton is unburdening herself, revealing frustrations pertaining to her own troubled marriage. As a young woman, the poet had a glamorous beginning in modeling and relative independence as a bookstore clerk, while her husband was away in Korea (Kumin xii). Upon his return, and with the arrival of children, she became a housewife and started suffering from anxiety and other mental disorders (xii). One can't help but notice the regret captured in the poem "The Twelve Dancing Princesses", where the young women have to give up their exciting lifestyle after one of the sisters is married. In fact, the women seem to lose the drive which made them want to dance all night: "At the wedding the princesses averted their eyes / and sagged like old sweatshirts. / Now the runaways would run no more and never / again would their hair be tangled into diamonds" (281). There can be no sadder visual contrast than between the dour "sweatshirts" of the present and the glittering "diamonds" of

the past, aligning the life of the housewife and the life of the model, respectively. It is also noteworthy that the sisters' self-sufficient, gynocentric world in which "they slept together, bed by bed / in a kind of girls' dormitory" (278) is suddenly upended by the departure of one sister and the intrusion of one man.

A more troubling gynocentric world is fully realized in the poem "Rapunzel", in which the poet blatantly "queers" the text of the original fairy-tale. Mother Gothel, the witch who takes the child away from the parents who steal from her garden, bears an erotic, incestuous love for Rapunzel. She considers the girl both daughter and lover, as she beckons to her repeatedly: "Hold me, my young dear, hold me" (246). In the context of the fairy-tale, Mother Gothel is meant to be a surrogate mother to Rapunzel, yet the attachment between the two women is ambiguous. On the one hand, the witch has taken the child to raise by herself, keeping her locked away from the world; on the other hand, Gothel demands affection from the young girl beyond the normal boundaries of motherly love. There are many hints of sexual attraction and even sexual intercourse between them: "Let your dress fall down your shoulder, / come touch a copy of you (…) Put your pale arms around my neck" (245), "do not discover us / for we lie together all in green, / like pond weeds" (246). The poet places emphasis on the women's affinity for each other, their converging femininities: "We are two clouds/ glistening in the bottle glass. / We are two birds / washing in the same mirror" (246). Their sameness is, by and large, also a form of abjection; as Julia Kristeva argues, "intercourse between same and same" is a form of abjection because "it disturbs identity, system, order" (Apud Palmer 50). By displacing the man and claiming the woman for herself, Mother Gothel inverts the roles set out for her and Rapunzel. Instead of seizing the girl in order to punish her parents, the witch seizes her for her own pleasure: "Because Rapunzel was a beautiful girl / Mother Gothel treasured her beyond all things. / As she grew older Mother Gothel thought: / None but I will ever see her or touch her" (247).

The two women possess each other, blurring the lines of authority; one wonders whether Mother Gothel is in charge of Rapunzel or whether the young girl controls the surrogate mother through the desire the older woman feels for her. Sexton deftly weaves the fairy-tale elements to heighten the women's Sapphic bond; Mother Gothel who, in some versions of the tale, draws her youth from Rapunzel's long hair, now draws her youth from her desire for Rapunzel: "They play mother-me-do / all day. / A woman / who loves a woman / is forever young" (246). Thus, the path to immortality is achieved through the woman and by loving Rapunzel the witch may keep her youth and flourish. Of course, the fact that Gothel is required to love in order to maintain her influence also queers notions of power and authority. Sexton makes a larger point about the queering effect of generational bonds between women in the very beginning of the poem:

> 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 (245)

The images here are quite potent and do not shy away from physicality. Like in the poem "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs", the existence of the virginal "old maid" disturbs the order of things, particularly when the spinster threatens to possess the young woman and render the "boys" ineffectual. There is also a sense that mentorship between women is always a dangerous affair; a man may guide a young girl from adolescence to womanhood, but an older woman is apt to cause trouble. The mother / daughter relationship, seen as another form of mentorship, may be disrupted by the inability of mother and daughter to let go of each other and their over-reliance on each other may impede their evolution as full women. As Evelyn Bassoff argues,

> In order to realize the full possibilities of her individual life the middle-aged mother must not only separate from her adolescent daughter, she must also complete her separation from her aging mother. It is, after all, only as mothers and daughters grow apart, that each becomes a full woman (Apud Walters 193).

In "Rapunzel", Sexton seems to question whether the two women need to be forcefully separated in order to become full individuals. While Rapunzel enjoys the prince's frequent visits to her tower, he is only a superficial distraction: "Yet he dazzled her with his dancing stick" (248). When Rapunzel is finally united with him in marriage, the poet describes their new state with subtle irony: "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). The phallic imagery is a crude reminder of the conventionality of sexual roles, but it also questions the performative aspect of heterosexual femininity for, if Mother Gothel may effectively compete with the man for Rapunzel's love, then the compulsory aspects of the heterosexual relationship are defrocked. As Christine Holmlund notes, drawing from Luce Irigaray's theories of sexual identity, "the lesbian mimics and plays with the masculinity and femininity of psychoanalytic discourse, thereby making both "visible" as constructions and performances" (Apud Palmer 50). Despite the fact that "a rose must have a stem", a rose may also enjoy the company of another rose and it is the possibility of pleasure found in "sameness" that projects women outside precepts of male-defined femininity. Instead, as Irigaray contends, "they also remain elsewhere" (Apud Palmer 50). Therefore, in reworking the relationship between Rapunzel and Mother Gothel, Sexton also places the women outside "the world…made up of couples" (249). Their lesbian love is not annihilated by Rapunzel's marriage. Rather, that love and

its possibilities remain in expectancy. The final image of the poem is of the witch, Gothel, dreaming of Rapunzel as "moonlight sift[s] into her mouth" (249). The image is Sapphic and sexual, counteracting the phallic symbolism of the rose's stem. In dreams, therefore, Gothel still has access to her lover.

Another queer facet of the mother-daughter relationship is depicted in the poem "One-Eye, Two-Eyes, Three-Eyes", where Sexton argues that mothers thrive on the anomaly of their children. In the original fairy-tale, three daughters are born with one eye, two eyes, and three eyes respectively, but their mother considers the two-eyed girl too common, too much like everyone else, and hence bestows her affection on the "uncommon" daughters. The poet makes the case that, in fact, the mother derives strength from the children's impairment and lives off their need for her: "When a child stays needy until he is fifty – / oh mother-eye, oh mother-eye, crush me in – / the parent is as strong as a telephone pole" (260). This co-dependency is underlined by the phallic imagery of the "telephone pole", an exaggerated phallus that dominates and subjugates the child in the same way that the phallus dominates collective consciousness. Despite the fact that the child "might live to the age of fifty" (260) in otherwise good health, her physical or mental anomaly offers the mother the chance to become a martyr: "her mother planned a Mass of the Angels / and wore her martyrdom / like a string of pearls" (260). There is also the sense that the abnormal child is "simple" and "innocent" and therefore more easily controlled by the mother: "I knew a child once / With the mind of a hen. / She was the favored one / for she was as innocent as a snowflake" (259). Such assessments of motherhood mirror Sexton's own struggle with her role as flawed and even exacting caregiver.

The poem also abounds in descriptions of deformity and bodily abjection which are recast as signs of God's favor, the maimed child having an affinity for all things mystical: "Even in the pink crib / the somehow deficient / the somehow maimed, / are thought to have / a special pipeline to the mystical / the faint smell of the occult / a large ear on the God-horn" (258-9). The fascination which the abject is connected to the mother ("the pink crib") for, as Kristeva argues, the desire to dissolve physical boundaries and return to the womb is what prompts our attraction to certain forms of filth and decay (Kutzbach Mueller 9). The abject itself is an expression of chaos which we must reject once we are out of the womb for, as Kristeva warns, we risk "falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling" (Apud Kutzbach Mueller 8). The poet is aware of this dual force of attraction and repulsion and, therefore, insists upon chaotic, abject imagery to underline the fraught, voyeuristic connection between the spectators and the spectated: "The idiot child, / a stuffed doll who can only masturbate / The hunchback carrying his hump / like a bag of onions… / Oh how we treasure / their scenic value" (260). The same fascination with the misshapen and deformed is depicted in the poem

"The Maiden Without Hands", where the maiden's mangled stumps are an object of desire and obsession: "The maiden held up her stumps / as helpless as dog's paws / and that made the wizard / want her. He wanted to lap / her up like strawberry preserve" (273). Sexton also stresses the fact that the crippled maiden offers comfort to those around her and makes them certain of their physical wholeness, by contrast: "Lady, bring me your wooden leg / so I may stand on my own / two pink pig feet. / If someone burns out your eye / I will take your socket / and use it for an ashtray (…) My apple has no worm in it! / My apple is whole!" (273). As such, the irregularity of one ensures the regularity of many and the abjection of the crippled is thus fetishized and counteracted. The wizard may be drawn to the maiden's bloody stumps, but he does not wish to be less than whole himself.

A final, more destructive aspect of motherhood is shown in the poem "Hansel and Gretel", where, like a Medea undoing her children, the mother wants to consume her offspring so as to spare them the misery of hunger, but also because she is starving herself. If, as Madeleine Pober puts it, "Mothers strive for fusion, while their offspring seek disengagement" (Apud Walters 193), the final fusion between mother and child is the return to the womb via stomach:

> Little plum, / said the mother to her son, / I want to bite, / I want to chew, / I want to eat you up. / Little child, / little nubkin, / sweet as fudge (…) / Your neck as smooth / as a hard-boiled egg; / soft cheeks, my pears, / let me buzz you on the neck / and take a bite (…) / Oh succulent one, / it is but one turn in the road / and I would be a cannibal! (286-7)

The mother's tone is gleeful, verging on mad, revealing how easy it would be for the bonds of family to be annihilated for the sake of primeval survival. At the same time, the mother's namesakes for the child, "little nubkin", "little plum" imply that a mother's affection is always mingled with hunger - a need to possess and contain. The innocent gestures of affection such as kissing the soft "pear" cheeks or playfully "buzzing" the neck are construed now as a desire to devour and reclaim the child who used to be inside her. The end of the poem presents us with an ambiguity; while Hansel and Gretel manage to fool the witch of the gingerbread house and cook her alive, when they return home they find that their mother has died and, as they sit at the table, the siblings begin to recall "the woe of the oven/ the smell of the cooking witch" (290). This seems to hint at the fact that perhaps it was the mother, the presumed cannibal, who was the witch all along and it was she who was burned alive. Such an interpretation hinges once more on the need of the child to disengage from the mother, with often violent consequences.

If the mother undergoes various transformations throughout the volume, the father is not left far behind. A much darker and more disturbing

depiction of parental violence is shown in the poem "Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)", where the poet weaves a narrative of trauma and abuse around the patriarchal figure. Like Mother Gothel in "Rapunzel", the king displays a possessive need to keep Briar Rose to himself: "Briar Rose grew to be a goddess / and each night the king/ bit the hem of her gown to keep her safe (…) He forced every male in the court/ to scour his tongue with Bab-o/ lest they poison the air she dwelt in. / Thus she dwelt in his odor. / Rank as honeysuckle." (291-2). Beyond the slightly humorous depiction of the king's actions, there is a sense of unease and danger, of something foul and "rank" in his measures of protection. The act of scrubbing the young men's tongues with bleach harkens to the domestic practice of washing children's mouth with soap for speaking out of turn. The king's gesture is an extreme measure, underlining his need for control, while literally suffocating his subjects. In the same vein, women like Briar Rose (and Sexton herself) are suffocated by the roles they have to perform, particularly in a domestic setting.

In any case, the father-king is an unwanted element. If in "Rapunzel" the two women seem to desire each other, in "Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)", the princess is haunted by the father figure and his unwanted ministrations. Even after the prince kisses her awake and breaks the curse, Briar Rose is tormented by the memory of the king: "and she woke up crying / Daddy! Daddy! / Presto! She's out of prison! / She married the prince / and all went well / except for the fear - / the fear of sleep." (293). The girl cannot fully come into her new role as wife because she is split between her persona when she is awake and the "Sleeping Beauty" who was taken advantage of every night. The point of view shifts from third-person to first-person as Briar Rose confesses to the ways in which her father raped her, while her body was asleep and her mind was awake. The past and the present seem to become indistinguishable, as Briar Rose cannot tell if the abuse is still being perpetrated:

> You can stick a needle / through my kneecap and I won't flinch. / I'm all shot up with Novocain. / This trance girl/ is yours to do with (…) / I was passed hand to hand / like a bowl of fruit. / Each night I am nailed into place / and I forget who I am. / Daddy? / That's another kind of prison. / It's not the prince at all, /
> but my father/ drunkenly bent over my bed, /circling the abyss like a shark, /
> my father thick upon me / like some sleeping jellyfish (294).

The helplessness and passivity of the victim make certain the impossibility of either reciprocation or refusal. The father, described as a circling shark, imprisons the girl more effectively than the spindle's curse. In fact, one may wonder if the sleeping spell that comes upon her when she becomes an

adolescent is not simply the aftermath of the father's possession. After all, the curse was completed when the princess "pricked her finger" (292), an action mired in phallic symbolism. This retelling is probably the most radical in terms of departure from the source material, though, in fact, Sexton may be basing her poem on an older source. The poet may have been familiar with Giambattista Basile's seventeenth-century collection, *Il Pentamerone*, and his version of Sleeping Beauty called *Sun, Moon, and Talia*, wherein the sleeping woman is not awoken with a kiss. Rather, she is raped repeatedly by a less than gallant king and as a result she is impregnated, while still being unconscious. She is only awoken when she gives birth to the children, but otherwise remains wholly ignorant of what has been done to her body. Sexton effectively rewrites *Sun, Moon, and Talia*, making the young girl painfully aware of the assault on her body. At the same time, the portrayal of trauma in the poem hints to it being inspired by the poet's troubled childhood. She herself suffered from her father's abuse and molestation and the violence of the act is often alluded to in Sexton's poetic work (Salvio 94). Considering that her hypothetical audience is her daughters, sharing such traumatic aspects of family life broadens the possibilities of engagement with them, putting into context Sexton's own abusive behavior towards her children (Salvio 84) while striving for catharsis.

Other iterations of fatherhood that appear in poems such as "Red Riding Hood" and "Rumpelstiltskin" have to do with the queering of gender roles. In "Red Riding Hood", the huntsman has to perform a "caesarian section" on the wolf in order to release the girl and the grandmother from his belly. The two emerge like newborns, "remembering / nothing naked and brutal / from that little death, / that little birth, / from their going down / and their lifting up" (272). In a strange reversal, the wolf consumes the women who then become his biological children and must be reborn from him. The young girl and the grandmother, despite their difference in age, must undergo the same rite of passage. Though they have faced death, they come out of the womb like newborns, with no memories of their previous adventure. As for the wolf, he is described as a "kind of transvestite" (270) since he disguises himself as the grandmother, but it seems that his deception turns into reality and he shifts from one state to the other, even becoming "pregnant" with his victims: "Now he was fat./ He appeared to be in his ninth month" (271). In the poem "Rumpelstiltskin", it is revealed that the titular villain does not want to take the firstborn away just because he has struck a deal with the miller's daughter, but because he wants a child of his own: "Indeed! I have become a papa! / cried the little man. / She offered him all the kingdom/ but he wanted only this - / a living thing / to call his own" (235). This is the only magic Rumpelstiltskin is not able to perform, that of giving birth. In the end, when the miller's daughter guesses his name,

the dwarf tears himself in half: "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 Doppelganger" (237). Like the transvestite wolf, the dwarf is described in gender-queer terms as a fluid being whose identity is complicated by his yearning to be both mother and father. At the same time, Sexton calls him a "Doppelganger" because she claims that Rumpelstiltskin is a presence within all of us:

> Inside many of us / is a small old man / who wants to get out (…) / He is a monster of despair. / He is all decay. / He speaks 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 (…) / I am the law of your members, / the kindred of blackness and impulse (…) / It is your Doppelganger / trying to get out (233).

Even though the poet describes him as a "monster of despair", she shifts sympathy from the heroine of the tale to the villain; it is Rumpelstiltskin we should empathize with because his unrealized cravings and his unfinished identity belong to us. We live in troubled symbiosis with him. He is coded queer not only due to the reference to Truman Capote's "asexual voice" but also because he represents the underbelly of our identity, the inexpressible. If, As Annamarie Jagose claims, "queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire" (Apud Turner 4), Rumpelstilskin represents that mismatch and the possibilities of the Other within us. He is also a pitiful creature because he is a "freak" who is denied certain aspects of normal life: "I am eighteen inches high. / I am no bigger than a partridge / I am your evil eye / and no child will ever call me Papa" (234). His desire to have a child is framed as an attempt to vindicate his existence and find meaning, rather than merely as a game of wits.

As evidenced in poems such as "One-Eye, Two-Eyes, Three-Eyes" and "The Maiden Without Hands", Sexton is drawn to the outcasts, the freaks, the misshapen, partly because she considers herself an outsider too. In "Red Riding Hood", she begins the poem with a meditation on deception and how easily we conceal ourselves from others. She confesses that there is always a mismatch between outward appearance and inner life: "And I. I too. / Quite collected at cocktail parties, / Meanwhile in my head/ I'm undergoing open-heart surgery" (269). The volume *Transformations* is her attempt to foreground the outcast inside herself with the help of fairy-tales. As mentioned previously, Sexton offers space for exploration but no final resolution; she offers catharsis but does not remove discomfort. She may "domesticate" the terror, as Kurt Vonnegut surmised, but she does not reduce it; rather she sets it free. For that is the ethos of queer epistemology: to provide, as Annamarie Jagose claims, "an ongoing and necessarily unfixed site of engagement and contestation" (Apud Sullivan 43).

In this sense, *Transformations* engages with the unmoored and undefined aspects of the self and contests the self's limitations with the help of the generous frame of the fairy-tale. The poet takes advantage of its inherent fluidity and adaptability to enact "transformations" which might be difficult to access in a real life setting. Sexton taps into the queer potential of the fairy-tale and as a result, makes the undisciplined, "queer" aspects of desire and trauma communicable.

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