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Revisiting the fairy land: Anne Sexton's transformation of the Grimms' female characters

Abstract. Anne Sexton's vivid and scandalous literary heritage has always been arousing controversy mostly due to its confessional character. It is, however, underestimated that one of the sources of her poetic inspirations was a broadly defined European culture and tradition, including the Grimms' fairy tales. This article strives to inquire how Sexton revisits narratives of canonical tales with special regard to female protagonists. An apparent discrepancy will be shown between the two versions in terms of poetic imagery, character construction, and the reality in which they are firmly anchored. The morals drawn from the poems markedly diverge from the original versions, for it is with pessimism and disillusionment that Sexton transforms the naïve and sentimental images. The applied adaptation, hence, serves here to articulate the conflict between the traditional, male-centered set of values and a feminist perspective. The poems' structures, literary figures, cultural references, features of genre, and other elements will be examined and analyzed to compare the retold stories with their archetypes and to provide a detailed interpretation in the light of the addressed problems.

Keywords: fairy tales; feminism; female protagonist; adaptation; postmodern poetry.

Introduction

Since life writing has become one of the major trends in worldwide literature, a new light has been shed on confessional artists. The impact which their personal experience has on their work has been more carefully examined and evaluated, as the literary recording of the self has become their token of recognition. Anne Sexton, one of the leading poets of the confessional trend, is no exception, her literary heritage and confessional style being, however, equivocal. Sexton's texts require from their readers deep insight into a number of contexts in which they are firmly anchored. Her work arose from a complex combination of various generic fields, like family, society, or expression of individualism, the last one appealing to be the most crucial. The emanation of self was a reason for the poet to start writing, a key concept in her poems, and, eventually, one of the factors causing her self-destruction. Nevertheless, Sexton's late work was strongly inspired by common tradition and culture. A research aim of this paper is to establish how Anne Sexton transforms female characters, like Snow White, Rapunzel, Sleeping Beauty, and Red Riding Hood, in her

postmodern works of reversed, redescribed, and deconstructed meanings. The objective is also to explore and challenge traditional models of literary adaptation and intertextuality, and inquire whether they can be applied to the process of Sexton's rewriting of source texts. In the light of these assumptions, selected poem-stories will be analysed.

The Grimms' defeminized heritage

In her seminal work, *Women Who Run With the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* (1996), Clarissa Pinkola Estes employs the whole spectrum of female culture. The "Wild Woman" archetype she has been researching, refers to innate, natural, and primeval features of women compared to those of wolves. It has been found that this archetype can be identified with a psychological element or an instinctive nature basic to the female self. Estes's argument in favour of the Wild Woman archetype runs as follows: healthy women share a number of psychological qualities with wolves, and these are sharp senses, playfulness, exceptional ability to sacrifice, extraordinary strength, immunity, and inquisitiveness. Her findings are based on numerous traditional tales, tribal legends, and psychoanalytical work the researcher has been pursuing with female patients. She puts forward the claim that this elusive layer of the female psyche has been oppressed for centuries and misrepresented by male-oriented narratives, which made these innate features go astray. It would be too harsh to state that the tales which have been researched by Estes are purely misogynist, but it can be noticed that they present a clear division of gender roles.

Jack Zipes, in his lifelong attempt to explain fairy tales' enduring significance, seems to belittle gynocritical ways of reading them, and only in order to provide a certain background does he mention Grimms' feminist critics. He does, however, admit that throughout Jacob and Wilhelm Grimms' work collecting and editing Germanic tales and other folklore elements like customs or literature pieces, they intentionally erased or rewrote those elements which would not be in line with the patriarchal model of nineteenth century Europe.

> [T]he Grimms made major changes while editing the tales. They eliminated erotic and sexual elements that might be offensive to middle-class morality, added numerous Christian expressions and references, emphasized specific role models for male and female protagonists according to the dominant patriarchal code of that time, and endowed many of the tales with a 'homey' biedermeier flavour by the use of diminutives, quaint expressions, and cute descriptions (2002: 46).

It must be also underlined that the principal concern of the Grimms was to present the didactic role of tales, which facilitated the long-term process of bonding generations of Germans together. Educators and parents found it crucial to emphasize the morals and instructive lessons the tales should provide for children, although some of the messages may seem too harsh for contemporary upbringing. For example, *Tom Thumb* does not find much approval among modern children due to its violent and cruel character.

It is beyond any doubt that fairy tales have shaped the archetype of the female protagonist. Researchers of a feminist orientation, like de Beauvoir (1949), Tatar (1987), Lieberman (1972),

or Bottigheimer (1987), have enumerated a series of features and behavioural patterns deeply rooted in canonical tales, although derogatory to women. Excessively humbled ("[i]n fact humbled is perhaps too mild a term to use for the many humiliations to which female protagonists must submit" (Tatar 1987: 92)); in constant need of being rescued; delicate, ergo helpless, and dependent on their male counterparts, who quite often treat them disrespectfully, female characters give an irrelevant example for contemporary society where girls are taught to behave and act independently. As Liebermann observed, "[i]t is hard to see how children could be prepared to women's liberation by reading fairy tales; an analysis of those fairy tales that children actually read indicates instead that they serve to perpetuate traditional social roles (1972: 383). Examples are easily found in canonical tales widespread among children and reiterated by numerous adaptations. Depicted as kind-hearted and exceptionally beautiful, Snow White takes refuge among dwarves, where she fulfils the role of their housekeeper and cook. Cinderella frees herself from the yoke of a mean stepmother and stepsisters only due to the prince's choice. Furthermore, it is underlined that she could approach him having washed the dirt off, a symbol of her servility towards her hostile family; it leads her, however, only to another form of subjection, for now she has become the prince's property. "She first washed her hands and face clean, and then went and bowed down before the King's son, who gave her the golden shoe. [...] [H]e [...] took Cinderella on his horse and rode away with her" (Completed Fairy Tales 2012: 76).

Conversely, Marina Warner takes issue with such a straightforward critique of the tales in her two major works *The Absent Mother, or Women Against Women in the 'Old Wives' Tale'* (1991) and *From the Beast to the Blond: On Fairy Tales and their Tellers* (1994). She notices that their utility as a didactic tool is many sided; they gave voice to women as narrators of numerous stories presenting, hence, a female perspective. "Fairytale offers a case where the very contempt for women opened an opportunity for them to exercise their wit and communicate their ideas" (1991: 24).

Anne Sexton's feminizng of the tales

There has been an inconclusive debate about whether androcentric narratives of fairy tales have become too easy a target for feminist critics, who openly condemn these narratives for the patriarchal values they bear. Indeed, numerous screenings, revisited writings, and even Internet memes modernize fairy tale characters, mostly female ones, attributing to them features of being liberated and independent. One cannot, however, compare the social constructions of feminity at the beginning of 1970s and now. This section, thus, strives to present women's portrayal in *Transformations* in the optics of the American post-war realm with reference to their archetypical counterparts. As has already been mentioned, certain stereotypes and a concrete vision of womanhood are endorsed in source texts. As Gonzalez suggests,

> The purported naturalness of the division of the spheres [...] that so thoroughly pervades fairy tale, testifies to the efficacy of this cultural procedure, which women internalize and tactically assume as a truthful dispenser

> of womanhood. Fairy tales, then, constitute another, and very effective, normalizing discipline which show women the version of 'feminity' that the social norm expects from them; they are unawarely socialized and rendered docile to the cultural discourses at work in a given society and historical period. (1999: 12)

A somewhat comparative triangle will be presented, where the source texts and Sexton's revisions are compared in order to show the result of such confrontation.

One of the first protagonists dealt with in the volume is Snow White. Her girlishness, emphasized in the first stanza, takes the form of pure dollishness; her corporealness consists of material building blocks, like porcelain or cigarette paper ("arms and legs made of Limoges" (T 1971:3). The creature, not a person, is presented at the very beginning, named a virgin. The narrator attributes shallow, simple actions to her; she has a stated purpose of accompanying others, greeting her stepmother, saying yes or no – which, in Sexton's creation, deprives her of any humanity. This dependence on dominant companions makes her an inert creature leading a precarious existence based on others actions and decisions. Snow White's pureness, representing her beauty in the Grimms' tale, in Sexton grows in a different significance. The girl's freshness and virginity epitomize her helplessness, incompetence, and social incapacity in the face of the wrong committed to her by family and gender relations. Sexton's female persona is met by the reader at this very moment – the girl's womanhood being her greatest misfortune.

Whereas the Grimms' Snow White is seven, the metatale girl is thirteen. Placing her in this liminal moment of life, on the border between childhood and adulthood, allowed the writer room for poetic manoeuvre. The transformation of the protagonist is, hence, from a featureless child to a teenager whose qualities of character, mostly pejorative, are being developed in the course of the narrative.

> This time she bought a poison comb,
> a curved eight-inch scorpion,
> and put it in her hair and swooned again.
> The dwarfs returned and took out the comb
> and she revived miraculously.
> […]
> Snow White, the dumb bunny,
> opened the door
> and she bit into a poison apple
> and fell down for the final time. (T: 8)

All the harm done to Snow White in the source text does not apply to her own actions; in other words she is a victim of her stepmother's evil, not a culprit. Sexton's revision brings the girl into the disrepute of being vain, witless, and irresponsible. The adaptation, though, is perverse – the story proposed by Sexton still holds a moral forewarning of self-admiration and the triumph of the exterior, but the object of this narcissistic decountrifying is Snow White herself. In the end, she does not differ much from her main enemy; moreover the finale of the poem suggests she becomes the queen who once despised her. ("Meanwhile Snow White held court,/rolling her china-blue doll

eyes open and shut/ and sometimes referring to her mirror/as women do." (T: 9) In Sexton, female characters become slaves to their images; as if female existence was determined by and trapped in her appearance, which simplifies their each step as human beings.

A closer look at female relationships is taken in a revision of "Rapunzel". Whereas the scheme of the tale is much about the same, the attention is centered on the interaction between the title character and Dame Gothel. One of the first adapting procedures applied is changing the latter one into Mother Gothel, which stays in conformity with an anaphoric phrase at the beginning and at the end of the introductory part of the poem, "A woman/who loves a woman/ is forever young" (T: 35). That could be perceived as a declaration of parental love; the relationship between the two, however, is later developed as rather ambiguous. Sexton employs images of nudity and intimate contact between a young girl and a mature woman. The above mentioned introductory part serves as a monologue by Mother Gothel to the girl where she intends to explain the bonding between them, underlining their mutual affection and their belongingness to each other. ("We are two clouds/ glistening in the bottle glass./ We are two birds/ washing in the same mirror." T: 38) Erotic and toxic as it is, the relationship is presented in a loving, almost tender, way. Mother Gothel seems to be entirely devoted to Rapunzel; the young girl's freshness and beauty inspires her and prolongs her own vitality. Their oneness is the reason for woman's existence as a whole. In Sexton, family relations are subject to distortion, identifiable as something which McGowan names "domesticized terror"; putting them in the frame of a fairy tale makes them even more contorted. This view of family and its members contrasts with that of the Grimms' – sanguine and pure, where a parent acts as a natural protector of their daughter.

Whereas in "Rapunzel" the pathological incest can be somehow surmountable due to the title character's relationship with a man ("They lived happily as you might expect/ proving that mother-me-do/can be outgrown" T: 42), "Briar Rose" reconstructions portrays a woman devastated by her childhood traumas. Briar Rose's initial innocent character is transformed by numerous sexual allusions, and the problem of incest comes back here double-barrelled. In Sexton, the ambivalent feelings of a propensity for the father and sexual imagery predominate in the story and become its main theme. Fascination is mixed with disgust with the man who under false pretences of protecting Briar Rose from a curse, takes advantage of his power and antagonizes the girl. In the source text we can read, "the Queen had a little girl who was so pretty that the King could not contain himself for joy". In Sexton's version, "Briar Rose […] dwelt in his odor" (T: 109).

A somewhat rebellion against the order of a traditional fairy tale is the very fact that Sexton dares to describe Briar Rose's life after her wedding with the prince: the "they lived happily ever after" story is far from a bed of roses. Traumatically experienced in her childhood, Sleeping Beauty struggles with insomnia, depression, drug addiction. It is underlined that the girl from the canonical tale is divorced from reality; the Grimms' figure is the old-time reflection of a Stepford wife – flawless, thoughtless, subordinate. Sexton's version, on the other hand, defies expectations; her behavior is chaotic and unpredictable. She becomes a victim of her beauty, for it opens a Pandora's box for her. If it had not been for her female attractiveness, she would have been saved from her

father's affection and, thus, she would not bear the imprint of the incestuous trauma. As Sexton indicates, Briar Rose's womanhood is driven by her childhood memories and due to her emotional impotence she stays a girl forever – a girl who is aware of her imprisonment in an Electra complex, as well as of the ill sexual identity she has developed and cannot change. The final stanza, which is thereby the final part of the whole volume, expresses Briar Rose's fall into despair and compares her meager being to a posthumous condition.

> What voyage this, little girl?
> This coming out of prison?
> God help –
> This life after death? (T:112)

In "Red Riding Hood" Sexton departs from portraying women by means of the tales' characters and provides a prefatorial fragment concerning the figures of her contemporaries. "Many are the deceivers." (T: 73) is the first line of the poem and introduces the tone of the narrative – dismal and ironic. Postwar suburban America being the background, five people, mostly women, are shown as representations of a hypocritical society who, wearing numerous masks, lie and cheat in order to fulfill the imposed roles and fight for their endurance. "The suburban matron, […] list in hand so she won't suddenly fly" (T: 73) is about to meet a secret lover, two jugglers who wheedle money out of an elderly woman, and a narrator, who tries to escape her past, deceiving herself it would be possible by moving to a new house. These characters' stories given as an introduction to a slightly revised tale confront one of the most potent symbols of evil and corruption of morals – the wolf. Whilst the wolf evokes rather homogeneous emotions of condemnation, the characters proposed by Sexton, while sinful, are not black-and-white and lose themselves in confusion due to their weakness, not meanness. It might be stated, hence, that canonical tales, which have been teaching generations to glorify the right and avoid the wrong, employ inadequate values incongruous with human character and their choices.

Conclusion

In *Transformations* a critical mass of recognizable images of fairy tale figures were used to retell children's stories in a darker and queerer way, which reversed their universalism. The effect, reinforced by obscene, sardonic language and abominable images, constitutes a visible twist from values like nobleness, courage, kindness, or purity, embedded in the primary texts, into individual problems of incest, mental illness, and depression. The author is a fluent and precise observer of the decentralized reality overwhelmed by a vain and superficial culture; by placing her characters in this carnivalesque, chaotic environment, she voices the opinion that such a lifestyle, promoted by canonical pieces of European culture, is extremely harmful to human nature. The transformation of characters, formerly predictable, well rooted in their roles and undeniably either good or evil, into struggling outcasts has raised questions of an ontological, cultural, and literary nature.

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