

Andrea Zittlau*

“Inside many of us / is a small old man” – age/ing in Anne Sexton’s *Transformations*: A community discussion

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Abstract: The poetry book *Transformations* by Anne Sexton consists of seventeen poems based on the versions of fairytales by the Brothers Grimm. Told by Sexton, the tales become sharp comments on American culture, changing characters and action to focus on gender, power systems and medical histories. Analyzing the poems “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs”, “Rapunzel”, and “Rumpelstiltskin”, this article focusses on Sexton’s revelation of the aging and ageism inherent in both the fairytales and contemporary American culture. I am interested in a reading of the poems beyond the confessional approach so common in analyses of Sexton’s poetry, focusing instead on how the characters struggle with beauty expectations, age and gender roles as well as loneliness. Therefore, I have discussed the chosen poems with different communities beyond the academic context with an interest in other approaches and experiences applied in the readings. The voices are woven into the article, adding to the analysis and offering a comment on contemporary reading practices.

Keywords: fairytales, Anne Sexton, community outreach, gender

The poetry book *Transformations* (2001 [1971]) by Anne Sexton consists of seventeen fairytale poems based on the versions of fairytales by the Brothers Grimm. Those tales – some well-known others less known – experience a Sextonian make-over, not so much a transformation as the title might suggest but a change of perspective: they become sharp comments and offer a new set of contemporary metaphors to critique American culture. Furthermore, this clever use of classic fantasy stories allows for a new perspective on the original fairytale material. Populated by patients of mental health institutions, zombie-like couples, and an unhappily dependent natural world, the tales reference Sexton’s contemporary surroundings. They work almost like songs, ancient spells, stressing the traps of gender roles, hierarchies, and impossible expectations, turning those who do not comply into outcasts.

***Corresponding author: Andrea Zittlau**, Institut für Anglistik/Amerikanistik, Universität Rostock, August-Bebel-Str. 28, 18051 Rostock, Germany, E-Mail: andrea.zittlau@uni-rostock.de

Sexton shows the darkness of the fairytale world not as a distant construct but as something very real and contemporary, a world ruled by sexism, ageism, racism, and classism.

Sexton wrote *Transformations* in 1970, when already an established poet on the American stage. The poems differ from her previous writing, as they are conceptual and do not immediately invite a confessional, autobiographical reading. Nevertheless, already with its title, the book refers to the classic confessional discourse. As Miranda Sherwin points out, the two classic models of confessional writing, Augustine’s *Confessions* and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions*, illustrate the transformation of their narrators: Augustine’s narrator moves from sinner to saint and Rousseau’s from boy to man (Sherwin 2011: 5). However, this classic transformation is not at the heart of the work of confessional poets, as Sherwin makes clear. Instead, the poets “recruit religious and psychoanalytic themes and subjects in order to interrogate the tensions between self and society, between individual subjectivity and social construction” (4). Sexton’s *Transformations* does both, since many of the poems feature a character who transforms from child to adult as well as a speaker who comments on this transformation.

Sexton’s speaker is storyteller and witch at the same time, as the first poem of the collection, “The Gold Key”, reveals:

The speaker in this case
is a middle-aged witch, me —
tangled on my two great arms,
my face in a book
and my mouth wide,
ready to tell you a story or two. (Sexton 2001 [1971]: 1)

Although the fairytale personas also use the first-person pronoun in the poems, the speaker can always be distinguished. As we do not trust the witch in fairytales as a general rule, this speaker, identifying as the witch in the very beginning, creates another kind of foreboding in the reader, an anticipation of dark magic that will reveal itself in the storytelling process.

Categorized as a confessional poet, Sexton’s work is read mostly autobiographically. Therefore, scholars like Jeanne Marie Beaumont understand the voice of the storyteller as Sexton’s. Beaumont identifies the speaker as “a wise elder, a beldam, a crone” (2016: 219) and argues that this character is Sexton herself, who claimed the witch identity in one of her first poems, “Her Kind”, where she is a “possessed witch”, and also in early letters to her editor Paul Brooks (219–220). Beaumont reads the poems in *Transformations* with a focus on mental health, relating them to Sexton’s own history of experience with psychiatric wards and pharmaceutical treatment. Clearly, the poems can be read autobiographically, especially their prologues

in which the speaker dominates while, at times, the patients of the psychiatric ward parade. In “Iron Hans”, for example, brief graphic scenes form a kaleidoscope of patients: the suicidal boy, the paranoid man, the “old lady in a cafeteria” (Sexton 2001 [1971]: 45) who is crying. Indeed, Sexton’s fairytale world appears to be one of sheer madness, filled with characters to be diagnosed. Like the witch-speaker, a larger-than-life figure with “two great arms” (1) and “a wide mouth” (1), the retelling of the tales highlights elements of society by means of the grotesque and hyperbole.

While the element of gender plays a central role in *Transformations*, I would like to focus on aging and ageism in the following article, looking at how the poems (and the tales they are based on) handle the common narrative of aging as decline.¹ I chose the poems “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs”, “Rapunzel”, and “Rumpelstiltskin” from the collection, since all three poems include a persona that struggles with ageism. Furthermore, all three poems are based on a better-known fairytale while other poems in the collection refer to lesser-known tales of the Brothers Grimm. This was important to me as I frequently use poetry in community outreach programs, especially inside institutions such as the prison and the nursing home. My interest is in a poetry analysis that involves a variety of different approaches to texts, not only to make poetry relatable beyond the academic context, but also to enrich that context by a fresh set of original understandings of literary texts. Therefore, in the following I include diverse community voices focusing on the aspect of aging. I organized poetry discussions in the city of Chester (Pennsylvania) and in Wilmington (Delaware) in September 2022, focusing on the three chosen poems. These discussions were improvised meetings, partially spontaneous, partially with groups that have an established interest in literature and writing. Poetry analysis in these groups is very open, friendly and explicitly non-academic, which means no previous knowledge of poetry is necessary to join the conversation. The idea is that people feel welcome to share their thoughts on a particular work of literature. Such a discussion might start in a café or any other public place, and often people are curious and join in, sometimes only to share a thought or two. The groups I worked with were small but very diverse, including all genders, African Americans, white and Latinx people, and they involved teenagers as well as people in their seventies. All contributions that are quoted here are anonymized. I would like to thank community activist and writer Jayne Thompson and poet Kenneth Pobo for assisting me in setting up these discussions and for taking part in what turned out to be fascinating readings of Anne Sexton’s poetry. Most of all, I would like to thank everyone who discussed these poems with me.

¹ For a critical introduction to the narrative of decline, see Gullette (2011).

1 “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs”

The fairytale of Snow White as told by the Brothers Grimm is about the stepmother’s perception of declining beauty and her envying of Snow White’s youth to a deadly extent. The 1937 animated film is among the most famous Disney productions and shaped the image of Snow White in popular culture, adding comic elements to the story. However, Sexton relies on the dark version of the Brothers Grimm and centers her poem on the fear of losing beauty and on the essence of youth, which haunts most of the poems in *Transformations*. In the beginning, we meet the stepmother who enters as “a beauty in her own right, / though eaten, of course, by age” (Sexton 2001 [1971]: 3). Interestingly, Sexton inserts “of course”, to comment on the way that age as decline has been naturalized in the original fairytale but more so in Sexton’s contemporary, gendered society. “Beauty is a simple passion” (3) the stanza continues, insisting that it encourages pride, which – due to the causality of the poem – is a poison.

The adjective chosen in the poem for beautiful, the one word the queen uses to ask about her appearance, and that is used repeatedly throughout the poem, is “fair”, which also means light-skinned; after all, the girl is as white as snow. The images used to describe the young beauty do not correspond to the classic fairytale but are taken from contemporary culture:

the virgin is a lovely number:
cheeks as fragile as cigarette paper,
arms and legs made of Limoges,
lips like Vin Du Rhône,
rolling her china-blue doll eyes (Sexton 2001 [1971]: 3)

She is fragile, vulnerable and white to an unreal extent. By connecting her to France, Sexton evokes a specific, bourgeois image that comments on social status by referencing high-end consumer products, thus turning Snow White into an expensive doll. However, reading this passage in the community setting, this was not of concern to the participants. Instead, someone complained: “All that emphasis on the concept of the virgin,” he said, “right in the beginning, the line ‘the virgin is a lovely number’ is just one example that sticks out and the actual number Snow White is in years is thirteen.” Someone else pointed out that in Anne Sexton’s time, “women were called numbers; you would say ‘she is a number’ when you thought a woman was attractive”, thus commenting on the objectification of women. Clearly, the issue the group focused on was the fact that Sexton paints her Snow White as a teenager:

One thing that is hard for me to forget, when this all starts happening, Snow White is thirteen.
It’s a very odd oppressiveness. There are all of these challenges happening when you are that

age. It is funny, you know, when she goes to stay with the seven dwarfs and they tell her not to open the door and she opens the damn door and then she did it again! And one of the lines includes the comment ‘Snow White the dumb bunny’.

Somehow, the group agreed, this is the reality of a teenager. There was one young woman in the group who took that description particularly to heart, recalling not only her early teenage years but also the fact that she used to admire the Disney Princesses, thinking of them as role models.

In contrast to the teenage Snow White, the poem shows the stepmother as physically aged. The queen “saw brown spots on her hand / and four whiskers over her lip” (Sexton 2001 [1971]: 5). The anxiety the queen experiences over Snow White’s beauty is the anxiety related to her aging body in a life focused on youthful appearance and beauty. This appearance is translated into value on the marriage market as well as value in general. After all, Snow White’s beauty is the only quality the wealthy prince is attracted to. However, Sexton neither pities nor ridicules the queen; nor is there compassion. She is the “wicked queen” (9) who needs to die a painful death by dancing in the “red-hot iron shoes / in the manner of red-hot roller skates” (9). At the end of the poem, in which Snow White is again repeatedly compared to a doll, she is the new queen, who looks into her mirror, following in the footsteps of her stepmother “as women do” (9). As Cassie Premo Steele observes, “it is clear that women cannot completely escape the repetitions that shape their experience” (2000: 63), also commenting on the repeated falls that Snow White goes through (falling down after being poisoned several times but also being dropped while in the coffin).

Sexton’s comment on the role of women was also evident to the people in the discussion group who found that element particularly interesting: “She becomes this doll that is ... you can do with it as you please. A doll can’t talk back and a doll will not age.” “Maybe that is a statement about how girls, when they become women, how there is so much emphasis on how you have to be not just the best but the best in terms of beauty and judgement”, someone else commented. However, the alternative embodied by the stepmother, whose rage and envy are punished with death, is not desirable either.

It should also not go unrecognized that the royal marriage in the fairytale was not an arrangement but a coincidence provoked by youth and beauty. After all, the prince sees the seemingly dead Snow White (who by then is an object in every way) and wants to own that beauty. This combination of beauty and death struck the participants of the discussion: “What I find ... bizarre is, when the dwarfs think she is dead and they put her in a glass coffin because she is so beautiful. And then this prince comes and sees this corpse, he likes it, I find that very weird ...” Another discussant was likewise bothered by the necromancy:

Evidently she hadn't decayed. And the prince keeps staring. It's ill. If this had happened in real life, you would say he really needs to be getting psychological treatment. But she comes back to life. It is amazing how just a bad moment of carrying brings her back to life. And I mean, they do marry but it is almost passed over in the poem. Most of it is about what happened to the evil queen at the end of the poem. Snow White is no longer thirteen but has moved to another – I would argue not necessarily better – kind of knowledge.

In this comment, the transformation – as in the title of the book – becomes obvious. This poem is indeed about a transition from youth to adulthood. By making beauty the obvious major issue, Sexton not only highlights that aspect of the fairytale but also shows how the narrative of gender-related beauty and the connected ageism dominate our understanding of women in society. At the very end of the poem, Snow White becomes like her mother. Her life becomes a cycle. In the poetry discussion, someone commented:

After all those horrible things you might think that Snow White has learned from that but instead she is now the beautiful woman and the other one died in the roller skates of fire. What are we supposed to think about that? This woman is dead and she died in the most miserable way. In the story, we want Snow White to have a decent life after all of these challenges. But do we have to have this happen to her?

Though at times humorous, the poem is dark as can be, showing no way out of the focus on beauty for women, especially since what the poem understands as beauty is youth, known for its unmarked skin, something that can also be expressed with the adjective “fair”.² Nobody leaves the story empowered, not even the young Snow White nor the prince. The triumph of the oppressed, so often essential to fairytales, remains absent here.

2 “Rapunzel”

The tale of the young woman who grows up in a tower guarded by the woman who kidnapped her – commonly known as “Rapunzel” – is the material of another of Sexton's poems in *Transformations*. Sexton translates the fairytale into a story about an intimate relationship between two women who are not equals: Rapunzel, kept in a tower that she cannot escape from, and the older woman, Mother Gothel, who is not her mother. Instead of a story about dependency, as the Brothers Grimm

2 While the issue of race is not part of the poem (or of *Transformations* at all), it is important to notice that “fair” was read with racist overtones by members of the community. In fact, the absence of race and the insistence on whiteness as beauty are problematic here.

tell it, Sexton's poem features the imagined relationship of mentor and student, girl and aunt, and the erotic appeal of the elderly body:

A woman
who loves a woman
is forever young. (Sexton 2001 [1971]: 35)

The poem's beginning is a declarative statement. Most poems in the collection criticize heteronormativity as a trap that dispossesses and imprisons women. Therefore, the beginning of this poem seems hopeful. In contrast to the previously discussed "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs", there is no beauty pressure evident. However, Sexton does not prepare us for the evil twist the poem takes in the next lines:

The mentor
and the student
feed off each other.
Many a girl
had an old aunt
who locked her in the study (Sexton 2001 [1971]: 35)

The issue of dependency is evident, yet the positions named here also connect to the topic of age/ism: both mentor and aunt are power positions that often imply age difference. Of course, these lines also started a discussion in the community group. Picking up on the issue of love, someone asked: "Does this aunt 'love' Rapunzel? Love does not seem to be here what is really going on. It's power dynamics. And Rapunzel doesn't seem to have much opportunity." Indeed, the aunt seems to feed off her role as the mentor as there is a reference to locking someone in the study, which refers to the imprisonment of Rapunzel. The poem continues:

They would play rummy
or lie on the couch
and touch and touch.
Old breast against young breast... (Sexton 2001 [1971]: 35)

This erotic image was of particular interest to the discussion groups:

I think there are lesbian overtones. When you got 'old breast against young breast' that's a very physical image and you couched it in the beginning with this talk about love. I don't know how to negotiate this in the poem. Sexuality does bleed in, like love relationships and power relationships. It seems important that that's how she starts it.

While "Rapunzel's" first stanza may at first glance suggest a powerful force of a lesbian relationship, the second stanza transports that same relationship into the sphere of the psychiatric ward. There it says: "I have left the three Christs of Ypsi-

lanti" (Sexton 2001 [1971]: 35), which refers to the infamous research project by Milton Rokeach with three schizophrenic men.³ The metaphors in this stanza concern mental health and Christianity. After repeating the phrase "I have left" (35), the speaker comments that "the church spires have turned to stumps" (35). "Let your dress fall down your shoulder, / come touch a copy of you" (35) may refer to the trap expressed in "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" of repeated female experiences as well as the notion of dependency. After all, a teacher would not be one without the student, the aunt not an aunt without the niece, and each role will reproduce itself. The power relations at the heart of these constellations are problematic and Sexton reveals them as such.

"Rapunzel" begins with a kind of prologue that takes up about half of the poem. Here the phrase "hold me" is repeated, an intense and desperate homoerotic love declaration that those who read Sexton autobiographically relate alarmingly to her sexual abuse of her daughter Linda. Remembering her mother in her autobiography, Linda reveals how she reads "Rapunzel" as a description of her experiences with her mother (1991). Likewise, Paula M. Salvio discusses the sexual abuse of Linda as well as Sexton's own experiences of abuse by her aunt (2007: 84) in her book about Sexton as a teacher and thinks about the strange power constellations that Sexton created with her students. In this light, "Rapunzel" becomes a confessional poem par excellence.

There is no distant commentary as there was in "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs"; Rapunzel's storyteller is emotionally part of the tale that she tells. After introducing the garden in detail, the witch catches the thief of her plants:

Ah ha, cried the witch,

[...]

you are a thief and now you will die. (Sexton 2001 [1971]: 39)

The anger and passion involved here did not go unnoticed by the community discussion group. Someone commented on how the kidnapper/aunt/witch expresses viciousness very quickly: "There is no negotiating. There is no: you did something I didn't like and maybe we could talk about ways of how we could rectify that. No, it's like: you gonna die."

Sexton comments on the irrational, passionate reaction, so often part of Brothers Grimm's tales, but she also creates sympathy for the witch. Quite obviously, Mother Gothel wants to possess Rapunzel, and the young woman does not have a say in this. When the prince comes to take her out of the tower, instead of being

3 See Milton Rokeach, *The Three Christs of Ypsilanti* (1964). Rokeach had three patients diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia who all believed themselves to be Jesus Christ. He brought them together in the hope of curing them and documented his experiment.

excited and happy, Rapunzel is irritated. He almost doesn't look human in Sexton's poem, with his voice "deep as a dog", "moss on his legs", and the "prickly plant that grows on his face" (Sexton 2001 [1971]: 41). The poem presents him almost as a monstrous being. The contrast between gendered bodies is one way to read these lines, yet the metaphors of nature and the wild dominate. Everything outside of the tower is dangerous and a potential threat. Mother Gothel has manipulated Rapunzel into believing that the tower is the only safe space.

When the prince arrives in this poem, attracted by Rapunzel's singing, "he declared his love" (41). However, what kind of love is he declaring? Sexton makes sure that the readers realize that there is no room for negotiating. After all, the prince is the intruder as the poem focalizes on Mother Gothel who is betrayed by the young couple. Sexton makes ending up in heterosexual constellations sound like the inevitability of growing up – another type of transformation that links gender, sexualities and age.

The last stanza focuses on Mother Gothel and her sadness upon losing the woman she loved:

As for Mother Gothel,
her heart shrank to the size of a pin,
never again to say: Hold me, my young dear,
hold me,
and only as she dreamt of the yellow hair
did moonlight sift into her mouth. (Sexton 2001 [1971]: 42)

The "yellow hair" is, of course, Rapunzel's, which Sexton has metaphorically referred to as "dandelion" and "a dog leash" (40), the latter evoking again the image of a subordinate relationship. Like a sailor, Mother Gothel had climbed the hair to enter "the stone-cold room, / as cold as a museum" – an image of Rapunzel's prison as well as Mother Gothel's memories. Reading this poem autobiographically, this line becomes a comment on traumatic memories, which are experienced as cold and lonely. Cassie Premo Steele sees an opportunity for healing in the ability to express traumatic memories. According to her, authors like Sexton used their craft in order to heal (2000: 62).

In the community poetry discussions, Sexton's biography remains unmentioned. However, the fact that the evil witch has the compassion of the speaker and therefore the sympathy of the reader is discussed vividly: "That ending is heart-breaking. It's funny, the moonlight sifting into her mouth, on one level it's pretty, it's a nature image but it's really a death image. She is kind of no more with us." In this reading, Mother Gothel dies symbolically by losing Rapunzel to the prince. It is also a comment on their relationship, as Rapunzel only stayed as long as she was incarcerated in the tower and had no other place to go, which is a comment on the limits of the family and teaching relationships mentioned in the prologue between

aunt and niece, student and mentor. These relationships reappear in the poem in the expression of "mother-me-do" (Sexton 2001 [1971]: 39, 42). A poetry discussant thought about possible escapes from dependency:

If Rapunzel is going to have any chance at her own life at all and not to be locked inside of towers, locked in rules and towers and things that somebody else says you have to follow, she has to get free of 'mother-me-do'. And in a way, the poem is optimistic. It can be outgrown. You don't have to stay in the tower.

Again, the poem illustrates a transformation from child to adult in which the possibilities of learning signify freedom. However, as the speaker sympathizes with Mother Gothel, the freedom becomes loss. "The world", the speaker laments, "is made up of couples. / A rose must have a stem" (Sexton 2001 [1971]: 42).

This last comparison is especially troubling. The flower, again an embodiment of beauty, is compared to Rapunzel, the stem that holds her – a comment on gender constellations – has thorns and therefore is connoted in a negative manner. The speaker takes Mother Gothel's position here, viewing the prince as an evil intruder into her abusive relationship with Rapunzel. After all, she had planned that "None but I will ever see her or touch her" (40). Told differently, the prince could be viewed as the savior of the young woman, but Sexton does not choose to do so. Instead, the young woman is the savior of the witch's youth, as repeated in the lines "A woman / who loves a woman / is forever young" (35, 39).

The poem concludes with a reference to Rapunzel and the prince: "They lived happily as you might expect" (42). As in many of the poems, this does not sound like a celebration of happiness. Discussants commented that it was a line more like "blablabla", exposing the formula of fairytales in which your life takes a definite turn through marriage. The element of aging is only revealed when the predictable constellation of two human beings fails, which – in this poetry collection – happens all the time. In fact, all the aging characters are painfully lonely, including Mother Gothel, as becomes obvious in the last stanza.

At a community poetry discussion, people were bothered about the metaphor of the pin at the end of "Rapunzel". The line "her heart shrank to the size of a pin" (42) stimulated an interesting discussion:

- "Sexton could have had that to the size of a pebble or she could have said: the size of a dust flake, but a pin! A pin! That can hurt you! Pins are made to hold something in place, so choosing that image, there is a reason for that."
- "This is the woman who took care of you. This woman essentially raised you. What do you feel about this? Are you glad she is dead?"
- "What about 'never again to say hold me', she is giving instructions! It's not that voluntary. She could have said something else like 'she will never be in her arms again'. This would be a little more ambiguous."

- “Is she happy that there is no more touch going on of whatever kind? But I feel like it is purposefully not answered. That’s not what Sexton wants you to focus on. She wants you to focus on this woman who is a witch and acted out in these ways. And this was the result in Rapunzel’s life.”

What becomes obvious from all these reactions is that Sexton successfully shifted the focus from Rapunzel, the main character in the Brothers Grimm tale, to Mother Gothel, the antagonist. While some poetry discussants took her side, stressing the pain and possible ungratefulness of separation, others sympathized with Rapunzel and wondered about possible traumatic aftermaths. Clearly, the end leaves the readers with questions concerning the relationship of the two women.

3 “Rumpelstiltskin”

At the heart of the fairytale Rumpelstiltskin, there is an arrangement similar to Rapunzel: an older man wants to trade a child in exchange for his magic skills. In contrast to the women featured in the previously discussed poems, Sexton does not comment on the appearance of the male characters in the collection and therefore they are not marked as aged.⁴ Accordingly, Sexton’s retelling of “Rumpelstiltskin” comes as a surprise. Originally, an otherworldly creature in the shape of a small human, Sexton introduces Rumpelstiltskin as an “old man” who seems to be a universal part of human nature:

Inside many of us
is a small old man
who wants to get out. (Sexton 2001 [1971]: 19)

The poem continues to picture the man as small (“no bigger than a two-year-old”, Sexton 2001 [1971]: 17) and “malformed” (17). “His head is okay / but the rest of him wasn’t Sanforized. / He is a monster of despair” (17). The description quickly twists into the grotesque with the definite pronouncement “He is all decay” (17). Yet – like the witch – this seems to be his power; after all, he pronounces himself the boss of “your dreams” (17). After that, he becomes the metaphorical enemy from within, a personal struggle, the evil twin of everyone’s nature as the storyteller shifts from the third-person pronoun to the first, taking over the voice of Rumpelstiltskin.

⁴ This is not the case in the fairytales told by the Brothers Grimm, where kings frequently age and fear for the inheritance of their kingdoms.

The described ugliness, however, does not connect to the fact that Rumpelstiltskin is an old man. Although the speaker insists that "He was as ugly as a wart", the old man is referred to as "a dwarf", an exhibit, a circus curiosity ("exhibited on Bond Street", Sexton 2001 [1971]: 18). This description recalls the freak show, and in her essay of the same title, Sexton meditates on the voyeurism of her audience (van Hynning 2016: 114). In that sense Rumpelstiltskin becomes our vulnerabilities exposed and, again, the object of affection in the poem. He is not an old man in the sense of human aging, rather an old man in the sense of an ancient and almost mystic element in existence. As the speaker claims that Rumpelstiltskin is "inside many of us" (Sexton 2001 [1971]: 17), he describes himself later in the poem as "Doppelgänger" and declares, "I am your evil eye" (19), embodying evil desires and qualities. This is further stressed by the end of the poem in which Rumpelstiltskin, after losing the bet and the baby, becomes self-destructive, tearing himself into two, and the parts are created as expected dichotomies, which are then twisted and referred to as "soft as a woman" (22), a barbed hook, papa and Doppelgänger.

At the community poetry discussion, people were particularly taken by the line "... no child will ever call me Papa" (18) early in the poem. While compassion is created for the miller's daughter who has to turn straw into gold ("poor thing", Sexton 2001 [1971]: 18), the discussion group felt sorry for Rumpelstiltskin: "All he wants is to be a father. That is his big deal. But he is using power. If you don't do this, I am going to do this. I am going to make you utterly miserable. She ran out of presents to give him."

This comment takes the perspective of Rumpelstiltskin, who could be seen as the helpful magician who simply wants to be paid for his services. Therefore, the miller's daughter doesn't give presents – as the discussant suggests – but pays Rumpelstiltskin in the Brothers Grimm version as well as in Sexton's poem. However, the requested payment is a child, which creates the drama of the story, as it is a prize too high to pay (and to accept). To read that request as a desire for fatherhood is an interesting way to access the fairytale, especially after Rumpelstiltskin has been introduced to the readers as a monster (Sexton 2001 [1971]: 17).

Others in the group likewise identified with Rumpelstiltskin, guided by Sexton's initial lines that he is "in many of us" (17):

The biggest key in the poem for me is the Doppelgänger. With that you can read the characters [the miller's daughter and Rumpelstiltskin] as almost each other. Even though they are of different gender, Rumpelstiltskin and the princess are just different sides of each other and how they use power. Maybe it is not that different as we think.

This is a very interesting comment as it does not divide the characters of the tale into the usual good and evil but manages to read them as almost alike. Philosophically, someone remarked: "She is the good one. But maybe there are other sides that

are coming through. Doubleness is always a presence”, meaning that both sides cannot be separated, they always act together. They are a team rather than antagonists. Yet the miller’s daughter who became queen is unwilling to hand over her child and succeeds in refusing.

The description of Rumpelstiltskin in the poem starts by linking the character to old age and stressing the age gap between him and the young and desperate woman. One participant in the poetry discussion remarked: “I think there are things in his soul or personality or whatever you want to call it that are dwarfed. He so yearns to have that child, and he has to use trickery and threat to be able to not be seen as the dwarf, to be worthy of having the child.” Rumpelstiltskin is drawn like a freak show character, a curiosity, degendered and not fully human. Using age within the semantic field of freaks and the monstrous, Sexton exposes the ageism inherent in traditional fairytales. She makes us see that fairytales construct women around beauty and link old age automatically to the monstrous.

This idea of worth, of being worth less when old, predominates in the fairytales in Sexton’s poetry collection. This is not only about women losing the appearance considered to be beautiful; it is also about men aging in loneliness and despair. The poems do not offer a solution but comment on these constellations almost in desperation and insert references to mental health treatments. This perhaps suggests the inevitability of mental health crises in a society that is built on norms that ultimately exclude its majority.

4 Conclusion

As Elisabeta Lopes observes in connection to *Transformations*, “the female characters that populate the various poems all seem obsessed with their physical appearance, yearning for everlasting beauty and youth” (2013: 144). Lopes reads the poetry as feminist criticism of fairytale standards for women that reduce them to aesthetic and passive objects. In telling the poems, the storyteller-witch herself does not celebrate aging. Instead, the poems become a lament, at times told matter-of-factly (but not without regret as in “Rapunzel”); at other times, the speaker herself expresses rage and envy, commenting nastily on the young and beautiful women as dolls. The issue of beauty is connected to women in youth and becomes their only value in the poems, but it is also the element that dispossesses them of their agency and that is inevitably making them miserable later in life as they lose this quality. The women with agency, however, are old and ugly, not necessarily wise, and their actions are motivated by anger and anxiety.

Anne Sexton’s poetry collection *Transformations* brilliantly comments on the constraints of society. As age is one of these constraints, the poems include numer-

ous references to the restrictions that come with age in terms of being a (valued) member of society. The young and beautiful princesses, who continue to dominate a space that is considered desirable, are exposed as dolls. By taking the position of the witch, the poems judge the lack of agency and power in these young female characters. However, in the end nothing remains but the aging body that does not have value in the tales. The evil reminds us that life is temporal. The occasional lines dropped in about age such as "he met an old woman. / Age, for a change, was of some use" ("The Twelve Dancing Princesses", Sexton 2001 [1971]: 90) or "never getting a middle-aged spread" ("Cinderella", Sexton 2001 [1971]: 57), which seem hopeful at first glance, are actually a depressing glimpse into society. When I asked about the element of aging at the poetry discussions, someone said:

Yes, sometimes the older characters do not come out very well at all. It is not that they are unpleasant, they are murderous. And what is that saying? The young are especially vulnerable to the kind of decisions that the older make and it can be very life threatening that way.

On the element of magic, which is a crucial part of fairytales, one participant said:

Magic can be a positive thing or it can be a negative thing. It almost has a life of itself. In terms of how people use that. In the poems, there are often spells that are cast. But think about what a spell is. It is kind of making somebody unable to do their own will. It is all about what you have forced on them with this thing that they can't escape from.

And that seems also to be true for the norms and prejudices in society. Sexton's take on "Sleeping Beauty", the poem "Briar Rose", which is the last in the collection, includes a description of the young woman who is turned into an insomniac by the spell:

I must not sleep
for while asleep I'm ninety
and think I'm dying.
Death rattles in my throat
like a marble.
I wear tubes like earrings.
I lie as still as a bar of iron. (Sexton 2001 [1971]: 111)

A transformation indeed, as the young princess's youth is extended by the curse, stopping time. The tubes worn like earrings and death rattling like marble create the sense of something precious, something beautiful. Death at the end of a long life becomes heavily sculpted eternity, as the material it is connected to here is iron. The image of the speaker inside a coffin is invoked.

Margaret Morganroth Gullette's groundbreaking work *Agewise* is dedicated to "all who believe they will want to commit suicide before they get old" (2011). It is tempting to read Sexton's suicide into that comment, especially after spotting all

those references to aging in her poetry that indeed fall into the American culture of ageism that Gullette criticizes harshly. She fights the narrative of decline that promotes the lack of (capitalist) productivity of the older adult population, pronouncing them useless (Gullette 2011: 43). The assumption is that “aging inevitably carries some level of dissatisfaction” (118). Enigmatically, Gullette reminds us that “[i]t is self-satisfaction that the forces of decline seek to undo” (118). Not focusing on aging but on ageism, Gullette succeeds in identifying common narratives of decline in public culture, of which fairytales are definitely part. The most dominant narrative is certainly the one of declining beauty, which is most relevant for women, and precisely that narrative is present in Anne Sexton’s *Transformations*.

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