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THE SHATTERING OF MYTH: ANNE SEXTON'S TRANSFORMING VIEW OF FAIRY TALES

POR

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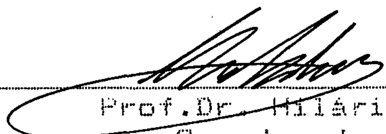

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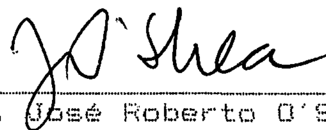

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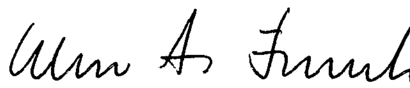

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In the present dissertation, I am specifically concerned with Anne Sexton's Transformations, a book in which she rewrites in verse sixteen fairy tales from the Brothers Grimm.

Relying basically on the assumption that changes in meaning effectuated by alternative retellings of fairy tales can tell us much about the culture from which it derives, I analyse six of Sexton's revisionist poems in terms of the transformations that women's social and sexual identities were suffering at the time the book was published, 1971. My main purpose is to verify how much Sexton has modernized the tales and demythicized conventional sex-role divisions and marriage expectations they convey.

RESUMO

Na presente dissertação, eu estou especificamente interessada em Transformations, onde Anne Sexton reescreve em verso dezesseis contos de fadas dos Irmãos Grimm.

Baseando-me essencialmente na idéia de que mudanças em significado efetuadas por versões alternativas de contos de fadas podem nos dizer muito sobre a cultura que lhes deu origem, analiso seis dos poemas revisionistas de Sexton em termos das transformações que as identidades social e sexual da mulher estavam sofrendo à época da publicação do livro, 1971. Meu objetivo principal é verificar o quanto Sexton modernizou os contos e demitificou modelos cristalizados de papéis sexuais e expectativas conjugais que estes propagam.

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INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER

ANNE SEXTON AND THE CRITICS

> When we must deal with problems, we instinctively resist trying the way that leads through obscurity and darkness. We wish to hear only of the unequivocal results, and completely forget that these results can only be brought about when we have ventured into and emerged again from darkness...
>
> -- Carl Jung, The Stages of Life

"She writes like a man" used to be the highest possible praise to the work of a woman writer in the male-oriented literary community of post-World War II America. What would then be the general critical response to the poetry of an "uneducated" housewife, rehearsing her first moves into a poetic universe exclusively concerned with the "universality" of male experience?

Born Anne Gray Harvey, Anne Sexton began writing poetry seriously after a suicide attempt on her 28th birthday, in 1956. Similarly to the women interviewed by Betty Friedan in The Feminine Mystique, Sexton could not find self-fulfillment in the restricted limits housewifery imposed on women's individual

potentialities. As a victim of the mystique, Sexton was not even aware of the creative power within herself. When asked by an interviewer why she had begun writing poetry somewhat late in life (she was almost 30), Sexton explained:

> Until I was twenty-eight I had a kind of buried self, who didn't know she could do anything but make white sauce and diaper babies. I didn't know I had any creative depths. I was a victim of the America Dream, the bourgeois, middle-class dream. All I wanted was a little piece of life, to be married, to have children. . . . I was trying my damnedest to lead a conventional life, for that was how I was brought up, and it was what my husband wanted of me. But one cannot build little white picket fences and keep nightmares out. The surface cracked when I was about twenty-eight. I had a psychotic break and tried to kill myself (Kevles 84).

Following hospitalization for suicidal depressiveness and thanks to the advice of her psychotherapist, who encouraged her to write as a form of therapy-- "don't kill yourself," the doctor said, "Your poems might mean something to someone else someday"-- (84). Sexton found in writing a sense of purpose in her life, a sort of a mission had been assigned to her-- writing now had become her chief responsibility. Through poetry her feelings of self-displacement and emotional chaos could finally come to a sort of order. Even if strictly formal and aesthetic (esp. in her early poetry), this order, paradoxically enough, gave her the freedom to expose all the wild forces that had been so long imprisoned in her "buried self." As Sexton herself put it in an interview to Patricia Marx, "you could let some extraordinary animals out if you had the right cage, and that cage would be form"(80).

Sexton's poetic development goes hand in hand with her continuous struggle with psychological problems and recurrent hospitalization in mental institutions. But determined to take her writing beyond the therapeutic-amateurish condition, Sexton enrolled in a poetry workshop offered by the Boston Center for Adult Education, taught by John Holmes, a member of the senior faculty at Tufts University. The workshop represented the second and one of the most decisive moments of Sexton's awareness of her own creative skills. The first, as she herself tells us, was among the "insane" people she met in the mental institution. In the language of the schizophrenics, Sexton found a poetic language-- a language whose meaning is condensed and not openly stated, a language not only of words but of silence (Middle Book 198). Among crazy people, and removed from the restricting roles of housewife and mother, Sexton-- the madwoman-- was able to look for a new identity, speaking a new language. Through therapy, she was given a chance to decode her secret yearnings and to establish connections between her neuroses and her life. Among the poets in Holmes's worksop, Sexton experienced this same feeling of belonging somewhere. The displaced housewife had finally found a place of her own. Trying to explain this feeling to an interviewer, Sexton compares the workshop with the mental hospital:

> I started in the middle of the term, very shy, writing very bad poems, solemnly handing them in for eighteen others in the class to hear. The most important aspect of that class was that I felt I belonged somewhere. When I first got

> sick and became a displaced person, I thought I was quite alone, but when I went into the mental hospital, I found I wasn't, that there were other people like me. It made me fell better-- more real, sane. I felt, "these are my people." Well, at the John Holmes class that I attended for two years, I found I belonged to the poets, that I was real there, and I had another "these are my people" (Middlebrook 197).

In the beginning, writing poetry represented for Sexton delving into the depths of the unconscious for an understanding of her disturbed self. After all, she told an interviewer, "poetry milks the unconscious. The unconscious is there to feed it little images, little symbols, the answers, the insights I know not of" (Kevles 85). Differently from most of her Boston contemporaries, like Adrienne Rich, Sylvia Plath and Maxine Kumin -- who eventually became her best friend and collaborator -- Sexton had no formal education and did not feel bound to any literary tradition. We know that both Rich and Plath began writing in the modes of the best metaphysical and modernist poetry, eventually growing out of these models as they gained a poetic identity of their own. But the imprint of tradition was not an indelible mark in Sexton's education. In fact, she had the advantage of not having had a repressive traditional education, and yet of receiving both the instruction and, later on, the academic credentials she needed (honorary Doctor of Letters, Tufts U; full professor at Boston U; honorary Doctor of Letters, Fairfield U, among others.) This detachment from a formal literary education to a great extent enabled Sexton to devise her own poetic aesthetics and to deal with certain subject matters never previously accepted or considered suitable for "high"

literature.

Together with her first workshop experience with John Holmes, Sexton was granted a scholarship to the Antioch College Writers Conference, where she went in the summer of 1958 --- attracted by the poem "Heart's Needle"--- exclusively to work with W.D. Snodgrass. Working with Snodgrass was another decisive moment in Sexton's career. He made her abandon some of the conventions she had assimilated into her poetry under the influence of John Holmes, such as allusions to classical literature or basing the poem on general abstractions. The influence of "Heart's Needle," a poem about Snodgrass's loss of his daughter through divorce, was crucial to the solidification of Sexton's poetic style and choice of subject matter. Reading the poem, when she herself was separated from her daughter due to emotional disability, gave her the courage to keep on writing such "intimate" poetry. She felt, "if he had the courage, then I had courage" (89). When Sexton met Snodgrass, she had already written three quarters of <u>To Bedlam and Part Way Back</u>, her first published book, which appeared in 1960, and, as she tells an interviewer, he was the first established poet to like her work (89). Snodgrass's influence on Sexton is evident in two of the best Bedlam poems, "Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward," and "The Double-Image," in which she explores such delicate questions as the pain of loss and the conflicting relationships between mother and daughter.

When still at Holmes's workshop, Sexton was painfully struggling to establish a poetic identity of her own. Holmes, however, advised her not to write such personal poems about the

madhouse. "That isn't a fit subject for poetry," he used to say. As an apprentice not very confident of her own literary abilities, Sexton even tried to take Holmes's advice: "I tried to mind them. I tried to write the way the others, especially Maxine wrote, but it didn't work. I always ended up sounding like myself" (89). It was Snodgrass and later on Robert Lowell, with whom Snodgrass suggested that she studied, who, in a way, allowed Sexton to dare herself and to sound like herself.

In 1958, Sexton began attending Lowell's writing seminar at Boston University. There she met George Starbuck, and in january 1959, Sylvia Plath joined the group. Plath, who had a very traditional intellectual training, was, at this time, writing very formal intellectual poems (before the outburst of passion and hatred yet to come in Ariel), while Sexton was daringly writing out of her own private pain with no covers or censoring, and definetely working her way into the confessional mode--an aesthetic that her poetry helped establish. Evaluating Lowell's influence, Sexton said: "He helped me to distrust the easy musical phrase and to look for the frankness of ordinary speech. . . he didn't teach me what to put into a poem, but what to leave out" (90-1).

By the time of the publication of her first book, To Bedlam and Part Way Bach (1960), Sexton was already identified, not always sympathetically, as a Confessional poet. As the title suggests, the book deals directly with the author's own experiences at mental institutions: the implications of madness; the painful and often problematic relationship between mother and

daughter; and especially with the feeling that once you have been to bedlam, you never fully recover-- the need to probe into the depths of the unconscious that comes with madness and therapy never takes you back to the same home you once left. Confessional poetry, as M.L. Rosenthal has noted is a poetry of suffering (65). Often compared to other so-called confessional poets, such as Lowell, Berryman, Roethke, Snodgrass and Plath, Sexton had her own peculiar ways of speaking out her suffering. She wears no masks. Her language is strikingly direct and colloquial; her metaphors are often brilliant and vivid, bringing the most obscure psychological conflicts into astounding concretion; her imagery is simple and assertive. Sexton sets up no barriers to her own writing about controversial and delicate matters such as madness, suicide, incest, abortion, menstruation, addiction-- the dark and painflul side of human existence. In her poetry, Sexton "confesses" to things that most people dread to admit as part of their own lives. She assumes the madwoman, the neurotic, the vulnerable, the strong and the weak, the desperate and the hopeful being that lives in each one of us.

At a time when literary orthodoxy demanded that poetry dealt with universal abstracts, the Confessional School constituted a break with tradition, dealing openly with, I would say, personal universals-- but seldom acknowledged as such. Confessional poetry refuses the alienation traditional literary norms impose on the creative subject by assuming no distance between the artist and the work of art. As Lillian Robinson puts it, referring to women's writing, "the person, the personality and the expressions of personality are one" (231-2). Besides dispensing with the

authorial distance of "high poetry," confessional poets have enlarged the range of acceptable subject matter to incorporate into their work intimate emotional experiences, often considered too personal, too embarassing and, sometimes, taboo. The confessional self knows no boundaries between the private and the public. It is, as Karl Malkoff has pointed out, an expanded self, since it merges interior with exterior events, creating a whole, in which these two levels of experience cannot be distinguished or dissociated from each other. The self responds to experience and is both agent and victim of its own experience-- the public becomes the private and vice-versa. In other words, the confessional self encompasses all it perceives (167).

Writing in the Confessional mode and therefone breaking with a whole poetic tradition, Anne Sexton has often been accused of "indulging in self-pity and self-dramatization." Indeed, Sexton dramatizes a self that is unmistakably feminine, so it is no wonder that, in a predominantly male literary environment, governed by the New Critical ideals of dissociation of sensibility and rational objectivity, her poems inspired much controversy.

One of Sexton's earliest censors (still in the years of her apprenticeship), and the one who, in opposing her work, aroused in her a more acute awareness of her strength as a poet, was John Holmes. Working hard and opening her poems for discussion, both in Lowell's seminar and in Holmes's workshop, Sexton felt she had gathered enough material for a book. She then submitted the poems to Holmes's criticism, and his reaction made evident how deeply

unhappy he was with her text. Himself a very traditional poet, Holmes did not find in Sexton's poems the required elements for "high" poetry-- no authorial distance, no elevating literary allusions, no "universality" of theme. By his response we can tell how shocked and even embarrassed he was at the way Sexton exposed her private pain. Holmes condemned the very sources of Sexton's poems-- her own experience at a mental institution-- claiming that she was being too self-centered and that by writing about her psychiatric experience, she was forcing others to listen to her, in a selfish attitude. Holmes finally accused Sexton of using poetry to purge her own neuroses and of not teaching or helping her readers in any way. His critical advice was straightforward and frank:

> I distrust the very source and subject of a great many of yours poems, namely all those that describe and dwell on your time in the hospital... I am uneasy... that what looks like a brilliant beginning might turn out to be so self-centered and so narrow a diary that it would be clinical only.
>
> Something about asserting the hospital and psychiatric experience seems to me very selfish-- all a forcing others to listen to you, and nothing given the listeners, nothing that teaches them or helps them... It bothers me that you use poetry this way. It's all a release for you, but is it for anyone else except a spectacle of someone experiencing release? (feb.1959) (Middlebrook 203).

Sexton knew that Holmes's advice was not a critique of her poetry, but overt censorship. He did not even suggest that the poems needed to be revised; rather, he said bluntly: "don't publish [them] in a book."

Sexton's response to holmes was the poem "For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further." Sexton Knows that the quest for an

identity and the shattering of illusions bring painful, and sometimes embarassing, revelations. Yet, she has chosen to unmask her illusions and to stand naked at the "truth" she discloses in her poetry. She, like Oedipus the king, has chosen to seek the path of truth, however painful it may be. In the epigraph to _To Bedlam and Part Way Back_, Sexton identifies her courage to expose inward views of herself with Oedipus's determination to know the truth, as she cites from a letter of Schopenhauer to Goethe:

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

In "For John...", Sexton dramatizes her own account of the Oedipus-Jocasta controversy. The poem, originally intended as an apologia to John Holmes, represents, in a larger sense, a defense not only of her own self-probing and self-exposure all along the book, but of the whole school of poetry that came to be called "Confessional." As she contends with Holmes's disapproval of the lack of conventional standards of beauty and of an intellectual-philosophic rationality in her poems, Sexton finds out that these are not the only means through which to achieve poetic truth. Most importantly, she has found out that "the inward look that society scorns" has enabled her to unveil not a private but a collective truth, which, to the horror of the Jocastas the we carry in ourselves, includes and reveals us. However awful the truths she uncovers through her confessions, and although the poetic scrutiny of personal revelations may not be beautiful,

Sexton has found an incomparable order in them. She has learned to value her own existence and her own "ugly" truths as an "accident of hope." One need not look for beauty outside of oneself to find valuable lessons:

> Not that it was beautiful,
> but that in the end, there was
> a certain sense of order there;
> something worth learning
> in that narrow diary of my mind.
> ....
> And if I tried
> to give you something else,
> something outside of myself,
> you would not know
> that the worst of anyone
> can be finally,
> an accident of hope.

Sexton defines her position in relation to confessional poetry, when she suggests in the poem that suffering is not a prerrogative of an isolated, individualized self. Rather, her pain and her sins, her guilt and her horror may be anyone's. Sexton is perfectly lucid of the generality of suffering, no matter the personal context in which it is experienced, or the personal standpoint from which it is viewed:

> I tapped my own head,
> it was glass, an inverted bowl.
> At first it was private.
> Then it was more than myself;
> it was you, or your house
> or your kitchen.

Sexton reduces the tension between John and herself by including him in her own experience, and by suggesting that his reluctance to accept her inner revelations results from a general fear to look inward and reveal ourselves:

> This is something I would never find
> in a lovelier place, my dear,
> although your fear is anyone's fear,

like an invisible veil between us all...
and sometimes in private,
my kitchen, your kitchen,
my face, your face.

In her reply to Holmes, Sexton, as Kay E. Capo has noted, moves away from the strictly personal level of his accusations to place his discontentment in a more universal context (88). His fear is "anyone's fear" of self-exposure. Privacy, then, becomes just a safety device created by our need to keep away from the illusion-shattering power of revelations and from the intimate beckoning for identification that Confessional poetry makes to us readers. In "For John...", Sexton sets new aesthetic values to assess Confessional poetry. As Capo points out, she separates beauty from order and truth by admitting as proper subjects for verse the grotesque and the gruesome, provided that they disclose the truth (93).

But the disclosure of suffering and personal weaknesses--the grotesque reality of the human self that we prefer not to see-- in such a direct and simple language, so characteristic of Sexton's style, was yet to arouse the disapproval of many other poets and critics. James Dickey's review of To Bedlam and Part Way Back, for one, exemplifies the general critical attitude towards confessionalism. Dickey, like Holmes, feels uneasy with so much painful self-scrutiny conveyed so straightforwardly, without what he calls "individual linguistic suggestibility" (63). Dickey also fears to see the horror, which could be his own, and feels "tempted to drop [the poems] furtively into the nearest ashcan, rather than be caught with them in the presence of so much naked suffering" (63). Although he acknowledges the

relevance of Sexton's themes such as madness, near-madness, and the pathetic attempts at cure and readjustment to society, Dickey, like many conservatite critics, conscious of the political force of some of Sexton's poetry, prefers to dismiss it by alleging "lack of artistic control"-- "no more than jottings from a psychoanalyst notebook" (see Ferrier 360).

Sexton's second published volume, All My Pretty Ones(1962), deals with similarly painful themes as the Bedlam poems, going a little deeper into more general themes of loss (esp. her parents) as the poet tries to define herself in relation to the outer world. James Dickey's review of Sexton's second book still retains its first disdainful tone against her dwelling "insistently on the pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experience" (106). In this book, Sexton offers a second apologia for Confessional poetry, "With Mercy for the Greedy." The poem is Sexton's reply to a friend who had urged her "to make an appointment for the sacrament of confession." Here Sexton reiterates the universality of her aesthetic attitude when she affirms that poems are the expression of the tongue's continuing wrangle to confess and justify "its" sins:

> My friend, my friend, I was born
> doing reference work in sin, and born
> confessing it. This is what poems are:
> with mercy
> for the greedy,
> they are the tongue's wrangle,
> the world's pottage, the rat's star.

Sexton, as Paul Lacey has pointed out, chooses the sacrament of poetry over the sacrament of confession. "She chooses the particular kind of sacrament of confession which poetry is, its kind of mercy, its wrestle with words and meanings"(235).

In _Live or Die_(1966), her third book, winner of a Pulitzer Prize in 1967, Sexton faces the ultimate question of her life and confronts her own suicidal impulses, as she tries to decide whether life, not only for her, but for everyone, is worthwhile (Johnson 181). This is Sexton's first volume in which the poems are arranged chronologically, and this allows us to feel her move towards a more mature and positive view of life after having gone through the darkness and the pain of madness and despair. In the final poem of the book, Sexton chooses life over death, as she herself tells an interviewer, "I didn't want to poison the world... I didn't want to be the killer" (Kevles 96). In "Live", as feminist critic Suzanne Juhasz has noted, Sexton finds the reason for and the source of life in her experience and identity as a woman-- she, as a woman, has the power to generate life:

> Today life opened inside me like an egg
> and there inside
> after considerable digging
> I found the answer
> ....
> And you realize that she does this daily!
> I'd known she was a purifier
> but I hadn't thought
> she was solid,
> hadn't known she was an answer.

As life-giver and life-maker, as woman and poet, Sexton experiences the world as a part of herself. Now she rejects the obscurity of madness in favor of the light of the sun, the light of life:

> So I won't hang around in my hospital shift,
> repeating the Black Mass and all of it.
> I say live, live because of the sun,
> the dream, the excitable gift.

As Juhasz points out, poetry for Sexton has now transcended its

first therapeutic function, and, being a public act, her writing may affect other people's lives (343). Nonetheless, personal experience and suffering are communicated to others so that each one of us readers may find a gift in them. As Sexton tried to explain to Holmes in "For John...", the ugly truths of the human self may become an "accident of hope," an "excitable gift."

Yet, many critics and reviewers still refused to see in Live or Die anything other than a disgusting account of Sexton's own psychotic breaks and her inner contention with a death wish. Charles Gullans, for instance, criticizes not only Sexton's themes-- wanting to die, resistance, insanity-- but the way she "confesses" her traumas and her anguish as if she were talking with her analyst. Like Holmes and Dickey, Gullans seems afraid of being included in and revealed by Sexton accounts of her inner struggles. He denies that her poems may have a relevance to someone else's life by simply refusing to engage in the interpersonal relationship her poetry establishes with the readers, and by diminishing its aesthetic value:

> These are not poems at all and I feel that I have, without right or desire, been made a third party to her conversations with her psychiatrist. It is painful, embarrassing, and irritating. The immediacy and terror of her problems are painful; the personal character of the confessional detail is embarrassing; and the tone of hysterical melodrama which pervades most of the writing is finally irritating (148).

Love Poems(1969), Sexton's fourth published volume would also arise the discontentment of some traditional critics who resisted to accept the personalization of the object in her

poems. But Love Poems, as William Shurr has observed, is not just a collection of love poems. It traces the most intense moments of a love affair, which apparently lasted four years, from the quiet curiosity at the period of fascination; the ecstasy of the consummation; the suffering in the frequent separations; and the pain after the definitive break (246). Early reviewers of the book complained that the poems seemed "to have been written far too quickly, as if she were rather nervous of overcooking emotional raw material" (qtd. in Shurr 254). Others like William Dickey condemn Sexton for creating a world in which the objects "have no independent validity"; rather, "they exist as projections of her own indulgent emotional states" (213). By what we know of Sexton's style, we could argue that immediacy and the intensity provided by an outburst of "emotional raw material" is exactly what she sought to convey. So, in this rawness of emotions and in this seemingly hasty arrangement of the poems lies the strength of her craft and not the weakness. Sexton had a gift for merging personal experience with exterior experience, establishing a connection between the two, that not necessarily existed. As William Shurr has accurately put it, she had a talent for "pseudobiography" (254). Sexton could not talk about an object as simply an object outside of herself, as William Dickey would have liked her to do, because perhaps she was very much conscious of the subject's power to modify any object by simply looking at it. What she conveys in her poems is herself looking at and thus affecting and being affected by exterior events, people and things, and not denying that she is doing it. That is

why most of her poems sound like straightforward confessions even when they are not.

The "confessional" label has, in fact, prevented many readers and critics from realizing the extent of Sexton's poetic achievement. Nonetheless, being identified as a confessional poet, as Diana H. George observes, did not stop Sexton from going beyond the limits of her own self experience; it just did not let readers notice that she had done so (xvii).

More recently, critics like Beverly Fields, William Shurr, Lawrence J.Dessner and Paul Lacey, to mention just a few, have begun to argue the validity of the confessional label often attached to Sexton's poetry. Fields, for instance, believes that Sexton's work conveys a number of symbolic themes which have been misapprehended as literal autobiography (73). In her opinion, due to the density of Sexton's poetry, critics have found in a biographical approach an easy way out. And, although we cannot deny that there are elements of autobiography in her poetry, Fields finds it more profitable to credit Sexton with a certain authorial distance, and to read her poems as poems rather than as memoirs (73). In "The Poetry of Anne Sexton," Fields carries out an analysis of the literary devices Sexton employs to enhance the effect of the meaning or vision she proposes to convey. When analyzing the techniques employed in "Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward," Fields points to the fact that the poem has led many critics to conjecture whether or not Sexton has actually had an illegitimate child. Such misinterpretation, Fields believes, derives from the poet's conscious use of a confessional tone to "confess" to the experience of the other (78). William Shurr, as

mentioned previously, has also commented on Sexton's talent for pseudoautobiography-- i.e., for investing someone else's experience with her own personal feelings, thus transforming her individual history into an "intense fictional realism" (254). Sexton herself has contributed to the discussion of such controversial questions as the limits between her work and her life, telling an interviewer that "it's a difficult label, 'confessional,' because I'll often confess to things that never happened. . . If I did all the things I confess to, there would be no time to write a poem... I'll assume the first person and it's someone else's story" (Heyen 134). Lawrence J.Dessner goes further to argue that "all of the confessions, like all of whatever may be written, 'never happened'." In his opinion, the very mediation of language and the selectivity of writing turns all our discourse into fiction (136). Analyzing "The Abortion" from All My Pretty Ones, a poem which most critics have believed to be literally autobiographical, Dessner finds a carefully woven poetic structure supporting the emotional structure, so to speak, that moves the reader as the persona narrates her pain and regret. Although Confessional poetry claims to "hold back nothing,"[1] the very patterning of art that shapes language into poetic form and the very manner of putting down even the most shocking and painful personal truths are ways of holding back. And, as Dessner puts it, "what is held back we call truth; what is made manifest through language we call beauty"(142). In his opinion, in Sexton's most successful poems, the most shocking personal revelations are often conveyed through a craftsmanlike

use for art, which for him is "artifice, something other than truth-telling"(145). Both Dessner and Fields agree that the most important is not to decide whether Sexton's true emotional conflicts were more or less painful than her poetry conveys, but to view her poems as "transformations of experience, and not experience itself." The only truth we can get to through poetry is the truth that language is able to convey-- one, due to the inherent limitations of words, mediated by craft and artifice.

Paul Lacey, in "The Sacrament of Confession," argues that the "confessional" Label that has distinguished poets like the Robert Lowell of Life Studies, W.D. Snodgrass, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, among others, has been useful to point to a new way of dealing with previously unaccepted subject matters in poetry.[28] Differently from traditional poetry, in which the poet distances him/herself from the poem by assuming a persona, the confessional "I" is supposed to be autobiographical. M.L. Rosenthal, quoted by Lacey, considers Lowell's "Skunk Hour" and Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus" as authentic representatives of confessional writing since "they put the speaker himself at the center of the poem in such a way as to make his psychological vulnerability and shame an embodiment of his civilization" (216). Lacey, like Fields, Shurr and Dessner, admits that the relation between the writer and his/her persona in a poem is still a complex one.

In fact, this complexity may be observed as critics, like Ralph J.Mills Jr., for instance, compliment Sexton for the admirable way she wrote about "bitter-sweet memory and loss,"(113) having in mind the "elegy" for her brother, "For

Johnny Pole on the Forgtten Beach," when we know that Sexton never had a brother. Although even in "confessional" writing there is some distance between author and character, the shock caused by most "confessional" poetry, like that of Anne Sexton, comes from a new attitude towards expressing one's feelings and impressions through poetry; comes from, as Lacey puts it, "a new openness, a willingness to make poetry of experience unmediated by such doctrines of objectivity as the mask, the persona, the objective correlative, a preoccupation with extraordinary experiences-- mental breakdown, infidelity, divorce" (216-7).

As we have previously pointed out, it has been quite easy for traditional critics to dismiss Sexton's poetry for its subject matter, disregarding altogether the existence of an aesthetic form and of a new attitude towards poetic expression that demands to be judged in new terms.

Traditional critics often tend to assess Sexton's poetry not for what it is, but for what it should be, and when this happens, as feminist critic Suzanne Juhasz puts it, "the critical cart is before its horse" (118). The traditional critic is the one for whom the principles of universality, generalization and objectivity are synonyms of good art. T.S. Eliot, one of the mentors of the New Critical School, offers us the model of the "good" artist. According to him, "the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates," so that the artist's attitude towards his creation is marked by "a continual extinction of personality" (qtd. in Juhasz 115). The fusion of personality and

text, of poet and poem, as we have seen, is the central characteristic of Anne Sexton's poetry that the New Criticism just could not deal with. This inadequacy of the estabilished critical canon to approach fairly works written by women made necessary a questioning of the dominant definitions of art, as well as of the function of criticism itself, for as Alicia Ostriker has accurately put it, "where critical dicta and works of art fail to coincide, it is the dicta that needs to change" (13).

This revolutionary task of questioning aesthetic standards and critical criteria was undertaken in the late 1960s by groups such as the feminists. The feminist critic does not automatically apply traditional critical rules to a poem; she/he is more open to innovative works and to judge them on their own new terms. Thanks to the growth of the academic feminist movement, works of women poets like Anne Sexton-- which do not fit in the male literary orthodoxy-- could finally be judged in more sensible terms, and many of the misinterpret-ations and distortions that Sexton's poetry was liable to suffer have been reconsidered as new aesthetic criteria have been established and as criticism has moved its focus of attention to the poem and not to the status quo (Juhasz 118).

The main contribution of feminist criticism to the reassessment of Anne Sexton's poetry comes from the acknowledgment of the political power of shared personal experiences. Indeed, a common characteristic of much of the poetry produced by women in the 1960s and early 1970s is a tendency to turn to (pseudo)autobiography in order to better

understand women's condition in a larger socio-cultural context. Critics like Elizabeth Janeway have noted that the fusion of fiction and autobiography in women's writing derives from a need to exchange individual history to arrive at common conclusions. So, autobiographical impressions are not conveyed as if they belonged to a specific individual, but as if others have also experienced the same pain and have faced the same struggles. As Janeway puts it, "what happened to me is presented as a parable of what has happened or may probably happen to other women" (368). This search for identification and understanding, sometimes conveyed through a bitter tone of discontentment and despair, is the basic attitude that informs most poetry written by women during this period.

As critics like Fields, Shurr, Dessner and Lacey have begun to question Sexton's confessionalism by bringing into light the figure of the poet storyteller, feminist critics have begun to view Sexton's poems about personal experience as having a power to reach out to broader issues.

Examining poems that were previously considered strictly autobiographical, feminist critics have focused on the cultural significance of Sexton's most "personal" and "intimate" poetry, especially that concerned with family conflicts, mother-daughter relationship and the female body. Margaret Honton, in her article "The Double Image and The Division of Parts: A Study of Mother-Daughter Relationships in the Poetry of Anne Sexton," proposes to discuss Sexton's writing in terms of a poet and her personae, not in terms of the poet and her autobiography. This approach, in her

opinion, allows us to extract universal meanings from highly personal writing, and to attach to "confessional" poetry a variety of meanings: "acknowledgment, avowal, public profession of belief and values as well as admission of guilt" (99). Analyzing some of Sexton's poems about motherhood and daughterhood, Honton shows how Sexton developes from a negative sense of herself as a double image of her mother to a fuller self-image as a woman and mother herself. In poems such as "In Celebration of My Uterus," Sexton starts from her own personal center to universilize her experiences and to accept herself as a woman. The poem may be seen, Honton believes, as a "loving poem to womanhood" (115). More sociologically oriented critics like Lillian Robinson identify in Sexton's celebration a mystification not of the uterus itself but of sisterhood-- the uterus becomes simply a symbol that connects herself to an endless chain of sisters (264). In "Goddess Manifestations as Stages in Feminine Metaphysics in the Poetry of Anne Sexton," Stephanie Demetrakopoulos also examines Sexton's poems about her daughters and observes how her poetry advances from a dark suicidal tone to an affirmation of life that is based on matrilineal or goddess values (117). Sexton's suicide drive reappears when her daughters grow up and she, as woman and mother, loses connection with her most meaningful reality-- the family-- and cannot find herself in a word dominated and ruled by a masculine god. Demetrakopoulos considers Sexton's loss of a sense of selfhood a typical symptom of a woman immersed in a culture overwhelmed with masculine values. As she proceeds to examine Sexton's contribution in defining positive and strong feminine values, Demetrakopoulos

connects Sexton's matrilineal experiences to the ancient Demeter-Kore archetype, thus adding a broader dimension and a universality for the origins of the feminine consciousness Sexton expresses.

Also with respect to Sexton's poems about family relationships, Carole Ferrier in "Anne Sexton: Demystifier or Mystic?" suggests a parallel between the anti-psychiatrist school's concept of the "death of the family" and the feeling of the destructive power of parent-child relationships, conveyed especially in Sexton's poems about her father-- notably, "The Death of the Fathers" sequence in _The Book of Folly_ (1972). Discussing the possibility of ideas originally presented in imaginative writing be further on used to develop theory, as Freud did with Greek drama, Ferrier finds similarities between Sexton's concern with demystifying madness, schizophrenia, mental hospitals and suicide with R.D. Laing's notion that schizophrenia is merely a social label that characterizes a "political event" (366). In poems like "You, Doctor Martin," Sexton exposes the patriarchal role that psychiatrists play in order to bring their patient's view into line with the dominant view. In like manner, Ferrier continues, literature and theory come together again when one compares Simone De Beauvoir's analysis of the condition of women in a bourgeois-patriarchal society and Sexton's own account of the confinement and limitations of housewifery in the poem "Housewife." De Beauvoir defines women's role at home as perpetuating bourgeois social relations:

> But she has no other job than to maintain and provide

> for life in pure and unvarying generality; she perpetuates the species without change, she ensures the even rhythm of the days and the continuity of the home, seeing to it that the doors are locked. (The Second Sex 405)

Anne Sexton, in a poem entitled "Housewife," describes housewifery as a form of life that forces itself into women's bodies and imposes on them a perpetual, limited and repetitive pattern of action:

> Some women marry houses.
> It's another kind of skin; it has a heart,
> a mouth, a liver and bowel movements.
> The walls are permanent and pink.
> See how she sits on her knees all day,
> faithfully washing herself down.

The socio-political relevance of Anne Sexton's poetry is more fully discussed by Jane McCabe in "A Woman who Writes: A Feminist Approach to the Early Poetry of Anne Sexton." In the article, McCabe contends that although Sexton never claimed to be a feminist, many of her poems focus on and depicts the hardships women suffer in our society. McCabe believes that Sexton's concern with female bodily experiences and also with mother-daughter relationships make her poetry of special interest to feminist critics (217). And, like most feminist critics, McCabe views the poetry of Anne Sexton as moving beyond the personal territory into which conventional critics have enclosed it. Sexton, herself a suburban housewife, shows her discontentment with a confortable but dissatisfying life: "I... answered the phone,/ served cocktails as a wife/ should, made love among my petticoats,/ and august tan..." Sexton's awareness of the isolation of domestic life and of the restricted expectations society holds towards the housewife, added to the difficulties

she must face if she eventually dares to be a poet, constitute, in McCabe's opinion, representative feelings of a woman who lives in a society that oppresses her. Writing, then, allied with imaginative power, becomes Sexton's only means to transform her "calm" suburban landscape into a world of magic and visionary power(near insanity):

> I have gone out, a possessed witch,
> haunting the black air, braver at night;
> dreaming evil, I have done my hitch
> over the plain houses, light by light;
> lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.
> A woman like that is not a woman quite
> I have been her kind
> ("Her Kind" BPWB,21)

Together with other contemporary women poets, like Sylvia Plath and Denise Levertov, Sexton views female experience under a peculiarly female perspective. Assuming an unmistakably and invariably female persona, Sexton performs a great feat of daring in her poetry, writing openly, as already mentioned, about masturbation, abortion, menstruation, being a mother and daughter, and sexuality. "Women experience the world through different bodies than men," McCabe reminds us and asserts that "this is nowhere more clear than in Sexton's poetry" (223). In McCabe's opinion, Sexton's most successful poems are those in which she writes about herself as a woman, about her relationships with men and with women (especially her mother and daughters). Sucessful too, McCabe believes, are the poems in which Sexton explores the difficulties of reconciling the role of suburban housewife and the creativity of the poet. But Sexton herself managed to be identified not as a housewife, but as a poet, and being a poet for her, in McCabe's words, meant "giving

aesthetic meaning to personal relationships, to what it means to be daughter, sister, wife, mother" (226).

Discussing the problematic nature of Sexton's themes and style, feminist critic Alicia Ostriker in "That Story: Anne Sexton and her Transformations" tries to explain why Sexton's poetry has been the cause of so much controversy among critics. Besides the openness with which Sexton brings to light taboo subjects like abortion and menstruation, and the naturalness with which she speaks about the female body, she is, as Ostriker puts it, "assertively emotional" (252). And the vulnerability that comes with the exposure of emotional fragility has turned Sexton's poetry into an easy target of attack, as we have seen. Sexton's demand for love, Ostriker believes, may sound narcissistic, childish and also self-defeating, insofar as it inspires aversion and contempt. According to Ostriker, what is more bothersome in Sexton's poetry is the unresolved battle between thanatos and eros, self-loathing and self-love, suicide and survival. Our literary tradition, in Ostriker's opinion, has been for long confirming men's prison in their own despair. Each one locked up in his cell feels disturbed when he hears "from a neighboring cell the noise of scratching, poundings, screamings for the jailer"(253). Anne Sexton, like Confessional poets in general, never limited her poetry to the models of psychic normalcy offered by our patriarchal culture, and Ostriker holds the view that poetry should not be limited in any way for, although "reticence and good taste are excellent things, unscrewing the doors from their jambs are a good thing too" (253). In asserting that "our original sin as humanists is a

tendency to forget that nothing human is alien to any of us." Ostriker debunks the traditional contemptuous response to Sexton's confessionalism, while at the same time acknowledges the power of Sexton's poetry to reach out to others, and thus be culturally and politically meaningful. The "crazy suicidal lady" may be, after all, the inhabitant of our own attic. In Ostriker's opinion, Sexton's best poems are those in which self-analysis becomes a statement on human condition. The texts Ostriker proposes to examine in this article are Transformations (1971), "The Jesus Papers" in The Book of Folly (1972), The Death Notebooks (1974), and The Awful Rowing Toward God (1975)-- which are books that represent the most subversive and the most tragic of Sexton's work, and Ostriker believes that "confessional or not, all these poems change the way we must look at our shared past. As their themes are increasingly ambitious, their conclusions are increasingly significant culturally. Obviously they also change the way we must look at Sexton" (254).

At this point we can perceive that there has been an evolution in the critical response to Sexton's poetry. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, when Sexton published her first books, the literary community was not yet ready to understand and to accept as art a poetry that departed so much from its standards. We have seen how critics and poets like Holmes and Charles Dickey have felt offended by Sexton's blunt "confessions." Later on Sexton's work began to be viewed from a different perspective as critics like Beverly Fields, Lawrence Dessner and William Shurr, to mention just a few, began to

explore the fictional element in her texts and to approach confessionalism as a poetic attitude and an aesthetics, rather than just a crude way of speaking out one's most intimate experiences. The feminist trend, that was consolidated in the late 1960s, finally introduced Sexton's work in a more universal context, pointing to the socio-cultural importance of its themes and to Sexton's ability to reach out to broader issues, while using a confessional tone.

Having in view the great contribution of feminist criticism in pointing to the political relevance of Anne Sexton's themes, I intend to pursue the same critical attitude, viewing Sexton's text as being, above all, highly critical of patriarchal cultural values. My central concern in this dissertation will be Transformations, Sexton's fifth published volume, which consists of a series poems retelling sixteen fairy tales from the Brothers Grimm.

Differently from Sexton's previous books, which concentrate more on personal revelations, madness, pain, love and desire, Transformations, as most critics believe, marks a shift in Sexton's poetic style and orientation. Although we know that Sexton always had much of the poet storyteller in her writing, her previous work is marked by a psychoanalytic self-scrutiny and an intense preoccupation with examing and explaining interpersonal relationships in terms of her own innermost neurotic tensions. Sexton herself was afraid of publishing a book that departed so much from her usual style. In an almost apologetic tone, she feared that "many of my former fans are going to be disappointed that these poems do not hover on the

brink of insanity," and acknowledged that "they lack the intensity and confessional force of my previous work." Transformations, as feminist critics like Jane McCabe, Alicia Ostriker, Diana H.George and Helen Cronan Rose agree, represents the moment in Sexton's career when she abandons strictly personal material to work with a cultural good-- in a sense artificial, but both strange and familiar to her own world. If we look at Transformations in the context of Sexton's poetry, we will be able to identify in it many of the psychological dilemmas and personal neuroses that have characterized her work up to this moment and given her the label of confessional poet. But, looking at Transformations in the context of the actual transformations that women's sexual and social identities were suffering at the time of the book's publication, we can see Sexton's recreations and innovations, including anachronistic similes and acid ironies against patriarchal-bourgeois values and moral standards, as a response to a social need-- we can see Transformations, then, as, above all, a political act-- a counter-myth discourse. Sexton's revisionist poetry must be appreciated, I believe, as one important means of rethinking and reframing women's present image in our still male-dominated world. After all, revisionist mythopoesis is a refusal of women to recognize themselves in a patriarchal mirror, which pretends to reproduce an eternal and natural image an image that is nothing but a mythical inversion to guarantee and perpetuate patriarchal rule; an image that today demands to be reflected in new mirrors.

My purpose in this dissertation is to demonstrate how Sexton

was able to associate her internal conflicts with a larger socio-cultural disturbance, whose consequences she was not the only one to suffer. Beginning with the assumptions that all alternative retellings of fairy tales consist in an interaction between culture and text, and that changes in meaning effectuated by a specific variant can tell us much about about the culture from which it derives, as suggested by Bottigheimer (1988), I will carry out an analysis of Sexton's poems, based on an English translation of the Grimms' original German texts, in an attempt to verify how much she has modernized and demythicized the tales.

But before going into the analysis of the texts themselves, I believe it is essential to have a better understanding of the nature of the fairy tale, both as a genre and as a convenient vehicle of dominant socio-cultural values. In the next chapter, I offer a brief overview of the processes of patriarchalization and mythicization of the fairy tale, especially through Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm's own editorial interventions in the many editions of their world-famous and widely-read Children and Household Tales. My purpose in the following chapter is to show how patriarchal-bourgeois values have been crystallized in the fairy-tale text as second nature. Finally, I discuss briefly the importance of revisionist mythmaking by women writers, more specifically, Anne Sexton's Transformations, in debunking traditional myths concerning female sexuality and socialization — a discussion that I will carry out in more systematic depth in the third and fourth chapters, through an analysis of six of the poems which make up Transformations.

NOTE TO CHAPTER ONE

[1] Concerning the truth-telling controversy that lies around "confessional" poetry, Sexton contradicts herself: in 1969, she told the readers of the New York Times: "for years I railed against being put in this category. . . then about a year ago, I decided I was the only confessional poet. Well... Allen Ginsberg too. He holds back nothing and I hold back nothing." (quoted by Robert Phillips in The Confessional Poets. Carbondale: Southern Illinois U P, 1973, p.76). Yet, back in 1965, in an interview to Patricia Marx, she had said that in her poetry she hunts for the truth, but not necessarily a factual truth -- "it might be a kind of poetic truth." Here Sexton means to say that the truth that there is in a poem may not be the truth of her own experience, and that to achieve a dramatic effect, the poet must distort or omit some literal facts of his/her life, so that "you don't have to include everything to tell the truth. You can exclude many things. You can even lie (one can confess and lie forever) as I did in the poem of the illegitimate child that the girl had to give up. It hadn't happened to me. It wasn't true, and yet it was the truth" (in No Evil Star: Selected Essays, interview and Prose, p. 75). In other words, Dessner is right, the poet, in fact, holds back a lot in order to tell the kind of poetic truth he/she chooses to tell the readers.

CHAPTER TWO

THE BOURGEOISIFICATION AND MYTHICIZATION OF THE GRIMMS' FAIRY TALES AND THE IMPORTANCE OF REVISIONISM

Fairy tales are often related to a world of fantasy, where gruesome and cruel monsters and witches are defeated and both the throne and the loveliest of princesses await the hero at the end of his journey. Unified by a common structure-- the hero leaves home, enters a wild and mysterious world in search of some knowledge, a treasure or a princess in danger; then, he confronts and destroys the evil, and finally returns home almost invariably to reconstitute the lost familiar order with the establishment of a new and happy family-- fairy tales, with very few exceptions, offer an excessively optimistic view of human relations and enterprises. Most tales share an utopian nature and assure the reader that a period of hopeless misery and disgrace will invariably be compensated for by infinite happiness. Of course the hero has to possess or to acquire during his process of maturation some attributes such as industriousness and humility, which will qualify him to be generously rewarded at the end of the tale.

But what exactly are fairy tales? How do they differ from the oral folk tale and from other types of literature? How do

they relate to the diverse cultures in which they develop and what are the cultural implications behind their seemingly innocent plots? Finally, what is their importance to the development of both children's and adults' sense of moral and proper social behavior? These are some of the questions which I consider crucial to be, if not fully answered, at least discussed as we embark in our attempt to understand the complexities of the fairy-tale world.

When we talk about fairy tales, I believe almost everyone remembers the Brothers Grimm. Wilhelm and Jakob Grimm are responsible for the most popular collection of fairy tales, published in seventeen editions between 1812 and 1857, and increasing both in popularity and sales through the years. It was based on an English translation of their tales that Anne Sexton wrote her revisionist poems in Transformations. For this part of the chapter, I will be using Ruth Bottigheimer's Grimms' Bad Girls and Bold Boys: The Moral and Social Vision of the Tales as a main secondary source.

The Grimms' enterprise to collect German oral narratives, which was a rather common initiative among their contemporaries, had the prime purpose of preserving "linguistic monuments" of the German culture. They believed that in a Germany occupied by Napoleon, the only unifying element was the language, especially that encountered in its "pure" and "natural" state in the folk narratives. In fact, in the prefaces to volumes 1 and 2 of the first editions of the collection, W.Grimm compares the tales to pure nature and asserts that they are "nature poetry" (Bottigheimer 24). We must remember that the Grimms received

their first intellectual impressions during the Romantic period --a period in which the people were valued highly as representatives of the authentic spirit of a nation. For the Romantics, all popular literature, conveyed orally, should be preserved as the very essence of a culture. The Grimms believed that the tales, however they might vary in their many versions all over the world, capture in their core the soul of the people in all its purity. As Ruth Bottigheimer reminds us, this tendency to set popular tales at a high position had been at work since the 18th century, when J.K.Musaus (1773)affirmed that "they belong to national taste, which never completely degenerates" (13). Concerning the ethical value of traditional oral narrative, Ludwin Bechstein, a Grimms' contemporary, calls it 'holy', 'immortal', and 'pure', and defines it as a "moral philosophy for the people" (13).

With the Romantic vein that prevailed in the beginning of the 19th century, fairy tales were regarded as one major source of the "wisdom of the people by which one lives" as Johannes Von Mueller stated in his Historische Critic of 1811 (14). Immersed in and emerging from this spirit, the Grimms'collection affirmed itself as the canonical anthology of tales, highly praised both by critics and intellectuals and the common reader. Clemens Bretano, working on his own collection of folk tales, called the Grimms'work, even before its publication, a "treasure"(1807), and Edward Morike referred to it as a "golden treasure of genuine poetry"(1842) (14).

Originally intended as a scholarly publication, the

Kinder und Hausmarchen grew in popular taste and came to be regarded as a children's book---which was, at the time, a recent phenomenon, since until the late 18th century, fairy tales enjoyed a dominant adult readership. With the boom of publications for children in the mid-19th century, which was due in part to a rise in the literacy rates (18), the Grimms' tales occupied a very influential position. According to Bottigheimer, the Grimms seemed to believe in the importance of the tales as natural conveyors of religious and moral truths. In fact, the majority of the stories published in the late 18th century contained an overt moral purpose, which sought to "remind" their readers about the proper way to behave. Charles Perrault's 16th century texts, for instance, often ended in a punitive tone, openly stating their moral message. The Grimms' tales differ from these stories in that their moralizing content lies embedded in the plots themselves, thus achieving their purpose in a more subtle manner.

Although the Grimms, at first, praised their own collection of tales as a reliable record of German folk culture, emanating from the people and without influences from the educated bourgeoisie, W. Grimm's social purpose became gradually apparent from the various additions and substitutions made in the collection throughout its many editions until the final one in 1857. During these years of editing and enlarging the collection, one can easily observe, as Bottigheimer points out, how hard work, gender-specific roles, severe punishments for female characters and a conservatite approach to social institutions, especially the family, emerge overtly from the tales' narratives

as values to be apprehended by their young audience. More and more the Grimms came to view the group of tales as a sort child-rearing manual, whose heroes and heroines should be accepted as perfect models of appropriate behavior. It is very telling that the Grimms, as Bottigheimer informs us, substituted "The Moon"(tale No. 175) for "The Misfortune." "The Moon" is a tale about the restoration of natural and moral order in a chaotic world and resembles many other Christian morality tales, included in the last editions of the collection (20). For the small edition, published after W. Grimm learned of the commercial success of Edgar Taylor's 1823 english translation of the tales, the Brothers decided to select those tales more adequate to maintain the status quo, giving preference to stories that depict girls as subservient, obedient, beautiful-- thus marriageable-- and suffering (B.20). Bottigheimer observes that tales in which girls display a mischiveous behavior have been carefully kept out of the eyes of the young reader. The small edition includes some Christian tales, two anti-semitic tales, and the most familiar tales of all times: "The Frog King"(No.01), "Hansel & Gretel"(No. 15), "Cinderella"(No. 21), "Snow White"(No. 53), "Little Red Riding Hood"(No. 26), and "Rumpelstiltskin"(No. 55) (in B.20). Bottigheimer also points out that tales whose heroes were tricksters and rebels were also kept out of the reach of children during Wilhelm's lifetime (20).

After Wilhelm's death in 1859, when his editorial interventions could no longer be seen, the Kinder- und Hausmharchen, mistakenly, emerged as an autonomous source, as if

built up by itself and never touched by human hands. The tales, then, came to be perceived not only as conveying the true essence of German folk culture, but also as translating "the very concept of the human race" (15)-- an idea defended by Herman Hesse and many others who turn to the tales in search of psychological truths. Those interpreters believe that fairy tales develop independently from cultural processes and that the narratives are not influenced by specific narrators, by the collector of the tales, by editorial interests and/or by the audience itself(B.15). According to Bottigheimer, many critics have built up theories based on the belief that fairy tales are dissociated from culture-- thus ignoring their "essential historicity." Writing in 1969 that prince and princess figures in fairy tales represent elements of our nature yet to be developed or discovered, Max Luhti forgets the peculiarly Romantic interest in the Middle Ages, which, in part, explains why most fairy tales are set in Medieval times-- a period in which, due to its political organization, princes and princesses were more likely to be found. Jungian interpreters like Marie-Louise Von Franz think that "Fairy tales are the purest and simplest expression of collective unconscious psychic processes." Franz goes on to affirm that fairy tales represent the archetypes in their "simplest, barest, and most concise form" and that they "mirror the basic patterns of the psyche more clearly [than myths]" (qtd. in Bottigheimer 15-16). Freudian psychoanalysts also find in the tales elements to exemplify and solidify their theories of the human psyche. One of the most influential studies in this trend is Bruno Bettelheim's <u>The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and</u>

Importance of Fairy Tales (1977).

I use Bettelheim as the main reference when discussing Freudian interpretations of fairy tales not only because his work has become very popular and influential but also because I believe his orthodox ideas make an interesting contrast to Anne Sexton's more critical and culturally-oriented view. In his book, Bettelheim reports his experience in treating disturbed children and how he found out that most of the so-called children's literature are too superficial and insubstantial in terms of meaning. He believes that the acquisition of reading skills loses all its value when what is offered for children to read does not add up anything important to their lives (12). Bettelheim, then, comes to the conclusion that in the realm of children's literature, with few exceptions, the folkloric fairy tale is the most enriching and satisfactory reading both for children and adults. Through the tales, he asserts, one can learn more about the inner workings of the human mind and about the correct solutions for psychological problems in any society than through other stories (13). According to Bettelheim, children need help in order to find some coherence in their lives. They need hints about how to order their confused feelings and, based on these hints, be able to create their own interior order. Children also need, Bettelheim continues, a moral education that subtly and implicitly leads them towards the "advantages" of moral behavior, not through abstract ethical concepts, but through what seems tangibly correct and meaningful for them. Bettelheim, of course, does not hesitate to affirm that children find this kind of

meaning in fairy tales. To back up his assertion, he resorts to the German Romantic poet, Schiller, who, as any other Romantic certainly would do, wrote that there is a deeper meaning in the fairy tales he was told as a child than in the truths that life teaches us (The Piccolomini III.4 in Bett.14).

Bettelheim believes that fairy tales, having developed through the centuries, have come to speak a universal language, understood by all levels of the human personality, including both children and the sophisticated adult (14). Later on, we will be able to see how Bettelheim fell prey to the mythical structure of fairy tales just for ignoring the historical factors behind the formulations of such a pretentiously universal language.

Bettelheim also believes that fairy tales transmit important messages to the conscious, pre-conscious and unconscious mind, in any level it may be working at the moment. Dealing with universal human problems, particularly with those more pertaining to children's thoughts, the tales, in his opinion, speak directly to the developing child's ego and encourage its growth, while at the same time they alleviate pre-conscious and unconscious pressures. As the stories develop they give children hints on how to satisfy the desires of the id without transgressing the requirements of the ego and superego (14). Bettelheim goes futher to atribute children's preference for the folkloric fairy tale to the fact that it begins where most children find themselves psychologically and emotionally. The optimism of fairy tales toward difficult situations and apparently insolvable dilemmas gives shildren the certainty that serious difficulties are inevitable in life but that obstacles can be transposed. After

all, the child/hero always emerges victorious in the end. Unlike most children's stories, says Bettelheim, fairy tales confront the young reader with basic human predicaments like death, aging, the limits of our existence and the desire for eternal life. The simplicity of the fairy-tale plot, in his opinion, allows children to grasp the essence of otherwise complex psychological realities. In the tales everything is clearly stated, the characters are mostly types and obsolete details have been eliminated (15). When we get to the discussion of the mythicization of the fairy tale, we will see that Bettelheim has focused strictly on the left-over folk motifs that have been distorted by a mythical discourse-- obviously, Bettelheim does not see the distortions.

Proceeding with his demonstration of the positive moralizing effect that fairy tales have on children, Bettelheim notes that not everything is perfect for the hero all the time. Before being rewarded with "eternal" happiness, there is a whole lot of suffering on his way. Evil is as much present in fairy tales as Good. And it is exactly the established duality between Good and Evil in the tales' plot that poses a moral dilemma both to the hero and to the reader, in Bettelheim's opinion, and urges the child/hero to decide on which side he would prefer to be. According to Bettelheim, although the evil may be attractive to children-- after all, evil figures are powerful and usally occupy the hero's place for a short period-- they identify more closely with the hero's quest, which corresponds symbolically to their own process of maturation. The identification with the hero, who

invariably defeats the evil, imprints on the child a sense of morality (16). This is one of the reasons why Bettelheim finds fairy tales so valuable to the development of the child.

In spite of offering new dimensions to the child's imagination, the structure of fairy tales, Bettelheim says, suggests images to the child based on which it can organize its fantasies and overcome in a satisfactory way the pressures of unconscious desires. Also, by warning an assuring the child that life is not always easy but that obstacles can be surmounted, the tales seem to expose the reader to a sort of psychoanalytical experience. Bettelheim suggests this clearly when he asserts that Freud's proposal was not to make people's lives easy, but to enable them to accept the problematic nature of their lives and not let themselves be defeated by, or avoid facing, it. Only going into the world and fighting all the obstacles courageously can the child/hero find himself and the other, with whom he will "live happily forever after" (19). The very universality of fairy tales' psychological content can be questioned here. Bettelheim seems not to consider in his conclusions the fact that the fairy-tale heroine does not overcome difficulties nor surmounts obstacles actively as male-heroes do. Rather, she waits passively to be rescued and saved. She is the hero's prize, simply the other, as Bettelheim, probably inadvertently but significantly, has put it.

Bettelheim considers fairy tales unique both as a form of literature (later on we will return to this topic) and as works of art easily understood by children like no other form of art. In his opinion, a fairy tale could not contribute in such a

positive way to the psychological development and emotional maturation of the child if it were not, first of all, a work of art (20). And like all works of art, folkloric fairy tales offer an infinity of possible interpretations and many different aspects to be explored. As an example, Bettelheim concludes that besides their psychological content, our cultural heritage finds expression in fairy tales and through them is conveyed to the child's mind, therefore, reiterating the importance of the tales to the moral education of children (21). Although he does not concentrate on this kind of analysis, Bettelheim proposes a moral/religious reading of the Grimms' "The Seven Ravens." In his brief analysis, he emphasizes the Christian notion that those (in this tale, a girl) who are willing to sacrifice a part of their bodies that will keep them from reaching perfection, will be allowed into Heaven. We will have the chance to comment on the religious approach to fairy tales, when we discuss the "Christianization" of the Grimms' texts.

At another point in his book, Bettelheim illustrates with a case from his own clinical experience how fairy tales can be essential to the psycho-emotional development of the child. According to him, a lonely 5 year-old boy used to ask to be read "Rapunzel" all day, because he felt reassured with the image of an overprotective substitute mother and with the idea that his own body could offer him means to achieve security, like Rapunzel's hair allowed her to meet the prince (27). All along the book, Bettelheim offers similar analyses, in which he identifies Oedipal conflicts being overcome, insecurity and oral

voracity being replaced by self-confidence and self-control("Hansel & Gretel", for instance), courage replacing fear and egocentric solitude finding its happy end in marriage. We could say that Bettelheim's Uses of Enchantment epitomizes the Freudian notion that fairy tales represent imaginatively, through plot and characters, the healthy process of human development, and thus, help lead children to the discovery of their identities (20).

Both Freudian and Jungian psychoanalysts agree that fairy tales and myths speak through symbols which represent unconscious material. In those psychoanalysts' opinion, fairy tales and myths appeal simultaneously to our conscious and unconscious mind, in their three levels-- id, ego and superego. Freudian analysts, as we have seen, are concerned with showing what kind of repressed material lies underneath fairy tales and myths and how they relate to dreams and fantasies. Jungian analysts, in turn, go a little beyond to assert that the tales represent archetypal psychological phenomena and symbolically suggest the need to reach a higher degree of self-confidence, by making available to the reader individual and racial unconscious forces (Bettelheim 47).

In spite of offering some interesting and valid insights into the reading of fairy tales, Bettelheim's analyses fail to grasp the ambivalent nature of the fairy-tale text by not taking into account the undeniable mediation between oral and written text. Both Perrault's and the Grimms' tales are the result of years of painstaking revisions, that included both deletions and additions to the, not always, original oral source, and thus

cannot be considered to convey, as we will see further on, the heritage of ancient cultures, nor can they provide anthropological validations for psychological theories on the universality of human psychic conflits.

Not denying the value of some psychoanalytical fairy-tale criticism, Jack Zipes, in his book The Brothers Grimm: From Enchanted Forests to the Modern World (1988), suggests that a better choice would be a critical psychoanalytical approach-- one that questions traditional psychoanalytical approaches while at the same time incorporates the issue of history to the discussion, which will allow a demystified view of the historical nature of the Grimms tales (116). Nevertheless, most psychoanalytical criticism still done today in Germany, for example, tends to ignore socio-historical material and prefers to approach the tales, as is the case of Carl Mallet's works, as containing hidden messages about human nature. Mallet, with Bettelheim's full support, as Zipes informs us, considers the tales to be "primeval narratives reflecting the great folk spirit and universal psyche." In his latest book, Kopf Ab ! Gewalt im Marchen (1985), Mallet insists in affirming that fairy tales do not have an author. He treats the Grimms' collection, Zipes tells us, as a "manual for learning how to live" (117). Such naive and simplistic readings of fairy tales prove insufficient when one considers such questions as authorship, the processes of collecting and editing the tales and their growing institutionalization within the body of a patriarchal-bourgeois culture.

First of all, we must have in mind the differences between the oral folk tale and the literary fairy tale, i.e., between oral and written literature and the implications of the latter. We know that the Grimms' first intention when collecting the tales was to present them as true conveyors of customs and practices of the German people. They believed that, by recording in written texts the richness of German oral tradition, they were helping preserve the "childhood of humankind," and the tales should function as 'reminders' of a "natural culture"(Zipes 12). All this derived, in great part, from a need to bound the German people together during the years of the French invasion, and also to avoid the infiltration of French culture by proving the importance and purity' of German culture. The Grimms, as Zipes points out, considered their work as "part of a social effort to foster a sense of justice among the German people and to create pride in the folk tradition" (9).

The Grimms used to collect the tales not by visiting peasants, as most poeple believed, but by inviting storytellers to their home and asking them to tell the tales aloud, which they wrote down, sometimes after hearing the tales a couple of times. So, memory, as Zipes remarks, was fundamental to the process of recording and transcribing the tales. Most of the Grimms' informants came from the middle-class or aristocracy and most of the tales they related to the Brothers had been told by their servants, nursemaids, governesses, or had been read in books (10). Of course, these versions had already been radically revised. Ironically, many of the recorded tales were French in origin. The Grimms also took tales straight from books, letters,

journals and took the liberty to choose and make changes in the tales as they pleased (11). Wilhelm, in fact, was very careful in refining and polishing up the style of the narratives and in making their content more appropiate for bourgeois audiences, especially children (12-13). In the preface to the second edition of the collection, the Brothers openly confess that they have carefully deleted "every phrase unsuitable for children" (Tatar 19).

So, a work that was first intended to capture the pure nature of German oral folk culture, instead of coming closer to its essence, enlarged even more the distance separating the oral narrative and the printed text (Tatar 32). According to Maria Tatar in _The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales_(1987), it is a mistake to consider the Grimms' texts as mere transcriptions of oral folktales. In her opinion, the tales are far removed from their oral sources, when they had one. It is difficult, indeed, to give a precise definition of what a Grimm fairy tale is-- the controversy still exists among folklorists, literary critics, ethnologists, psychologists and historians as to the differences between the oral folk tale and the literary fairy tale (Zipes 51). Zipes believes that Dietz Rudiger has devised a definition which incorporates most of the major features of the folk tale and which better allows us to understand the cultural implications of the Grimms' tales. According to Rudiger,

> The fairy tale is a narrative work of fiction that is complete in itself, transmitted, and therefore conservative, and it contains typical figures, properties, situations, and aspects of action that serve the portrayal of how conflicts are solved on

> the basis of fixed moral notions. Those events that are described in it can leave the immediate realm of experience. Yet, the conflict that it treats is continually anchored in this realm.
> (qtd.in Zipes 51).

The majority of the Grimms' tales are in fact concerned with the solution of a conflict according to the moral principles of their own bourgeois society (51).

Tatar believes that the Grimms' tales stand in a limbo between folklore and literature, for, in spite of William Grimm's significant editorial interventions, which undoubtedly mar the "purity" of the original tales, their work cannot be equalled, in strictly literary terms, to Oscar Wilde's or Hans C. Andersen's. A basic difference between folklore and literature would be that folklore grows out of, and towards, conventions accepted by a certain culture -- it belongs to a collective cultural body -- while literature, which has one author, who names her/himself, establishes a more open dialogue with the cultural environment from which it derives, conforming to or breaking with conventions (66). Nevertheless, the truth seems to be that there is no clear boundary between oral and written traditions. Rather, both traditions appropriate material from one another to enrich their plots (32). The Grimms collection would then lie in the midpoint between oral folktales and literature, and Tatar prefers to classify it as belonging to a group of hybrid texts that might well be called literary folktales (33).

The term folktale, as Tatar points out, has been used to refer both to oral narratives which belong to the folk tradition and to a group of tales (oral narratives) which take place among

the folk -- these are predominantly realistic and naturalistic tales. In opposition, the term fairy tale has been connected to both oral and literary traditions, but it has been traditionally related to narratives that privilege the world of the fantastic and the supernatural, where uncanny events take place and magic interventions are part of the natural course of the plots (33).

The Grimms' collection contains both folk and fairy tales, according to latar's definitions, but we are concerned here more specifically with the literary fairy tale as opposed to the oral folktale. Folklorists, in general, tend to defend the "purity" of the oral genre by accusing literature of distorting the tales for the sake of money making. Literary critics, in turn, often ignore the relevance of oral material to the production of the literary fairy tale (Zipes 135).

Discussing the controversial nature of the relation between the oral folk tale and the literary fairy tale, Walter Ong emphasizes that writing can enhance orality by organizing and ordering its elements, while at the same time imposing on it new rules, values and meanings alien to the customs of oral cultures. According to Ong, writing is "a particularly preemptive and imperialist activity that tends to assimilate other things to itself even without the aid of etymologies" (qtd.in Zipes 136).

By the end of the 19th century, literature became an essential instrument in the socialization and education of children. In this period, volumes of literary fairy tales became more and more indispensable items in the libraries of bourgeois families.

Zipes considers the rise in popularity of the literary fairy

tale in Europe as the "bourgeoisification" of the oral folk tale (136). By "bourgeoisification" he understands the appropriation of popular tales, told and propagated by peasants, by the literate bourgeoisie, which transforms and adapts the styles, motifs and meanings of the tales according to the values and interests of its own culture (136). Besides complementing the oral tales and preserving some elements of the oral folk tradition, that otherwise would have been lost, the consolidation of the fairy tale as a literary genre has played a decisive role in shaping both adults and children's notions of sex roles and proper social behavior, since the most accepted and disseminated group of tales until today stresses the glories and rewards of male bravery and the "advantages" of female subservience and obedience (Zipes 136-7).

According to Zipes, the patriarchalization of the tales took place even before their bourgeoisification. In fact, it began in the oral tradition itself. As matriarchal societies suffered changes and were little by little replaced by a patrilineal tradition, the active heroine of the tales was also replaced by the "superior" male hero. As stated by Gottner-Abendroth (in Zipes 141), the most important aspects of patriarchalization are the "demonization" of the goddess, the substitution of the hero for the active heroine, the emphasis on patriarchal marriage, and the disappearance of major matriarchal myths and rituals, such as the moon worship. One interesting example is the well-known tale "Cinderella," which has undergone inumerous changes during approximately 4.000 years (7.000 B.C to 3.000 B.C). From an

active girl who, with the help of her wise dead mother, designs her own destiny, Cinderella has been transformed into a passive, inactive girl, whose only hope of salvation lies in the marriage to prince charming.

According to Zipes, the patriarchalization that happened in the oral tradition paved the way for the further bourgeoisification of the tales in the literary tradition (141). Zipes traces the increasing patriarchalization of "Cinderella" in the tale's three major versions: by Giambatista Basile, Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm. In his analysis, he notes how matrilineal elements tend to fade and almost disappear when we get to the Grimms' 19th century version. Basile's tale depicts a vigorous young girl who kills her evil stepmother in the hope of finding a loving mother-figure in her governess. The signs of patriarchalization begin to show in the demonization of the governess, in the domestication of Zezolla and her rescue by a king. Perrault's 1697 version was strongly influenced by Basile's, but highlights even more incisively patriarchal hues. Perrault's Cinderella is a helpless, industrious and humble housekeeper. Here the matrilineal tradition has been completly ignored, as Perrault, in Zipes' words, tries to "establish a code of bourgeois-aristocratic civilité" (142).

The Grimms, differently from Perrault, went some steps back into the matrilineal tradition and reinserted some of its elements such as the dead mother, the dove and the tree. But their Cinderella has not been exempt from patriarchal domestication. Having received a strict calvinist education, the Grimms emphasize values of the Protestant ethic such as self-

denial, industriousness and obedience — their Cinderella has become even less responsible for her destiny. At the end of his analysis, Zipes remarkably observes how an oral tale, depicting the process of maturation of a girl into womanhood in a matrilineal society, has been turned into a sort of literary prescription of how a bourgeois woman should behave in order to make herself suitable for a "good" marriage (142).

Following Ong's notion that writing organizes but rearranges oral narratives and is thus a preemptive activity, Zipes considers the literary texts that come out in a certain time as "semiotic constellations" or "semantic consolidations" of the accepted moral codes of a society. By "semiotic constellations" or "semantic consolidations" Zipes means the manner in which literature crystalizes oral narratives by injecting into them notions of desirable social behavior and thoughts, thus making the texts speak either the author's or the dominant class's ideology. And when these literary texts are considered exemplary in a given epoch, they are frequently used as guides of adequate conduct for children (143).

In fact, the Grimms Children and Household Tales has been widely used as a reading book for chidren at schools and households all over the western world. And, as we know, the tales have been carefully tailored to fit this purpose. In their endeavour to capture the "pure" essence of German folk culture, the Grimms contributed to reshape the tales to the taste of the rising German bourgeoisie. So, the nationalistic spirit that drove the Brothers in their urge to establish a German identity

made the Grimms themselves, and many critics too, believe that they were being faithful to the German oral tradition. As literate recorders, the Grimms played an essential role in transforming the tales' motifs and style. Because they imposed on the tales their own language and bias, the symbology of their texts tells us more about the political reality of their time than about the German national character. As Tatar asserts, the _Children and Household Tales_ are not the true expression of the folk and thus cannot convey the collective unconscious that Jungian critics, for instance, search for (35). In fact, the great mistake of most psychoanalytical criticism is to assume that the tales are genuine folk tales and to believe that they are thousand of years old, as Bettelheim does, and that they convey universal symbolical patterns to which psychoanalysts can apply their theories (Zipes 28). In spite of the fact that the tales collected by the Brothers Grimm do have their origin in an ancient tradition of storytelling, they cannot be said to express the reality of olden times.

In their versions of the tales, the Grimms, especially Wilhelm, who did most of the editing, tried to Chritianize the texts by inserting Protestant values, as already mentioned, that should govern the heroes' fight for success, such as humility and industriousness. It is known that folk literature has been characterized by an absence of Christian elements and, as Bottigheimer points out, most of the humorous chapbooks of the 17th and 18th centuries are full of spicy and sarcastic anticlerical jokes. According to Bottigheimer, it is clear that it was Wilhelm who, throughout the many editions of the

collection, introduced Christian elements, which were not present in the 1812 or 1819 versions (145).

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the mere inclusion of Christian interjections and references to Christian liturgies, such as "thank God" (tale 163), "good God" (127), "Lord God" (192), "for Heaven's sake" (64), "may God protect us" (166); the belief that something that appeared was the "Divine sign" or that it was "as if an angel came from Heaven" (178), to cite just a few, do not make for a naive Christian interpretation of the tales like the one Bettelheim, influenced by the Judeo-Christian Exegetic School, has attempted at and which we have referred to on page 12 above.

The tales cannot be considered to convey Christian values simply because these values are not intrinsic to the oral folk narratives, but rather, have been artificially inserted throughout the various editions of the collection, according to the Grimms' own religious beliefs. As Bottigheimer accurately observes, the fact that Hansel feels assured that God will protect him and his sister does not make "Hansel and Gretel" into a Christian tale (146).

The tales that can be considered Christian are the Etiological tales, which set out to explain the origins of the world in explicit Christian terms. This group of tales, among which figure "Our Lady's Child," "Eve's Various Children," "The Old Man Made Young Again," "Brother Lustig," and "The Girl Without Hands," not denying the increasing patriarchalization of the texts, offers a view of societal organization that is

predominantly male. These tales differ from those in which Christianization takes place by the mere insertion of Christian interjections in that their protagonists usually are saints or even God Himself, and the whole structure of their plots is built up around the reconstitution of order on Earth by Divine intervention. And, of course, as Bottigheimer remarks, this Heavenly power that regularizes life down on Earth constitutes a "male Heavenly bureaucracy" (148).

Differently from their male counterparts, the female protagonists of Christian tales often receive some sort of punishment instead of a reward at the end of the story. Even in "The Girl Without Hands," where God intervenes to restore the maiden's hands, a lot of suffering -- mutilation, persecution -- is required before the Divine takes pity on her. After comparing and contrasting male and female protagonists in many of these Etiological tales, Bottigheimer concludes that it is sex and not sin the cause of so much suffering in the Grimms tales. She also observes that it is not enough for girls and women to be good in order not to suffer; instead, they have to undergo long periods of isolation, penury and persecution, remaining virtuous and pure all along, in order to be rewarded. The implicit message of these tales, directed especially to children, is that the one who accepts and endures poverty and misery, being pious and good, proves her/his unconditional love for God and thus deserves to be generously rewarded (150). Bottigheimer is incisive in her conclusions:

> **Christianized tales in the Grimms' collection separate the characters not so much into good and evil as into male and female, their fates determined and defined not**

according to the ethical and moral quality of their lives, but according to their sex (155).

Another significant characteristic of the Grimms' editorial interventions concerning female characters is that women tend to be gradually silenced and lose the power of speech as we get to the 1857 edition of the collection. We know that in any society the ones who have full control over discourse are more likely to have full control over those deprived of the power of speech. The frequency with which a specific character holds speech in literary texts may be indicative of the author's or the editor's position towards the power of language-use and that character in particular (Bottigheimer 52).

Bottigheimer analyzes speech and silencing in literary texts on five levels: historical, narrative, textual, lexical and editorial. Historical silencing occurs when a woman writer does not feel at ease to use her own name and adopts a male pseudonym; narrative silencing takes place when a character remains silent for a period in the course of the story; the number of direct, indirect or reported speech allowed to specific characters may be a silencing factor at a textual level; lexical silencing is determined by the choice of verbs used to introduce direct or indirect speech; and, finally, the interference of the author or the editor in the text within the text may determine what Bottigheimer calls editorial silencing (52).

Bottigheimer makes an interesting analysis of female silencing in the Grimms' texts and points to the fact that many critics have praised Wilhelm Grimm for shifting from indirect to direct speech in the later versions of the tales, but have failed

to ask important and revealing questions such as "who speaks?" and "under what circumstances?".

In many of the best-known tales women are victims of narrative silencing as in "The Frog Prince," where the frog orders the princess to be quiet. Only when the frog suggests that he wants to sleep with her in the same bed, does the princess react verbally, which, as Bottigheimer notes, might well be William Grimm's own moralistic editorial voice rather than hers. In "Hansel and Gretel" too, Hansel speaks more and more frequently than Gretel, who cries almost all the time. Rapunzel and Cinderella also suffer textual silencing. Instead of letting Rapunzel speak out her feelings and fears, William Grimm describes them for her, while the prince gives full voice to his thoughts. Cinderella is both mute and powerless. As Bottigheimer remarks, Cinderella remains silent during most part of the narrative -- she says nothing at the ball, stands silent by the ashes, and does not say a word when the prince comes for the slipper's owner (53).

It seems to be typical of the Grimms' narrative structure to create silent heroines in contrast to the "bad" girls, who are much more eloquent. Comparing the increase and decrease in direct and indirect speech for men, for bad and for good girls in "Cinderella," Bottigheimer comes to the following conclusions: from the 1812 to the 1857 editions, Cinderella has an increase in indirect speech (0-1) and a meaningful decrease in direct speeches (14-06). There is also a notable increase in direct speech for the stepmother (04-07) and the prince (04-08). Those numbers show that some kind of criterion was adopted by W. Grimm

before distributing direct and indirect speeches to the characters of a tale. The higher incidence of direct speech for male characters to the detriment of their female counterparts leads us to believe that Grimm shared the long-held belief that loquacious women are dangerous monstrosities, and thus must be muted in order to fit into the whole gallery of suffering, pious, obedient and silent heroines. Bottigheimer believes that a more careful study would reveal that Wilhelm Grimm transferred direct speech from women to men (59).

In their attempt to make the Kinder-und Hausmarchen a suitable reading for bourgeois children and adults, the Grimms developed some other editing tendencies such as smoothing the language of the tales, making clearly structured narratives, adding adjectives, proverbs and direct speech to give more life to the texts. As part of their endeavour to create an ideal narrative, the Grimms, as we have been trying to demonstrate, imbued the "authentic" creations of the folk with their own patriarchal-bourgeois sense of propriety. Besides adding Christian interjections and religious references and sentencing all heroines to long periods of silence, the Grimms were very careful to leave out all erotic and sexual innuendos that were not adequate to bourgeois moral standards. They also stressed patterns of role divisions in keeping with the prevailing patriarchal code of their time (Zipes 14). A very telling example is the changes made in "Snow White" by the 1812 edition. In the manuscript of the tale, the dwarfs only demand is that she cook for them. By the first printed version (1812), however, the

requirements for Snow White to stay in their house have increased significantly, and obviously reflect the Grimms own ideas of female obligations concerning household chore. In exchange for shelter Snow White now has not only to cook but to keep house for the dwarfs, "sew, make the beds, wash and knit, and keep everything tidy and clean." And, of course, they add, "in the evening when we come home, dinner must be ready" (in Zipes 13 and Tatar 29).

Starting from the assertion that the Grimms' tales are "contagious," Zipes resorts to Dan Sperber's concepts of mental and public representations, in order to better understand the cultural relevance of the tales. According to Sperber, mental representations are those "internal to the information processing device" and public representations are those "external to the device and which the device can process as inputs." Sperber describes the cyclic relationship between mental and public representations as follows:

> The construction or retrieval of mental representations may cause individuals to modify their physical environment, for instance, to produce a public representation. These modifications of the environment may cause other individuals to construct mental representations of their own; these new representations may be stored and later retrieved, and, in turn cause the individuals who hold them to modify the environment and so on (qtd. in Zipes viii)

By viewing the Grimms' tales as sort of public representations, i.e., the product of the mind's inner workings, externally presented and organized in narrative form, and by considering the relationship established between text and reader as similar to that between public and mental representations

described by Sperber, we can begin to realize how culturally determined values embedded in the tales -- such as those we have just identified in "Snow White" - can be almost imperceptibly passed on to and internalized by young readers and thus help determine their inchoate notions about morality, sex roles, religion and so on. Bettelheim is certainly right when he says that fairy tales convey our cultural heritage (The Uses of Enchantment21) -- but surely not the heritage of primitive cultures that would stand for archetypes of human behavior.

Literary fairy tales, as we have been trying to emphasize all along, are, in fact, appropriations of folk culture molded into a bourgeois frame. In a time when the German bourgeoisie, as already mentioned, lacked military and economic power, the only way to guarantee its hegemony was to enforce its cultural values, especially through the arts. As Zipes puts it, "the bourgeoisie uses its culture as a weapon to push through its demands and needs" (21). So, literature, an indispensable element in the education of children, plays an enormous part in disseminating bourgeois ideas and habits, such as industriousness, thrift, female subservience and self-sacrifice. These values are presented in such a way as to become accepted as "second nature." If only the obedient and passive heroine is rewarded with marriage to a wonderfully brave prince charming at the end of fairy tales, then most girl-readers will inevitably take this as a model of proper and natural female behavior. "This is how things should be," that is what the tales seem to whisper to their young audience.

There is a general agreement among anthropologists that culture is learned. An individual learns or acquires knowledge, beliefs, customs, arts and morals by a "conditioning process," which more often than not takes place on a subconscious level. Despite being a creation of Man, in fact Melville Herskovits in Cultural Dynamics(1967) defines it as the "man-made part of the environment" (3), culture often takes on an extra-human feature: We never know exactly when or how a certain habit or value came to be accepted by a specific society and then passed on from one generation to the next. This phenomenon of cultural determinism occurs in such a way that most people belonging to the same social group often behave in a predictable manner (7). Role divisions within patriarchal marriage, for instance, are automatically and promptly accepted by the two parties without further questioning, because the cultural precepts that women be dedicated, sweet and loving wives, mothers and housekeepers, and that men be the successful professional and money-provider for the whole family have long been internalized as "second nature."

Psychologically speaking, culture is "the learned portion of human behavior" and what was once believed to be "instinctive" behavior now has been found to be the result of an effective process of enculturation, or better yet, "unconcious conditioning," that automatize some human attitudes and reactions (11).

According to Ruth Benedict, in Patterns of Culture, any society "chooses," so to speak, among the inumerous possible human behaviors those which better conform to its dominant ideology, and works on the dissemination of these behaviors and

on the supression of contrary expressions (254). Benedict also points out that the great majority of individuals born into a certain society assumes the behavior commanded by that society, and that, although the cultural norms might oppose the individual's inborn personality traits, most of them accept almost automatically the offered model (254-55). Describing the life-history of the individual in relation to her/his culture, Benedict says that

> **from the moment of his birth the customs into which he is born shape his experience and behaviour. By the time he can talk, he is the little creature of his culture, and by the time he is grown and able to take part in its activities, its habits are his habits, its beliefs his beliefs, its impossibilities, his impossibilities (3).**

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And, certainly, what she/he reads becomes part of what she/he believes and aspires to be. We know that almost every child reads fairy tales, and that through their formulaic structure, which makes easier the memorization of their plots, she/he subconsciously incorporates paradigms of accepted behavior. Fairy-tale images are so firmly imprinted on children's minds that they endure through adulthood on. Every girl dreams of being rescued by a prince - this is undeniably a typical female aspiration encouraged and perpetuated by fairy tales, which, as we have seen, have become an influential literary institution and a powerful instrument of cultural conditioning at the service of a bourgeois patriarchy. If an individual learns culture, most

children learn their lot through fairy tales. Folklorists like W. Bascom also agree that folklore is an important device to preserve the balance of culture:

> Folklore is an important mechanism for maintaining the stability of culture. It is used to inculcate the customs and ethical standards of the young, and as an adult to reward him with praise when he conforms, to punish him with ridicule or criticism when he deviates, to provide him with rationalizations when the institutions and conventions are challenged or questioned, to suggest that he be content with things as they are, and to provide him with compensatoryescape from the "hardships, the inequalities, the injustices" of everyday life. Here, indeed, is the basic paradox of folklore, that while it plays a vital role in transmitting and maintaining the institutions of a culture and in forcing the individual to conform to them, at the same time it provides socially approved outlets for the repressions which these same institutions impose upon him (qtd. in Don't Bet on the Prince 223-4).

The patriarchal values conveyed by the Grimms' tales, as we are going to see now, are not restricted to a German audience; rather, they have been pervasive throughout the western world, and have as well served the interests of the bourgeoisie outside Germany.

Although anthropology tells us that "no two bodies of customs are identical in detail" and that "every culture is the result of the particular experiences of its population, past and present" (Herskovits 5), and although the Grimms' primary intention was to capture the essence of German culture in their texts, the bourgeois models or "narrative paradigms," as Zipes puts it, that seek to institutionalize social, religious, moral and political codes offered by the tales have become part of most modern nations bourgeoisie's system of values (Zipes 63).

Heinz Rolleke (1985), one of the most prominent Grimms' scholars, tries to explain the international success of the Grimms tales, pointing out that

> the bourgeoisie has continually accepted the possibilities for identification in these texts beyond national boundaries, texts which effectually represent their own virtues and ideals and can be used effectively for pedagogical purposes.

Therefore, Rolleke concludes,

> it was not the joy about the "German essence" of the tales that brought about the international success of the Children and Household Tales as book but much more the respective affinity between the social and cultural givens in a particular country with those of Germany in the beginning of the nineteeth century (qtd. in Zipes 63).

The reason why the tales received instant approbation by the middle-class western bourgeoisie all around is that the social and moral codes offered by the tales have corresponded to the expectations bourgeois cultures have nurtured towards their children. Or, as Zipes accurately puts it,

> the "contagious" charm of the Grimms' fairy tales emanates from the compositional techinique and ethics developed by the Brothers Grimm to stress fundamental bourgeois values of behavior and moral principles of Christianity that served the hegemonic aspirations of the rising middle-class in Germany and elsewhere (qtd. in Zipes 63).

Needless to be reminded that these values have served the hegemonic interests of a patriarchal bougeoisie.

In the United States, and in those countries under its cultural influence, we have a very significant example of how the fairy tale still is a strong institution from which to rebuild or reinforce patriarchal fantasies about male power and female

powerlessness in Walt Disney's cinematographic versions of "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" (1937), "Cinderella" (1951), and "Sleeping Beauty" (1959).

Making use of the great popularity of the Grimms' texts, Walt Disney, as Zipes remarks, "americanized" the tales by extolling the innocence of the young male hero and the angelical sweetness of powerless girls. It is interesting to note that in the Grimms versions of "Snow White," "Sleeping Beauty," and "Cinderella," the hero is almost secondary to the development of the story; he comes in only at the end to save the heroine and guarantee the desirable patriarchal marriage.

In Disney's versions, however, the hero plays a much more significant role and his function in the narrative expands. In "Sleeping Beauty," as Zipes points out, the hero appears earlier in the story and displays his power by bravely defeating the bad fairy. Meanwhile, the female heroine lies silenced somehow -- either by a profound death-like sleep like Snow White and Sleeping Beauty or by an imposed condition of humility and deprivation of speech like Cinderella. All, needless to say, waiting to be rescued and swept away into the domains of prince charming, where, we are told, they will live happily forever after. While the heroine waits, suffers and does nothing to change things -- patriarchy has paralyzed her -- the hero, who is cunning, industrious, smart an gentlemanly, conquers and destroys evil, which is almost invariably related to a perverted and distorted female figure who misuses power. The "adjusted" female figure is, obviously, powerless, good and beautiful and

eventually finds eternal happiness and security beside male power.

It is not difficult, and I believe it would not be too far-fetched, to find connections between the female universe as depicted in fairy tales and the expectations post-war America held towards women. In the 1950s, when Disney's "Cinderella" and "Sleeping Beauty" were produced, women who had been out working during the war were expected to come back home and resume their posts as dedicated housewives and not become their husbands' competitors in the job market. During this period, women's education was very much marriage-oriented, and overemphasized the merits of "true" femininity to the detriment of intellectual and professional training. Women were increasingly taught to appreciate their restricted roles as wives and mothers within the home, and led to believe and accept that professional success and job satisfaction were exclusively male prerrogatives. So, women were being educated to build their lives around a culturally imposed biological determinism, and, in the name of it, suppress their individual potentialities (see Friedan 148).

Significantly, indeed, as Betty Friedan informs us, a very famous women's college adopted the following slogan: "we are not educating women to be scholars; we are educating them to be wives and mothers"(150).

Girls were discouraged from pursuing a career; many of them got married the next day they graduated from college, not to mention those that would quit school to marry. Any one woman who dared to get a job and become a serious professional was considered "unfeminine" and was automatically accused of

neglecting her husband and children. A woman's success should be measured by her husband's and children's out in the world. A "feminine" existence, as dictated by the "feminine mystique," was an essentially vicarious existence, since a husband was the basic pre-condition for a woman to gain social identity and status. As Betty Friedan puts it, "women in America are not encouraged or expected to use their full capacities. In the name of femininity, they are encouraged to evade human growth" (305).

We can identify in almost every American girl, in this period, a Sleeping Beauty retreating from the fight -- abandoning schools and jobs -- and annihilating her individual identity, falling into a patriarchal slumber, in the hope for the "kiss" that will awaken her into security and protection.

We have already talked about the great influence that written fairy tales exert on the socialisation of children, and, in our century, with the modernization of communication, we can add the movies and the television as even more powerful means to convey fairy-tale motifs, reaching larger audiences. So, the cinematic versions of "Snow White," "Cinderella" and "Sleeping Beauty," with all the changes introduced by Disney, contributed to reinforce patriarchal paradigms of sex-role divisions already present in the Grimms' texts. Both the tales and the films structure their plots in such a way that the fate of each character is predictable by their sex. The very predictability of fairy-tale endings implies its didacticism. Being offered only one model of sex-role divisions, children will unconsciously absorb it as "the" model, or as the way nature decided it should

be. As a result, as Marcia Lieberman points out in her article "'Some Day My Prince Will Come': Female Acculturation Through the Fairy Tale," "millions of women must surely have formed their psycho-sexual self-concepts, and their ideas of what they could and could not accomplish, what sort of behavior would be rewarded, and of the nature of the reward itself, in part from their favorite fairy tales" (187). Victims of an effective process of cultural conditioning, most women still behave in accordance to the precepts of male bourgeois myths.

Along with the processes of bourgeoisification and patriarchalization previously discussed, fairy tales have undergone a process of mythicization. Classical fairy tales, such as "Cinderella," "Snow White," "Sleeping Beauty," "Little Red Riding Hood," "Rapunzel," "The Frog Prince," and others, are so ingrained in the corpus of our culture that they assume a "natural" character. At the moment in which historically and culturally determined ideologies (such as the bourgeois ideology) are presented through fairy tales as eternal, irrefutable and unchangeable paradigms of behavior -- culture speaks through the voice of a pseudo-nature -- the fairy tale, then, becomes myth in the sense described by Roland Barthes in Mythologies and in Image-Music-Text.

For Barthes, myth is a second-order language or metalanguage, which steals language, distorts its meaning by introducing a new concept and thus forms a new signification. The sign of the linguistic system becomes the signifier (form) of the mythical system, and the signified or concept deforms the original meaning without, as we will see, abolishing it (Barthes

123). Thus, myth is a double-system, for its signifier is also the linguistic sign. Due to this duplicity of the mythical signifier, the intention of the myth lies subtly behind the literal sense, or, in Barthes own words, "its intention is somehow frozen, purified, eternalized, made absent by this literal sense" (124). So, myth appropriates a material which already has a meaning -- folk tales, for instance -- and imbues it with an ideological slant that is made to appear innocent and uncommitted.

As Barthes puts it, myth is "frozen speech," for as it comes to us, "it suspends itself, turns away and assumes the look of a generality: it stiffens, it makes itself look neutral and innocent" (125). By camouflaging the historical determination of its intentions, myth transforms culture into nature, or

> at least, the social, the cultural, the ideological, the historical into the "natural." What is nothing but a product of class division and its moral, cultural and aesthetic consequences is presented (stated) as being "a matter of course": under the effect of mythical inversion, the quite contingent foundations of the utterance become common sense, right reason, the norm, general opinion, in short, the doxa (which is the secular figure of the origin) (*Image- Music- Text* 165).

The efficacy of myth lies exactly in the fact that it does not deny its intentions, but naturalizes them (Barthes 131).

As myth, the classical fairy tale has been naturalized in many of its aspects -- structurally, the "once upon a time" and "They lived happily forever after" have long become part of the nature of the fairy tale itself. Also, as Zipes points out, it is second nature to structure a fairy tale according to a plotline in which the hero, who is almost always poor, goes into the

world, fights and defeats the evil, proves his value, and, as a consequence, rises in the social scale and achieves both financial and emotional success -- a typical male-oriented bourgeois plotline. So, elements that were not natural in the oral folk tradition have become natural in the Grimms' texts (22). The classical fairy tale has, indeed, developed in a similar way to the process of myth formation, as described by Barthes (114-20). It has appropriated a form of discourse that already had a meaning -- the oral folk tale -- and deformed this meaning to introduce patriarchal-bourgeois motifs, in a way that these culturally determined motifs were made to appear part of folk culture, part of human nature. Similarly to myth, the structure (form) of the fairy tale is at the service of its intentions.

Although the ideologies propagated by the tales are overtly bourgeois, the bourgeoisie, as Barthes points out, completely disappears as an ideological fact (138). The bourgeoisie never commits itself, for, as Zipes remarks, "the fairy tale must appear harmless, natural, eternal, ahistorical, therapeutic" (150). And, of course, this phenomenon of bourgeois "ex-nomination," as Barthes calls it, is part of the process of turning the reality of the world into an upside-down image of the world; of making history into nature (141).

In order to be experienced as natural laws, bourgeois values must appear unmediated by class interests. Interestingly enough, the Grimms' tales, after having become a powerful institution in western patriarchal bourgeois cultures, have been looked at, as

previously mentioned, as if they did not have an author, nor a mediator between the oral texts and the scripted versions. The tales seemed to emerge as if from nowhere, or from nature itself, and have become accepted as conveyors of natural, eternal and universal truths about humankind. (See Jungian and Freudian criticism, especially Bettelheim's assumption that fairy tales speak a universal language, accessible to the many complex levels of the human personality. Bettelheim ignores that the "universality" of fairy tales is a contingency and that it was invented to serve specific interests in a specific time and meant to last for all times).

Barthes argues that myth has a double structure -- it distorts the original meaning by filling it with a new concept, but never eliminates it. Both meanings (the literal one and the mythical signification) are present, for "myth hides nothing: its function is to distort, not to make disappear" (Barthes 121).

In like manner, the classical fairy tale, no matter how transformed and distorted to meet bourgeois needs, retains elements of the folk tradition. In "Sleeping Beauty," as Zipes points out, we do not only have a demonstration of male power of salvation and female dependency and passivity, but also a belief in resurrection, a human struggle against death and a desire for immortality (Zipes 153). But what myth does, safeguarding the interests of a male bourgeoisie, is to associate death in the folk narrative to female passivity and defenselessness and oppose it to male struggle and action (power, life); to connect female rebirth to male courage, maturity and complacency. Myth has transformed the original folk tale's possible idea of

resurrection and immortality into a patriarchal apology of male power to restore "sleeping" women back to life. It is the literal meaning within the mythical second-order structure that gives myth an innocent and harmless appearance (Barthes 124). Nevertheless, the mythical elements introduced in the fairy tales have become much more important than whatever the original meaning of the tales intended to convey some hundreds of years ago (Zipes 152).

The process of mythicization of fairy tales has been intensified in our century by Disney's film versions. As previously discussed, Disney took the already patriarchalized and bourgeoisified tales and constructed many myths out of them, in the form of apparently neutral messages. In his version of "Sleeping Beauty," the ideal American housewife of the 1950s lies under a veil of enchantment, waiting for the prince (husband) to rouse her from inactivity and awake her into social and financial stability and give a meaning (the only one) to her life. It becomes second nature that women do not have a life of their own without men.

But the time has come to tear down the myths and unveil the historical and cultural forces behind them. The time has come to ask, as Marcia Lieberman puts it, "what is inherent in our nature, and what has become ours through the gentle but forcible process of acculturation" (187).

Women, for at least 200 years, have found in fairy tales paradigms of behavior approved of by our culture. Marriage, as presented in the tales, appears if not as the only possible, but

at least as the most desirable female aspiration within a patriarchy. Seemingly innocent tales have long instilled into women's unconscious romantic expectations and fantasies whose only real-life realization is through patriarchal marriage. The long-held belief that patriarchy justifies and perpetuates through the fairy tale is women's "inborn" vocation to be loving and passive wives and mothers. It is exactly this "biologically" determined vocation which restrains women's potentialities, that pathbreaking studies such as Simone DeBeauvoir's The Second Sex(1945) and Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique(1960) began to question.

One fundamental notion put forward by DeBeauvoir is that one is not born a woman, but becomes a woman. DeBeauvoir's statement is validated by both anthropological and psychological theories on the undeniable role of culture in shaping the individual's personality. As anthropologists like Ruth Benedict and Melville Herskovits agree, most of our behavioral tendencies derive less from inborn traits than from cultural conditioning. The model of "true" womanhood as established by the feminine mystique, so accurately described by Betty Friedan's research, and so much praised and propagated by fairy tales, certainly does not correspond to the true nature of the female self. Although we cannot measure to what extent the fairy tale has influenced women's actual behavior, we know that its influence has been very significant, especially in what concerns marriage expectations and sex-role divisions.

As Friedan demonstrates in her book, in the 1940s and 1950s, American women had been fenced by patriarchy within the limits of

domestic roles. Women were expected to fulfill their roles as housewives and mothers and to find self-fulfillment only in them (37). To jump over the fence of proper behavior was obviously considered "unfeminine." But, as the Women's Liberation Movement regained strength in the 1960s, women began to expose and challenge the existing myths concerning their femininity and their role in society. When some women dared to jump over the fence into public life, what would happen to the romantic, passive and submissive fairy-tale housewife? She, inevitably, was gradually being rejected as the ideal model of femininity to which most women should subscribe. As women's role in society began to change, and as women began to assume a more active position, to question and to challenge patriarchal values, the classical fairy tale no longer offered satisfactory models and justifications to women's expectations and aspirations in life, and it too had to be changed, to be viewed under a new perspective, to be transformed.

In fiction and poetry, the increasing inconsistency between romantic idealizations and mythical expectations of female role and the often painful reality of actual relationships led some women writers like Anne Sexton, Olga Broumas, Jane Yolen, Angela Carter and many others to rethink and recreate the classical fairy tale, in an attempt to bring into light the skeleton of a patriarchal deception.

I am specifically interested in Anne Sexton's _Transformations_(1971), in which she rewrites in verse 16 fairy tales from the Brothers Grimm, among which are the most popular

ones such as "Snow White," "Cinderella," "Rapunzel," "The Frog Prince" and "Sleeping Beauty." These tales are among the ones which present the most memorable heroines, that probably have served as models for many a girl all over the western world.

Innovative retellings of fairy tales are attempts at melting the frozen structure of myth (Zipes 153), by letting myth show itself in all its arbitrariness and unnaturalness. As an anti-mythical discourse, the innovative fairy tale, as Zipes points out, does not deceive but sheds a new light on previously taken for granted aspects. It does not try to naturalize itself, but to expose the cultural forces behind mythical assumptions. To rewrite a fairy tale is to put into motion what myth has been trying to immobilize, for as Barthes says, "the very end of myth is to immobilize the world" (155); to rewrite a fairy tale, then, is to prove that life is able to reinvent itself, and that culture admits and needs change. Revisionist recreations such as those by Anne Sexton and Olga Broumas question the validity of male-dominated discourse. I have chosen to work with Sexton's text first because of the controversy around her confessionalism and also because she was one of the first women writers to resort to the fairy-tale institution in order to dismantle the patriarchal framework within which women have been imprisoned. And although Sexton never considered herself a feminist, Transformations is the one group of poems which conveys the strongest and most bitter criticism of patriarchal cultural myths. Differently from Broumas, who envisages alternative rearrangements of sex-roles, Sexton is more pessimistic. But, in spite of not proposing new sex-role models, she questions the

actual arrangements so radically and sardonically that arouses in the reader a wish for change (Don't Bet on the Prince 19-21). Sexton, in a sense, breaks the enchantment fairy tales have cast on patriarchal marriage by dissecting its malaises and ironically suggesting how it is in fact too far removed from fantasy and romanticism.

In the next two chapters, I will try to identify what are the mythic messages concerning female behavior embedded in the tales' apparently naive structure, that Sexton discloses to us in her critical re-reading of "Snow White," "Cinderella," "Rapunzel," "The Twelve Dancing Princesses," "The Frog Prince" and "Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)."

I have divided my analysis into two parts. In chapter three, I deal with three tales in which the mother is the exponent of womanhood. My purpose is to verify how the perpetuation of patriarchal values takes place from mother to daughter, discuss how Sexton criticizes male-defined mother-daughter relationships and how she reveals to us the hidden face of myth and its intentions.

In chapter four, I deal with another group of three tales, in which the father himself appears as the rightful enforcer of the patriarchal law. Here, I am concerned with the way Sexton views this power-based father-daughter relationship and how damaging it is to a woman's individual growth. Throughout my analysis, I use an English translation of the Grimms' text as a basis to comment on Sexton's critical revisions.

CHAPTER THREE

MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS IN "SNOW WHITE," "CINDERELLA" AND "RAPUNZEL"

As I have tried to demonstrate in the previous chapter, traditional fairy tales make use of a mythical discourse, which fuses reality with fantasy to reinforce patriarchal cultural norms. And we have seen that, according to these norms, passivity, self-abnegation and dependency are glorified as a woman's principal virtues, as if the whole structure of society depended upon women's capitulation to the constraining roles of housewives and mothers (Rowe 210). Behind the apparent innocence of fantasies directed to the entertainment of children, fairy tales hide their ideological power to transmit romantic idealizations of the female self and of women's function within a patriarchy (211).

A very common myth in our culture is that women are the "silent sex" (Gallop 274). According to the myth, women are objects designed and described by the male imagination, and not subjects capable of speaking for themselves. The "silent sex" is the inspiration for literature and the muse for romantic dreams. The myth also tells us that whenever a woman used language, her purpose would be either to chatter or to lie-- women never spoke to transmit knowledge, but to deceive. In this tradition, men, as

the guardians of language and producers of knowledge, were the ones who "know better," and thus entitled to speak about women. Even though most of the myths about women constructed by a male fantasy do not correspond to the real female self, women were not allowed to tell the truths about their own experiences. The obvious consequence of the myth is that women have been, for centuries, characters of male stories that they would not be trusted to write themselves. Culture was produced out of women (literature, psychological studies, etc.), but the woman of the myth did not produce culture (274).

Searching to demythicize and correct familiar female images from male distortions, Anne Sexton has moved from the overt confessional tone of her early poetry to third-person narrative poems which criticize patriarchal myths as they have been crystallized in fairy tales. This is indeed an important step that she has taken as both a poet and a woman, since it represents the moment in which a woman seizes male discourse and male tradition to discover the lies behind the models of "true" womanhood these offer; most importantly, it represents the moment in which Sexton, the poet and the woman, uses her voice to tell her own story, defying rigid conventional notions propagated by a dominating male culture, to show that culture can and must be changed.

Transformations (1971) consists of a prologue and sixteen rewritten fairy tales from the Brothers Grimm. In the book, Sexton makes use of a sarcastic tone to disclose the way women

have been made into objects shaped and manipulated male notions of womanhood. Sexton's major concerns in her revisionist poems are to desentimentalize the romantic structure of the traditional tales, which praises the passivity and purity of the "happy" housewife, and to review convention-based feminine life models. In her modernized versions, Sexton points to the need to transform patriarchal social values such as beauty standards, love, marriage and the family.

Suzanne Juhasz is one of the critics who believes that in _Transformations_ a major development, "if not a transformation," begins to take place in Sexton's poetry (343). In Juhasz's opinion, _Transformations_ represents the moment when Sexton abandons the dependent and powerless position of the patient to assume the independent and powerful position of the "middle-aged witch, me." In a poem written previous to this book, Sexton, as Juhasz points out, has treated madwoman and witch as equals: "I have gone out a possessed witch,/ haunting the black air, braver at night" ("Her Kind" _To Bedlam and Part Way Back_). And the refrain goes: "A woman like that is not a woman quite/ I have been her kind"; "A woman like that is misunderstood,/ I have been her kind"; "A woman like that is not ashamed to die,/ I have been her kind." The voice of the mad is "alone," as Sexton suggests in "You, Doctor Martin," since the mad are "magic talking to itself,/ noisy and alone." No one listens to the mad. From this thought, Juhasz draws a significant connection between the world of the mad and the world of women: both are private. It is very common to connect fool or madman and poet. The distance between

madwoman and woman poet, as Juhasz points out, is not great either, but more often ignored. Madwomen, as Juhasz accurately notes, are twice enclosed within a private sphere, both as mad and as women, whereas the male poet has always had a public voice, a voice of power-- a voice that can influence people's lives and provoke changes both in the personal and public worlds (343). In _Transformations_ Sexton speaks with a voice of power. She has finally outgrown the patient's powerlessness to assume the voice of the witch-- the wise madwoman, the one who sees through things, the one who scrutinizes and debunks patriarchal cultural myths; the woman, the poet. In Juhasz's own words, "by rooting her public voice in her private experience, by creating a public persona, witch, out of her private self, witch, [Sexton] is able to discuss the race in addition to herself" (343). Thus, the poet-witch can open the book of tales and, with the magic of words, transform them.

Transformations opens with "The Gold Key," which serves as prologue to the book. Here the speaker introduces herself as a "middle-aged witch, me." Women, as history tells us, belong to a long tradition of storytelling. From Scheherezade to our grandmothers, book in hand and surrounded by children, women storytellers have been in the covers of many a collection of fairy tales, including the Grimms' own. We also know that they have served as important oral sources of tales for the Brothers' collection. But, as I have previously argued, when women told stories, they told male stories and silenced their own voices to serve a patriarchal social order. Now, however, the story is different. The "middle-aged witch, me" is not just a storyteller,

she is a creator, a poet, making use of the power of words to transform familiar tales we thought we knew.

The poet-witch describes herself as having "two great arms" and the mouth held wide "to tell you a story or two." The great arms and the wide mouth imply that the witch's voice intends to be heard by a large audience, including both children and adults. The speaker's purpose is readily proclaimed:

> I have come to remind you,
> all of you:
> Alice, Samuel, Kurt, Eleanor,
> Jane, Brian, Maryel,
> All of you draw near.
> Alice, at fifty-six do you remember?
> Do you remember when you
> were read to as a child?

She soon designates the listener of the tales, a boy of sixteen who "wants some answers." And, of course, the boy is a surrogate for any one of us, including Sexton herself, since he represents the curious drive that leads to the critical transformations of the tales which follow. The boy, like any common reader, does not know yet the hidden meanings behind the fantastic world of fairy tales, but he has a gold key, which opens "this book of odd tales/ which transform the Brothers Grimm." And, as if by a wave of a magic wand, the "middle-aged witch, me" takes us to a world of possibilities, where "an enlarged paper clip/ could be a piece of sculpture/ (and it could)."

As we enter the world of Transformations, the first of a whole gallery of beautiful and helpless heroines we find is Snow White. Before retelling the tale, as is usual in the book, the

poet-witch offers us a prologue which sets the tone and reflects upon the meaning of the tale which follows. In the prologue to "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," Sexton, with a mocking tone, demolishes conventional moral values related to femininity. In dismantling the myth of the virgin, Sexton brings to the scenery the voices of its creators and manipulators, and reveals to us the submerged male intentions behind the apparent morality of the myth. The virgin is, in fact, a commodity, a doll whose movements are determined from without. In order to indicate the degree of reification that women have been subjected to in our society, Sexton makes use of strikingly concrete similes, which not only modernize her theme, but also establish an ironical and crude connection between women's body and manageable and pleasurable objects:

> No matter what life you lead
> the virgin is a lovely number:
> cheeks as fragile as cigarrette paper,
> arms and legs made of limoges,
> 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.
> She is as white as a bonefish.

In an astonishing image, Sexton implies that the culture which teaches little girls to be good and respectful daughters and repeat the doll-like greeting, "Good Day mama," is the same male culture which treats this girl as a defenseless sexual object, whose eyes are "shut for the thrust/ of the unicorn." The deceptive character of the patriarchal myth of the virgin is most shockingly conveyed by the image of the apparently harmless

unicorn, which is made to embody the intrinsic duplicity of the myth itself and becomes also an instrument of rape.

Snow White, as Madonna Kolbenschlag has noted, is the fairy-tale heroine with whom most girls easily identify (61). The tale is very popular and in almost every language and culture we can find variations of the story. According to Kolbenschlag, the reason for such popularity resides in the fact that the tale is a metaphor for the most fundamental of the relationships that constitute human experience, the mother-daughter relationship (61).

Fairy tales, in general, have their action centered in family conflict and their plots, as noted in chapter two, almost invariably develop towards the reconstitution of a lost family order. The basic characters of a fairy tale are usually the members of a nuclear family: the father, the mother (or stepmother) and the children. Of course there are the external elements: the evil being and the hero who destroys the evil (or leads the evil to self-destruction, since the integrity of the male hero cannot be soiled) and marries the helpless "heroine," and we are back to the family again.

We know that it is within the institution of the family that basic notions of sex-role divisions and social gender arrangements are first established and consolidated. How we organize ourselves sexually and psychologically in society has much to do with the manner our families have been reproducing themselves. In a patriarchal family, the central figure is the father-- he is the one who has the ruling power over the other family members. Psychologists have argued that the crucial

period for the development of gender identity and individuality is the preoedipal phase, and the success of this period depends basically upon the capacity of the mother to attend the preoedipal child's needs (Don't Bet on the Prince 27). The child can only develop a sense of independent and autonomous existence provided that the mother herself is an independent and strong individual. This phase, however, is doomed to failure, since, as Jessica Benjamin has pointed out, the father, in patriarchal cultures, embodies the ideal of "absolute autonomy":

> **This form of false differentiation can ... be seen as institutionalized in the oedipus complex and perpetuated in oedipal socialization. Man/father achieves absolute autonomy because woman/mother represents dependency. Individuality, then, is constituted by what is male, by the permanent assignment of man to the role of subject, through the father's assertion and insistence on complete independence. . . . Man's domination of woman has found expression in the oedipal relationships in which the split between male and female is reproduced in each generation** (qtd. in Don't Bet on the Prince 27).

In this chapter, beginning with "Snow White," I will be concerned with those tales in which the center of family conflict lies in the mother-daughter relationship. I intend to verify how the influence of the mother, who stands for male-defined womanhood, may hinder the full development of the daughter into maturity and autonomy.

The Grimms tale of "Little Snow White," which Disney has entitled "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," tells us about the evil plottings of a jealous (step)mother to destroy the most dangerous menace to her own beauty, her young and beautiful (step)daughter, Snow White. The queen, as we first meet her, is

described as a very beautiful woman, but "proud and arrogant," and we are told that she could not stand the possibility of someone being more bautiful than herself. In Sexton's version, she introduces Snow White as a "lovely virgin" of thirteen and the (step)mother as "a beauty in her own right,/ though eaten, of course, by age." Sexton, in spite of not altering the tale's plot, leaves enough room in her narrative for acid commentaries, which dissolve the pretentious innocence of the Grimms' text: "Beauty is a simple passion,/ but, oh my friends, in the end/ you will dance the fire dance in iron shoes."

The (step)mother, as the Grimms tells us, has a mirror, which provides her with enough self-esteem as daily confirms her unique beauty. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in "The Queen's Looking Glass," suggest that this "new wife" is, in fact, the "good" queen (Snow White's biological mother) at a further stage of development. And, once the "good queen," in the beginning of the Grimms tale, pricks her finger, bleeds and thus is "assumed into the cycle of sexuality," no longer does she have "outward prospects." Her life has now turned inward -- she is constantly referring to the mirror, as if looking for acceptable self-images. The wicked (step)mother has been trapped in the "inward search" psychoanalysts call narcissism (Gilbert & Gubar 202). The obsessed queen leads a life of complete self-absorption -- she is fed by the images that the mirror reflects of herself. In the Grimms' version, even the king is absent from the story, thus centralizing the whole conflict in the narcissistic dialectics established between the (step)mother and the mirror, and the

feminized oedipal struggle between the two women. According to Gilbert and Gubar, the "Snow White" tale is the paradigm of female development in a patriarchy, and I believe that Sexton's narrative sarcastically criticizes the way male myths of female sexuality and socialization curtail women's possibilities for achieving a strong sense of independent selfhood. Gilbert and Gubar believe that the reason for the king's absence lies in the fact that the queen has already internalised the patriarchal model of female sexuality and the king's voice now lives in her own mirror, "her own mind" (202).

The narcissistic battle between the queen and Snow White begins when the magic mirror, for which Sexton suggests a funny modern parallel: "something like the weather forecast," announces something like a storm coming: "Queen, you are full fair, 'tis true,/ but Snow White is fairer than you." Here Sexton does not miss the opportunity to be funny again: "Until that moment Snow White/ had been no more important than a dust mouse under the bed." The (step)mother, seeing her throne as a patriarchal beauty queen seriously menaced by an innocent flourishing beauty, realizes how her old age puts her in disadvantage: "... now the queen saw brown spots on her hands/ and four whiskers over her lips." The enraged queen, then, condemns to death the object of her jealousy. In the Grimms version, she asks the hunter to bring her Snow White's lungs and liver, two of her vital organs. Sexton's queen, however, asks for Snow White's heart, which may symbolize life itself or all the energy and vitality of youth. The hunter, who, as Bettelheim has suggested, may be in fact a surrogate for the father/king (318), a patriarchal

representative, refuses to kill such a beautiful child -- his own child (see also Gilbert & Gubar 204). To satisfy the queen cannibalistic desires, the hunter brings her the organs of an animal, which she devours believing to be her rival s. According to Madonna Kolbenschlag, in devouring the supposedly Snow White's vital organs, the wicked (step)mother enacts the primitive cannibalistic manifestations of envy, according to which the person acquired the power and the characteristics of the one devoured (62). Sexton captures well this idea when her queen concludes, after having supposedly eaten Snow White's heart, "now I am fairest."

After the hunter sets her free, the Grimms Snow White finds herself alone and helpless in the middle of a great forest, but the wild beasts do her no harm. In Bettelheim's reading, this passage through the wilderness may correspond to the rites of initiation, in which the naive and uninformed hero/heroine, after finding salvation and a reward leaves the wilderness as a full human being, able to love and be loved in return (318). Sexton's Snow White's stay in the wilderness, however, does not represent a period of growth or self-discovery; rather, she is initiated into the ambivalent male world which created the myth of the angelical virgin, where nature, like the unicorn, hides sexual traps behind its harmless appearance:

> Snow White walked in the wildwood
> for weeks and weeks.
> At each turn there were twenty doorways
> and at each stood a hungry wolf,
> his tongue lolling out like a worm.
> The birds called out lewdly,
> talking like pink parrots,
> and the snakes hung down in loops,

each a noose for her sweet white neck.

At the end of her painful experience in the wilderness, Snow White finally finds the dwarfs' house, which seems to her "as droll as a honeymoon cottage." Differently from the Grimms' Little Snow White, who eats a little piece of bread from each dwarf's plate, Sexton's "lovely virgin" eats seven chicken livers, which may be an indicative of the latent similarities between the girl and her (step)mother, since the latter has also eaten animal organs. Sexton's narrative, here and there, offers us hints of how Snow White gradually comes to fit into male-defined models of female sexuality and socialization, of which her (step)mother is the exponent.

The dwarfs, "those little hot dogs," as Sexton refers to them, may indeed have phallic connotations, which, according to Bettelheim, may also be suggested by their activity as miners, who penetrate into dark cavities. Still according to Bettelheim, the dwarfs symbolize an immature and pre-individual existence. In this connection, Gilbert and Gubar see the dwarfs as representing Snow White's own powerlessness, since they cannot protect her from the queen's evil machinations; they represent Snow White's own "dwarfed powers, her stunted selfhood" (205).

In the Grimms' version, it is in the dwarfs' house that Snow White is initiated into the patriarchal codes of female domesticity. As already mentioned in the previous chapter, in exchange for shelter, the dwarfs ask the girl to keep house for them, "sew, make the beds, wash and knit, and keep everything tidy and clean" (The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm 216). A task that Little Snow White happily undertakes, from all

her heart.

In Sexton's retelling, there is an emphasis on the gradual process of reification of the virgin. When the dwarfs first see the sleeping girl, they promptly say: "Yes. it's
a good omen,/ and will bring us luck." Of course they are lucky, she will keep house for them and "keep everything tidy and clean," as the Grimms dictated. Snow White's stay in the dwarfs' house represents, in fact, a period of domestication, out of which she will emerge as a perfect male-defined woman: subservient, selfless and powerless.

Snow White, indeed, is not safe in the dwarfs' house. As we know, it does not take long before the mirror reveals to the wicked queen that Snow White, in the dwarfs' little house, is still the most beautiful. The furious queen dresses as an old peddler, and for three times she goes to the dwarfs' house to try to tempt the girl into buying from her attractive objects. In the first time, she tries to sell the girl "a bit of lacing," which when fastened around Snow White's body makes her swoon. But the dwarfs undo the lace and she revives. In the second time, the queen, trying to appeal to Snow White's vanity, brings another female ornament to tempt her, a poisoned comb, which she puts in her hair and the girl faints again. The dwarfs, as in the previous time, take out the comb and Snow White "opens her eyes as wide as Orphan Annie." But the queen insists and in the third time she brings a beautiful poisoned apple, which Snow White, "the dumb bunny," as Sexton sarcastically refers to her, eats and falls down "for the final time." This time there is nothing the

dwarfs can do to save her.

Through Sexton's retelling, we can perceive how the queen plays with Snow White's vanity by offering her, in two of her unsuccessful plots, peculiarly female ornamental items, the lacing and the comb. Snow White, then, reveals her ambivalence of being both innocent and pure (white as snow) and having a latent desire for life (red as blood) -- a curiosity that, ironically, leads her to total stagnation. Falling to the queen's temptations, Snow White shows how she is becoming closer to the patriarchal narcissistic paradigm of womanhood. In this connection, Snow White and the queen, as Gilbert and Gubar suggest, are one (205). Upon eating the poisoned apple, the ultimate symbol of temptation, Snow White finally loses her chance of becoming a self-assertive individual and becomes a patriarchal object of art. Anne Sexton could not convey this more accurately when she describes the "dead" Snow White as laying "as still as a gold piece." Ironically, as Gilbert and Gubar point out, the queen, in attempting to destroy Snow White, has transformed her into a perfect -- passive and desirable -- model of male-defined beauty.

In the Grimms tale, the dwarfs could not bury Snow White, who was so lively and red-faced as a living person, "in the black ground." So, they made her a glass coffin, through which they, and the animals of the forest, could appreciate her beauty. In Sexton's version, the dwarfs set Snow White's glass coffin "upon the seventh mountain/ so that all who passed by/ could peck upon her beauty," thus pointing to the institutionalization of female beauty as an artistic object, exposed to everyone's appreciation.

in exposing the girl to every passer-by, the dwarfs become the linking element between the "lovely virgin" and the prince. When the prince sees Snow White, he cannot take his eyes off her, so "the dwarfs took pity upon him/ and gave him the glass Snow White -- its doll's eyes shut forever -- / to keep in his far-off castle." The dwarfs give the
girl as a gift to the prince -- a mere glass statue -- which will satisfy his desire for the aesthetic visual pleasure her beauty gives him. In the prince's "far-off castle," Snow White will be even farther away from public life and eternally enclosed within domesticity.

When Snow White "miraculously" wakes up and becomes the "prince's bride," her development into a male-defined woman is finished. In marrying the prince, she is ready to become a new queen, and thus the wicked (step)mother becomes obsolete. The old queen is then put to dance the death-dance in "red hot iron shoes." In the Grimms' version the devilish (step)mother dies and is replaced by angelical goodness, personified by Snow White. Anne Sexton, nevertheless, pessimistically suggests that there is no salvation for women in patriarchy, as long as daughters keep reincarnating the male models of womanhood embodied by their mothers. Models which prevent women from developing their own sense of values, which is only possible to happen when the person is able to achieve an autonomous personality. And, as Kolbenschlag has put it, "the woman who gives birth to a child before giving birth to herself faces the impossible task of raising an autonomous child" (73). Therefore, Snow White has no

other option but to conform to the same narcissistic obsession of which her own immature and selfless (step)mother was a victim:

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

The casual, but ironic, tone with which Sexton concludes her poem criticizes how naturally women have come to accept a sickened self-absorbed existence, into which patriarchal expectations and paradigms of womanhood have confined them.

"Cinderella," one of the most popular Grimm fairy tale, also illustrates female rivalry motivated and revolving around a male center. The tale's plot, similarly to "Snow White" (though to a lesser degree), is based on the stepmother's purposeful obstructions to her stepdaughter's elevation to a "better" and higher social position by marrying the prince.

"Cinderella," like many of the Grimms' tales, focuses on the popular bourgeois rags-to-riches plotline, which, in this case, has different implications, since the protagonist is a woman. In the prologue to her retelling, Sexton ironizes on the apparently natural causes which make a woman's rags-to-riches story different from a man's:

> You always read about it:
> the plumber with twelve children
> who wins the Irish sweepstakes
> from toilets to riches
> That story.
>
> Or the nursemaid,
> some luscious sweet from Denmark
> who captures the oldest son's heart.
> From diapers to Dior.
> That story.

The man is a professional who works to put money in the house,

after all he has twelve children to feed; he "wins the Irish sweepstakes," and since he is the head of the family, his wife and children will naturally benefit from his good luck. The woman, as Sexton sets the contrast, is a nursemaid, a profession which reflects female supposedly inherent motherly and domestic instincts, whose elevation to financial success depends on her ability to "capture the oldest son's heart." That story. That typical male-constructed plotline, which sets a woman's destiny as depending on her marriage to a successful and rich man. In our patriarchal culture, women are educated to fight for this man -- "that story." And that is the story Sexton will tell us now.

Sexton's version, like the Grimms', opens with the death of Cinderella's biological mother, who, before dying, advises her daughter: "be devout. Be good. Then I will smile/ down from heaven in the seam of a cloud." In the Grimms' story, Cinderella used to visit her mother's grave everyday and, heeding her mother's advice, "wept and kept on being devout and good." Here, are established the basic pre-conditions for a woman's "success": goodness and the readiness to live for someone else. This is the legacy of submission which the mother, who, in our culture, is the exponent of male-defined womanhood, passes down to her daughter.

With the death of her mother, Cinderella's father takes another wife, who already has two daughters. The daughters, in Sexton's description, are "pretty enough/ but with hearts like blackjacks." Here, Sexton's interesting simile attacks the same culture which has reified the virgin in "Snow White," and which

has turned female beauty into a weapon in the battle for the ideal man. Cinderella, who, like Snow White, is innocent and not yet initiated into the narcissistic competition that puts a woman against the other in patriarchal cultures, is immediately relegated to a debased position in her own house by her stepmother and stepsisters, who are doing nothing but attempting to eliminate a virtual rival. Sexton, as usual, does not miss the chance to use unexpected modernizing similes, which add zest to her spicy comments: "Cinderella was their maid/ she slept in the sooty hearth each night/ and walked around looking like Al Jolson."

We know that the prosperity of the bourgeois business-man was measured by the way his wife and daughters exhibited themselves richly dressed. Not denying the rule, Cinderella's father stimulates his new wife's and daughter's vanity by bringing them "jewels and gowns" from town. For Cinderella, however, he brings the "twig of a tree," which "she planted on her mother's grave." The tree that grows from the twig and the dove that satisfies Cinderella's wishes are, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the remaining matrilineal elements, which maintain the symbiotic connection between the girl and her dead mother. The speaker points to the importance of the dove: "whenever she wished for anything the dove/ would drop it like an egg upon the ground/ the bird is important, my dears, so heed him."

The king's ball, in which the prince is supposed to choose a wife, and which is the main cause of discord between Cinderella and her stepmother and stepsisters, is destituted by Sexton of

all romanticism and magic. Differently from the Grimms, Sexton does not fantasize over the romantic expectations a girl might have from such a fairy-tale ball. Rather, she desnudes the real intentions behind the party by referring to it as a "marriage market." Consequently, all the pretty girls invited become nothing more than mere articles of barter.

The battle between Cinderella and her stepmother gets even fiercer when the girl demonstrates a desire to go to the ball. Seeing the danger that the girl represents to her own daughters, the stepmother gives her the impossible task of picking up a bowl of lentils in two hours, before the ball. With the help of the dove, Cinderella completes the task in due time, but the stepmother now alleges that she has "no clothes and cannot dance." Sexton, probably referring to the way the fairy-tale stepmother is always portrayed as an intrinsically evil creature, so much so that the term wicked stepmother, as Maria Tatar has noted, may even become pleonastic (141), concludes with a generalizing comment: "that's the way with stepmothers."

Aware that she has no chance with her stepmother, Cinderella resorts to her dead biological mother, who, like the dwarfs in "Snow White," becomes the link between the girl and the prince. Sexton's Cinderella, like Snow White, little by little internalizes the virgin-as-a-commodity myth and now she desperately implores her mother to help her go to the ball -- or the "marriage market," as Sexton has called it: "Cinderella went to the tree at the grave/ and cried forth like a gospel singer:/ mama! mama! my turtledove,/ send me to the prince's ball!". The

mother, one of the child's main socializing agents, provides the means through which Cinderella becomes an acceptable male-defined woman. Sexton, who, in poems like "The Double Image," had already dealt with the problematics of mother-daughter relationships, especially what concerns the daughter's difficulties in developing an identity of her own and not becoming a copy of her own mother's portrait, treats the Cinderella case as typical. As in "Snow White's" concluding lines, her tone is casual and often funny:

> The bird dropped down a golden dress
> and delicate little gold slippers.
> Rather a large package for a simple bird.
> So she went. Which is no surprise.
> Her stepmother and sisters didn't
> recognize her without her cinder face
> and the prince took her hand on the spot
> and danced with no other the whole day.

Dressed in gold, Cinderella becomes a precious and desirable object in the prince's ball. She attracts the prince's attention just like the glass Snow White delighted her prince. Also like Snow White's prince, who wanted to own the beauty in glass, Cinderella's prince, in the Grimms' version declares: "this dancer is mine." Having left the party twice without a trace, Cinderella now represents a challenge for the wife-seeking prince, who does everything to find his golden doll. On the third day, as Sexton tells us: "... the prince/ covered the palace steps with cobbler's wax/ and Cinderella's gold shoe stuck upon it." The prince, though, does not seem to be looking for a wife, but for a sort of trophy, which he will probably also keep in his "far-off castle": "now he would find whom the shoe fit/ and find his strange dancing girl for keeps."

Very typical of a culture in which women are educated to live through and for her husband, the women of the tale engage in a ferocious competition for the prince. Cinderella's stepsisters are even ready to mutilate their own feet in order to fit into the golden slipper. Their bodily amputations might figuratively correspond to the psychic mutilations women have been conditioned to undergo in our patriarchal cultures in order to fit into male-dominated marriages. Sexton describes the amputations with the same comic wit that characterizes her counter-myth discourse:

> ... the two sisters
> were delighted because they had lovely feet.
> The eldest went into a room to try the slipper on
> but her big toe got in the way so she simply
> sliced it off and put on the slipper.

But, as we know, Cinderella's dead mother, disguised as a dove, calls the prince's attention to the blood in the sister's feet. Sexton's wit is on the spot: "that's the way with amputations/ they don't just heal up like a wish." The youngest sister, then, "cut off her heel/ but blood told as blood will."

Similarly to the prologue to "Snow White," in which she shows the virgin not as the embodiment of a moral value, but as a patriarchal commodity, Sexton here desentimentalizes the romantic scene in which the prince meets his "true" bride and rides off with her in his white horse, by describing their union as the result of a mechanized, business-like process:

> The prince was getting tired.
> He began to feel like a shoe salesman.
> But he gave it one last try.
> This time Cinderella fit into the shoe
> like a love letter into its envelope.

In her retelling, Sexton turns into a comic account one of the most violent scenes of the tale -- the scene in which the white dove pecks out Cinderella's stepsisters' eyes. The dove (=the mother), the symbol of goodness and peace, performs an act of violence when it comes down to protecting and defending the darling golden daughter of patriarchy. The violence of the scene is counterbalanced by Sexton's sense of humor and surprising similes:

> At the wedding ceremony
> the two sisters came to curry favour
> and the white dove pecked their eyes out.
> Two hollow spots were left
> like soup spoons.

In the concluding lines of her retelling, Sexton attacks one of the strongest patriarchal myths conveyed by fairy tales: marriage as the source of eternal happiness. In a very ironic tone, Sexton tears down the romantic guise of the myth and reveals a scenery in which both husband and wife have their potentialities to grow into mature human beings curtailed by limiting culturally imposed roles. Marriage, in Sexton's view, represents a sort of paralysis, and the fairy-tale happy-ending exists only in a world of fantasy:

> Cinderella and the prince
> lived, they say, happily ever after,
> like two dolls in a museum case
> never bothered by diapers or dust,
> never arguing over the timing of an egg,
> never telling the same story twice,
> never getting a middle-aged spread,
> their darling smiles pasted on for eternity.
> Regular Bobbsey Twins.
> That story.

I believe there is in Sexton's final lines an implied criticism on the way fairy tales portray conflicting young

females resolving their personal dilemmas according to culturally sanctioned alternatives. The good mother, who helps Cinderella, serves only to reinforce the paradigms of "true" womanhood established by patriarchy. It is the mother who turns the girl into a commodity by furnishing her with golden dresses and shoes. The mother, as emphasized by Sexton's version, helps sell her daughter in the "marriage market." The girl's marriage represents not the full development of her adult potentials, as Bettelheim claims, but her final conformity to the traditional and restricting roles of wife and mother. Cinderella marries the prince simply because her feet fit into the golden slipper "like a love letter into its envelope." In other words, she marries the prince because she fulfills all the expectations patriarchy holds towards women: she is beautiful, obedient, passive and powerless. Cinderella's ascension from rags to riches relies completely on external powers. She herself lacks self-initiative and does not choose, but is chosen. The fairy-tale marriage, as portrayed by Sexton, is another form of enchantment, in which the "happy" couple, like the virgin, are nothing but dolls -- selfless, faceless. With a highly critical eye, Sexton shows that what psychoanalitic critics tend to regard as a healthy resolution to oedipal conflicts (Cinderella marries the prince because she has overcome an early attachment to her father) represents, in fact, a sexist determination of where a woman should properly stand.

In the two tales analyzed so far, the central conflict resides in the narcissistic competition that turns women into essential rivals in a patriarchal culture. But is it possible that in such a culture two women establish a relationship based

on friendship, solidarity and love? This is, I believe, the question Sexton wants us to reflect upon through her critical retelling of "Rapunzel."

The prologue to the poem opens with a categorical affirmation of the life-giving love between two women: "a woman/ who loves a woman/ is forever young." The speaker is an old woman who addresses a younger one. In the first stanza of her speech-poem, the woman reminds us of the early healthy symbiotic attachment between mother and daughter, and that, like psychoanalysts have acknowledged, a girl's first emotional and erotic tie is with her mother or a mother-figure:

> 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 ...

This final line sends us back to Sexton's "Christmas Eve" (Live or Die), in which she contends with a wish to get rid of her dead mother's portrait and of its influence on her life. Concluding the poem, she recognizes herself in her mother and vice-versa, thus confirming the natural and unbreakable bond between mother and daughter. The feeling is almost that of "old breast against young breast":

> and then I touched my breast
> and then I touched the floor
> and then my breast again as if,
> somehow, it were one of yours.

"A woman is her mother," Sexton has stated in a previous poem ("Housewife"). In the prologue to "Rapunzel," the mother-figure feels her life waning and asks desperately the young girl, who could be her daughter, to hold her, to mother her and give her life. The mother gave life to her daughter and the suggestion here is that the two come full circle when the daughter becomes the mother of her own mother -- her only source of love and strength. The old woman's discourse is highly persuasive and desperate. She reminds the girl that time has passed and she is old:

> Let your dress fall down your shoulder,
> come touch a copy of you
> for I am at the mercy of rain,
> for I have left the three Christs of Ypsilanti,
> for I have left the long naps of Ann Arbor
> and the church spires have turned to stumps.
> The sea bangs into my cloister
> for the young politicians are dying,
> are dying so hold, my young dear,
> hold me . . .

Certain passages of the old woman's speech may suggest that the two women are engaging in a sexual-erotic seduction, and some may even say that Sexton is hinting at incest or professing lesbianism as an alternative to life-consuming male-defined heterossexual relationships. Of course Sexton is not happy with the way man-woman relationships are structured in our patriarchal culture, and how male cultural myths have turned women into "fair game," and taken away from them the feeling of mutual solidarity. I believe that what Sexton advocates here is a healthy symbiotic bond between women, in which one does not have the narcissistc

need to destroy the other in order to affirm herself in a male world, as happens in "Snow White" and "Cinderella." Rather, they mother and affirm each other in their love:

> The yellow rose will turn to cinder
> and New York City will fall in
> before we are done so hold me,
> my young dear, hold me.
> Put your pale arms around my neck.
> Let me hold your heart like a flower
> lest it bloom and collapse.
> Give me your skin
> as sheer as cobweb,
> let me open it up
> and listen in and scoop out the dark.
> Give me your nether lips
> all puffy with their art
> and I will give you angel fire in return.

The essential outcome of this emotional bond between women is strength. The affirmation of an existence based on female identification and experience has kept the two women out of male-oriented gender arrangements and socialization models. These two women, I believe, fit into Adrienne Rich's conception of the lesbian as "the self-chosen woman," the woman who has recovered "the forbidden 'primary intensity' between women and also the woman who refuses to obey, who has said 'no' to the fathers" (202):

> We are two clouds
> glistening in the bottle glass.
> We are two birds
> washing in the same mirror.
>
> We were fair game
> but we have kept out of the cesspool.
> We are strong.
> We are the good ones.

The "lovely virgin" who was "fair game" may be temporarily protected, but the "prince" and his power is still around. The

old woman knows it, and she knows that, as long as we live in a male-dominated and male-centered society, female love and solidarity are menaced. That is why she asks her "young dear": "Do not discover us/ for we lie together all in green/ like pond weeds./ Hold me, my young dear, hold me."

The final lines of the prologue celebrate the love and protection one woman gives the other. The "mother-me-do" game they play brings forth the renewal of life through the exchange of mutual acceptance and affection. The point of view is the old woman's and the tone suggests harmony and tenderness:

> They touch their delicate watches
> one at a time.
> They dance to the lute
> two at a time.
> They are as tender as bog moss.
> They play mother-me-do
> all day.
> A woman
> who loves a woman
> is forever young.

The prologue we have just discussed prepares us for the story that follows. And the story now is about an old witch and her love for a young girl. In the Grimms' version, the witch is introduced as "very powerful and feared by all." She has a garden into which no one is allowed. Her power, as suggested, is for evil and, as any powerful woman, she becomes a society's outcast — she is isolated within the high walls that surround her beautiful garden.

Sexton, nevertheless, begins her poem with a vivid description of the witch's garden, which underscores the long-held belief that witches are connected to nature, but debunks

the mythical assumption that their magic derives from evil natural powers. Sexton's vivid similes and imagery make life pump through the garden. There is color and music in it -- the garden is fertile, and, as Helen C. Rose has suggested, unmistakably female (211):

> Once there was a witch's garden
> more beautiful than Eve's
> with carrots growing like little fish,
> with many tomatoes as rich as frogs,
> onions as ingrown as hearts,
> the squash singing like a dolphin
> and one patch given over wholly to magic --
> rampion, a kind of salad root,
> a kind of harebell more potent than penicilin,
> growing leaf by leaf, skin by skin,
> as rapt and as fluid as Isadora Duncan.

The rampion, that grows "as rapt and as fluid as Isadora Duncan" is the key to our understanding of the story. As Sexton tells us, "a woman who was with child" saw the rampions in the witch's garden and immediately developed a desperate craving for the root. The husband, afraid that his wife would die "... climbed into the garden/ to fetch the life-giving tubers."

Mother Gothel, that was the witch's name, was very angry at the husband's intrusion and theft. Nevertheless, they made a pact: in exchange for the life-giving rampion, Mother Gothel would have the newborn child, whom she named Rapunzel, another name for the rampion.

The relationship between the old woman and the young Rapunzel acquires features similar to the one described in the prologue. Mother Gothel, in a sense, has mothered Rapunzel, since it was her rampions which nourished the baby. Now she imprisons

the girl as it to protect her only source of life -- Rapunzel has become life-giving for the witch as much as the rampion was for the girl's biological mother. In isolating the girl in the tower, Mother Gothel, like the old woman of the prologue, implicitly asks the girl, "do not discover us." The witch's attitude towards the girl is ambiguous: it is both affectionate and exploitative: "none but I will ever see her or touch her." Mother Gothel becomes an overprotective mother-figure, who wants to keep her daughter away from the traditional patriarchal family socialization models. The two women are "out of the cesspool," they have said " no' to the fathers," and live one for the other. Sexton's tone is almost lyrical and she draws her imagery from natural elements, which emphasize the harmonic strength that has grown between the two women:

> She locked her in a tower without a door
> or a staircase. It had only a high window.
> When the witch wanted to enter she cried:
> Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair.
> Rapunzel's hair fell to the ground like a rainbow.
> It was as yellow as a dandelion
> and as strong as a dog leash.
> Hand over hand she shinnied up
> the hair like a sailor
> and there in the stone-cold room,
> as cold as a museum,
> Mother Gothel cried:
> Hold me my young dear, hold me
> and they played mother-me-do.

Nevertheless, Sexton's attitude towards the two women's relationship is also ambiguous. In comparing the site of their daily meetings to a museum, she suggests the intrinsic artificiality of their situation. It seems that patriarchal power and values are so pervasive in our culture that such affectionate

bonding between women is doomed to take place in an isolated and inaccessible tower. The museum image also relates female friendship to a thing of the past -- a tie that our modern industrial societies have broken.

In spite of the tower, in spite of Mother Gothel's excessive care, the prince finally comes, as he always does in fairy tales. Now Sexton's tone begins to change as she mocks conventional heterosexual romance. Rapunzel's song pierces the prince's heart "like a valentine" and "like a chameleon he hid himself among the trees/ and watched the witch ascend the swinging hair." When the prince manages to get into the tower and meets Rapunzel, Sexton's mockery of agressive male sexuality speaks through the girl's astonishment. Her imagery and similes now suggest no tenderness:

> What is this beast, she thought
> with muscles on his arms
> like a bag of snakes?
> what is this moss on his legs?
> what prickly plant grows on his cheeks?
> what is this voice as deep as a dog?

But Rapunzel lets herself be seduced by the prince, and falls prey to the cultural institution of heterosexuality. Sexton's language ironizes romantic courtship and treats it as a form of enchantment through which the woman is led to passively admire the overpowering man. In her retelling, Sexton recovers the sexual innuendos that the Grimms had carefully eliminated from their version:

> Yet he dazzled her with his answers,
> yet he dazzled her with his dancing stick
> they lay together upon the yellowy threads,
> swimming through them

like minnows through kelp
and they sang out benedictions like the Pope.

It seems that with the arrival of the prince, the bond between the two women weakens and Rapunzel agrees to escape with him. The prince comes to take the young girl back to the "cesspool," out of which Mother Gothel tried so hard to keep her. The witch, as one would expect, feels betrayed and does what she can to keep the lovers apart:

> Each day he brought her skein of silk
> to fashion a ladder so they could both escape
> But Mother Gothel discovered the plot
> and cut off Rapunzel's hair to her ears
> and took her to the forest to repent.
> When the prince came the witch fastened
> the hair to a hook and let it down.

Mother Gothel punishes both Rapunzel and the prince, who is blinded by thorns as he jumps out of the tower in despair. Sexton's account of the prince's misery and of his meeting with Rapunzel again, after years, has the same mocking tone that has characterized her critical attitude towards idealized romantic heterosexual relationships:

> When he saw Rapunzel had been banished
> he flung himself out of the tower, a side of beef.
> He was blinded by thorns that pricked him like tacks.
> As blind as Oedipus he wandered for years
> until he heard a song that pierced his heart
> like that long-ago valentine.
> As he kissed Rapunzel her tears fell on his eyes
> and in the manner of such cure-alls
> his sight was suddenly restored.

Freudian analysts, like Bettelheim, read Rapunzel's final union to the prince as the natural result of a

well-resolved Oedipal phase. Heterosexual love is viewed, then, as the normal and expected outcome of a girl's early attachment to her mother. Psychoanalytic oriented feminist critics, like Nancy Chodorow, however, do not agree that heterosexuality is "natural, self-evident and unintended" (112). In her opinion, what takes place is exactly the opposite: "It seems to be both consciously and unconsciouly intended, socially, psychologically, and ideologically constructed" (113). Chodorow's view is endorsed by another outstanding feminist thinker, the poet Adrienne Rich, who believes that "heterosexuality, like motherhood, needs to be recognized as a political institution" (On Lies, Secrets and Silence 35). Sexton's Rapunzel's first contact with a male-figure, who "dazzles" her with his "dancing stick," marks the moment in which the girl subdues to what Rich calls the "institution of heterosexuality," which "demand[s] that the girl-child transfer those first feelings of dependency, eroticism, mutuality, from her first woman to a man, if she is to become what is defined as a normal woman -- that is, a woman whose most intense psychic and physical energies and directed towards men" (219).

Sexton treats Rapunzel's union to the prince with sarcastic contempt, and clearly suggests that it was a decision imposed from without -- from an overpowering male-culture, which determines and defines "normal" developmental patterns. In her version, Rapunzel becomes a victim of Rich's "compulsory heterosexuality." Sexton's ironic tone once more betrays her disbelief in the mythical romantic fairy-tale marriage:

They lived happily as you might expect

proving that mother-me do
can be outgrown,
just as he fish on friday,
just as the tricycle.
The world, some say,
is made up of couples.
A rose must have a stem.

Sexton s pessimistic conclusion implies that no matter how hard they try, women cannot keep away from patriarchal heterosexual love, which turns them into roses and men into the stems, without which the fragile roses would perish and die. In this connection, an emotional and affectionate tie between women is made impossible by the surrounding dominant male culture. In this cultural context, such a relationship will be forever doomed to become "artificial" and unreal, like that between Rapunzel and the witch, whose strength depended on the girl's total isolation from the outside world.

In Sexton s view, both Rapunzel and Mother Gothel's stories have an unhappy ending. The young one, who was "dazzled" by the seductive enchantments of the prince, becomes the selfless rose of the rose-stem couple, while the old witch is left alone with the memory of her life-giving Rapunzel. The witch, who once represented the ideal of sisterhood and solidarity among women, has been defeated by patriarchal power:

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.

In the three tales analyzed in this chapter, the center of

the conflict lies in the mother-daughter relationship, and all of them restrict female destiny to an attachment to male-defined values. We have seen that both in "Snow White" and "Cinderella," Sexton criticizes the dialectics established among women as self-damaging and based on narcissistic disputes that revolve around a male center.

In both tales, the mother-figure is split into the good biological mother and the evil stepmother. This division is due, in part, to William Grimm s censoring , which viewed to protect and preserve the sanctity of mothers. Nevertheless, Sexton sees both figures as representing a threat to the young female's development of a sense of selfhood, since they are the educational agents who teach their daughters how to fit into patriarchal models of femininity. In "Snow White," it is the stepmother who ironically transforms the "lovely virgin" into a desirable patriarchal object of art. In "Cinderella," the stepmother incites the girl into wanting to go to the ball by simply creating obstacles to her going, and thus, initiates her into the female narcissistic battle. The biological mother, in turn, is the one who provides the girl with the proper ornaments to become an acceptable male defined beauty.

In Rapunzel, however, Sexton envisages new possibilities for a woman-to woman relationship, based on mutual affirmation and love, and not on jealousy and competition. Yet, Sexton's critical awareness of the power of cultural conditioning processes and of cultural institutions, does not let her go any further into devising utopian alternatives. Her conclusion, as already mentioned, is highly pessimistic, since she sees no way of a

woman defining herself in terms not determined by the male culture in which she is immersed. In "Rapunzel," differently from "Snow White" and "Cinderella," the cultural precepts that link a woman to a man are not conveyed through the mother-figure; rather they are enforced by the overpowering figure of the prince, who finds Rapunzel even in the most isolated and inaccessible tower.

In all these three tales, the mother or stepmother is the most prominent figure, while the father occupies a peripherial position. In the next chapter, I will focus on tales in which the basis of the conflict resides in the father-daughter relationship. We have seen that the main motivation of conflict between a (step)mother and a (step)daughter are jealousy and the lack of love. Now I want to verify what it is, in Sexton's view, that motivates the tension between father and daughter. The poems I have chosen to analyze are "The Twelve Dancing Princesses," "The Frog Prince" and "Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)."

CHAPTER FOUR

FATHERS AND DAUGHTERS IN "THE TWELVE DANCING PRINCESSES," "THE FROG PRINCE" AND "BRIAR ROSE (SLEEPING BEAUTY)"

In the three tales I will analyze in this chapter, "The Twelve Dancing Princesses," "The Frog Prince" and "Sleeping Beauty," the most prominent ruling figure is the father, while the mother is totally absent.

The mother , either the good or the bad figure, as we have seen in both "Snow White" and "Cinderella," makes their daughters conform to male paradigms of womanhood using obscure and covert methods-- Snow White's wicked stepmother disguises herself as an old peddler and resorts to magic to act out her evil plans, which ironically turn against herself; Cinderella's good mother, in turn, appears disguised as a dove in order to help her daughter become a patriarchal beauty.

The father, however, as the legitimate representative of patriarchal power within the family, overtly acts upon his daughter's free will, and makes use of his culturally sanctioned authority to determine her destiny according to a male system of values .

In the "Twelve Dancing Princesses," Anne Sexton identifies

the conflict as residing in two major diverging powers: the King's consolidated power and the girls' tactical and magic powers.

She begins the prologue to the poem with a question: "if you danced from midnight / to six a.m. who would understand?" Sexton then lists seven different kind of people who, she believes, would understand: "the runaway boy" who "chucks it all/ to live on the Boston Common/ another missing person"; "the paralytic's wife who takes her lover to town,/ sitting on the bar stool,/downing stingers and peanuts"; "The passengers from Boston to Paris,/coming up like statues of honey/ those murderers of the nightgown"; "the amnesiac," who has "misplaced the past"; "the drunken poet/ who places long-distance calls/ at three a.m. and then lets you sit/ holding the phone while he vomits"; "the insomniac/ listening to his heart/ thumping like a junebug/...lying on his bed like a stone table"; and "the night nurse/ with her eyes slit like venetian blinds/...listening to the heart monitor/...and keeps vigil like a ballistic missile/ would understand." Here, Sexton, bringing the question to our modern times by means of witty and modernizing similes, gives us a hint of what is at stake as the King's and the girls' powers confront: freedom and autonomy.

Both the Grimms' and Sexton's versions begin with an assertion of the King's repressive powers over his daughters. The twelve beautiful princesses are kept locked up in their room every night, as Sexton tells us:

> At night the king locked and bolted the door

How could they possibly escape?

Nevertheless, the princesses somehow managed to transgress their father's authoritative power. The king, in turn, afraid of losing control over his daughters' destiny, makes the girls' mystery into another kind of "marriage market," as he tranforms them into prizes for the man who finds out where they do their dancing every night. Once more, women are treated as commodities, exclusively manipulated by men:

> The king sent out a proclamation
> That anyone who could discover
> Where the princesses did their dancing
> could take his pick of the litter

In the Grimms version, not only does the king offer one of his daughters as a wife to the man who solves the mystery, but also bequeaths his kingdom to this same man. Therefore, power is handed down from one man to the other as a way of preserving male control, while women are carefully kept in a secondary and noncompetitive position in the quest for power and freedom. As it could not be different in fairy tales, the hero's feat must be ennobled by a threat of death: "however there was a catch/if he failed, he would pay with his life."

The princesses, however, were not as naive as Snow White or Rapunzel. Aware that they were being observed and that their freedom was in serious peril, they resorted to their own shrewd methods to keep their father's spy out of their way and guarantee their evening dancing. For successive times, the girls' tactical powers succeeded over the king's sanctioned normative power. Sexton, as usual, is comic and colloquial in her account:

Many princes tried,
each sitting outside the dormitory,
the door ajar so he could observe
what enchantment came over the shoes.
But each time the twelve dancing princesses
gave the snoopy man a Mickey Finn
and so he was beheaded
poof! like a basketball.

From Sexton's rendering of the spying scene, we can perceive how female freedom presents itself as a menace to male hegemony in society. As women try to lead a life independent from men's rule, these immediately unite to overrule the rebellious girls.

It is not surprising that, taking into account the Grimms' conservatism and rigid notions of sex-role divisions, the princesses' pleasurable evenings and successful tricks would soon come to an end.

Following the well known fairy-tale bourgeois plotline, there appears the poor hero who, differently from his unsuccessful predecessors, with determination and the help of a stranger has more chance to succeed. The poor soldier's chances to find out the princesses' dancing place are, in the beginning, however, the same as the others', until he meets an old woman, who advises him on how to be smarter than the girls and discover their secret. In the context of my analysis, it is very significant that a woman should provide the means through which the male hero subdues the female heroines. This old woman may, in fact, stand for a stereotypical mother-figure, who embodies the accepted patriarchal model of womanhood. She, who probably knows

the girls secret, assumes, indirectly, normative control over their unaccepted behavior; and, helping disclose their secret, the old woman strengthens the king's power over his daughters and enlarges the gap separating female tactical powers and male consolidated power. Like Cinderella's dead mother, her magic here works for setting the girls as commodities in the "marriage market." The old woman, who seems to have supernatural powers (and may also be a witch-figure), gives the soldier a cloak which makes him invisible, and, differently from Mother Gothel, uses her connection with the powers of nature to bring "deviant" women into line with dominant patriarchal values. To use Sexton's own image, she helps throw the girls into the same "cesspool" out of which Mother Gothel tried so hard to keep Rapunzel. This woman, we might argue, embodies the same paradigmatic woman Simone deBeauvoir describes in "The Second Sex"-- the woman who perpetuates bourgeois-patriarchal social relations (to which we have referred in chapter one). Sexton narrates the "providential" meeting with comic irony:

> It so happened that a poor soldier
> heard about these strange goings on
> and decided to give it a try.
> On his way to the castle
> he met an old woman.
> Age, for a change, was of some use.
> She wasn't stuffed in a nursing home.
> She told him not to drink a drop of wine
> and gave him a cloak that would make
> him invisible when the right time came.
> And thus he sat outside the dorm.
> The oldest princess brought him some wine
> but he fastened a sponge beneath his chin,
> looking the opposite of Andy Gump.

Heeding the wise woman's advice, the soldier does not drink the wine and pretends to sleep as the girls get ready for their dancing:

> The sponge soaked up the wine
> and thus he stayed awake
> He feigned sleep, however,
> and the princesses sprang out of their beds
> and fussed around like a Miss America contest
> then the oldest went to her bed
> and knocked upon it and it sank into the earth
> They descended down the opening.

With the invisible cloak on, the soldier followed the girls to a magnificent underground world, where silver and diamonds grew in trees. The girls did not notice his presence, except for the youngest one, who, after having her dress stepped on and after hearing the cracking sound of a branch as the soldier took a silver leaf for proof, finally said with conviction: "wait up! he is here!" The oldest one,however, always found naive causes for the strange sounds: "those are/ the royal trumpets playing triumphantly." In the Grimms' version, the oldest princess's opinion about the noises sets up an interesting irony of her own destiny. She concludes, "that was a burst of joy because we'll soon be setting our princes free." What she didn't know was that each one of those sounds represented one more proof of their "transgression" that the soldier gathered to guarantee his own life, the throne and one of the sisters as his wife. In other words, instead of setting her prince free, she would soon be captured into matrimony by a future king and thus lose, once and for all, the freedom and the pleasure of dance she and her

sisters enjoyed in the subterranean world.

In her description of the princesses' dancing place, Sexton brings the girls' fantasy world to our modern world, which has the effect of demystifying the mystery and enchantment of the fairy-tale narrative, which results from a detachment from actual life. In Sexton's version, "the princesses danced like taxi girls at Roseland/as if those tickets would run right out." At sunrise, fun time was over and the girls had to leave their hedonistic night kingdom for their daylight prison-- their own father's kingdom.

In the same morning, the soldier, having succeeded in his duty, showed the king the evidences of the princesses' "crime." From Sexton's narrative, we can clearly perceive the war of the sexes that has been enacted in the tale all along. She describes the soldier with irony, as if he had really emerged victorious from a bloody battle and now claims his deserved medal:

> That morning the soldier, his eyes fiery
> like blood in a wound, his purpose brutal
> as if facing a battle, hurried with his answer
> as if to the Sphinx. The shoes! the shoes!
> the soldier told. He brought forth
> the silver leaf, the diamond the size of a plum.

Instead of a true hero, Sexton makes the soldier sound more like a traitor and the "nobility" of his feat is turned into a coward aggression to one's right to freedom:

> He had won. The dancing shoes would dance
> no more. The princesses were torn from
> their night life like a baby from its pacifier

Now came the time of the soldier to take his "pick of the litter" and choose one of the princesses for a bride. Ironically enough, he chose the eldest, who certainly will no longer hear the trumpets rejoicing at her burst of pleasure and joy.

The other princesses are together in their discontentment, and refuse to watch their sister attach herself to a repressive power-figure. To convey the way the girls have been defeated and deprived of all strength and power, Sexton resorts to a peculiar simile: "at the wedding the pricesses averted their eyes/and sagged like old sweatshirts."

Sexton finishes the poem with a pitiful tone and a sense of loss:

> Now the runaways would run no more and never
> again would their hair be tangled into diamonds,
> never again their shoes worn down to a laugh
> never the bed falling down into purgatory
> to let them climb in after
> with their Lucifer kicking.

In the three final lines, Sexton ironizes the long-held belief that women who refuse to conform to social conventions were somehow connected with the devil. As in her versions of "Snow White," "Cinderella" and "Rapunzel," Sexton also views marriage as a kind of prison-- as an institution that castrates one's freedom and annihilates one's independent selfhood. Snow White rolls her "china-blue doll eyes"; Cinderella and the prince become "two dolls in a museum cage"; Rapunzel becomes a

fragile rose held and kept alive by a stem(the prince), and the twelve princesses after the oldest one's marriage have their dancing feet, so to speak, tied up forever. Marriage in this tale, in fact, symbolizes not even the happy consolidation of romantic love, but the legal subjugation of a female transgressor; it is the guarantee that she will no longer behave in disagreement with the patriarcal law. With the marriage of the eldest princess, she and her sisters leave the freedom of their underground nightlife for a dependent and vulnerable existence under male guard. The tale clearly conveys the notion that only through marriage does a woman become accepted into the community. Female alternative behavior, as presented in the Grimms story, is severely criticized and the rebellious girls have to submit to male power and succumb to marriage.

In all the tales we have analyzed previously, including "The Twelve Dancing Princesses," the victory of male repressive power, be it indirectly through the help of a stereotypical patriarchal woman(mother or stepmother), be it directly through the reinforcement of male "superiority" through an overpowering hero(protected by the father-figure), the woman, who has been turned into some sort of trophee, paradoxically enough, gains only the loss of her self-identity. In other words, women are prevented from pursuing their own desires and forced into a destiny prepared for them by others.

This, I believe, is also the case in the next tale we will analyze here, "The Frog Prince." In the prologue to the poem, Sexton treats the image of the frog as symbolizing male

sexual threat. Just like in "Rapunzel," where compulsory heterosexuality poses itself as a constant menace to the two women's relationship, and which takes shape in the inevitable arrival of the prince, the frog here also represents the same oppressive and repulsive form of male sexuality. The "frog" is everywhere and wants to engulf Sexton into his world:

> Frogs come out
> of the sky like rain
> Frogs arrive
> with an ugly fury
> ....
>
> Mr. Poison
> is at my bed.
> He wants my sausage
> He wants my bread

Sexton views the frog as a phallic aberration:

> Frog has no nerves
> Frog is as old as a cockroach
> Frog is my father's genitals
> Frog is a malformed doorknob
> Frog is a soft bag of green.

Sexton is not the only one who feels aversion to the repulsive frog; nature itself repudiates the abhorrent figure:

> The moon will not have him
> the sun wants to shut off
> like a light bulb.
> At the sight of him
> the stone washes itself in a tub
> the crow thinks he's an apple
> and drops a worm in.
> At the feel of frog
> the touch-me-nots explode
> like electric slugs

The only place where the frog is well-accepted is in an environment as disgusting and repulsive as the frog itself: "slime will have him/ slime has made him a house."

Even worse than Rapunzel's prince, who appears to her as a beast with muscles like a "bag of snakes," with "moss on his legs," and a "prickly plant" growing on his cheek (and yet dazzles the girl with his "dancing stick"), the frog Sexton depicts here is not only disgusting in appearance but also inside; its way of conquering its "victim" is more dangerous and aggressive. Sexton compares the frog to an infectious agent which takes control of one's body and destroys the very environment it lives in:

> Frog has boil disease
> and a bellyful of parasites
> He says: kiss me. Kiss me
> and the ground soils itself

Sexton begins the story itself questioning the way our patriarchal culture sentences women to a destiny which they did not ask for, and which they have no control of. In Sexton's sardonic language, the princess, who stands for women in general, appears clearly as a pretty doll, with no free will and no free movement, forced to internalize pre-determined norms and values :

> Why
> should a certain
> quite adorable princess
> be walking in her garden
> at such a time
> and toss her golden ball

up like a bubble
and drop it into the well?
It was ordained,
just as the fates deal out
the plague with a tarot card.
Just as the Supreme Being drills
holes in our skulls to let
the Boston Symphony through.

Next, Sexton solemnly announces that "a loss has taken place." The golden ball, that, in the Grimms story the girl drops into the well, here becomes "more than a ball," and its loss may symbolize the loss of female identity and destiny. Without her ball the princess is "lost forever." As we would expect, no other "thief" could have taken possession of the princess's ball, but the frog himself, that, in Sexton's version, epitomizes the cultural strength of male-defined values.

The first appearance of the frog to the princess takes place in a quasi-magic moment, as his horrible "almighty" figure emerges from the well:

Suddenly the well grew
thick and boiling
and a frog appeared.
His eyes bulged like two peas
and his body was trussed into place.

Here Sexton brilliantly exercises her sarcasm at the way patriarchy manipulates women's destiny. The frog, who in the last stanza was characterized as a thief, now deceptively offers to sell back to the girl her own ball--i.e., her own life, though now re-shaped according to his values and taste:

> Do not be afraid princess,
> he said, I'm not a vagabond,
> a cattle farmer, a shepherd,
> a doorkeeper, a postman,
> or a laborer.
> I come to you as a tradesman.
> I have something to sell.
> Your ball, he said,
> for just three things.
> Let me eat from your plate.
> Let me drink from your cup.
> Let me sleep in your bed.

The frog's price for the ball sounds like an implicit marriage proposal, and Sexton once more suggests how castrating and self-annihilating patriarcal marriage is for women. Eating from her plate, drinking from her cup and sleeping on her bed, the frog will partake of all the princess's vital activities and thus will take control of the rhythm of her life and of its very destiny.

The girl, nevertheless, perceiving her danger and the frog's deceptive character, pretends to accept his offer only to have her ball back. Sexton also emphasizes the image of the frog as a deceiver:

> She thought, old waddler,
> those three you will never do,
> but she made the promises
> with hopes for her ball once more.
> He brought it up in his mouth
> like a tricky old dog
> and she ran back to the castle
> leaving the frog quite alone

At first, we think the girl has outwitted the tricky frog,

but, as Sexton had warned us in the prologue, frogs are everywhere, and just like a poison or an infection, spread themselves all over the place. That is, indeed, an interesting metaphor Sexton has found for the pervasiveness of patriarchal values and norms in our society. Now Sexton begins the narration of the sequence of events that function like a trap that lead to the princess's inevitable and "pre-destined" fall into a system of life which she has not devised nor chosen for herself. The voice of authority is easily perceptible from Sexton's text:

> That evening at dinner time
> a knock was heard at the castle door
> and a voice demanded:
> King's youngest daughter,
> let me in. You promised;
> now open to me.
> I have left the skunk cabbage
> and the eels to live with you.
> The king then heard of her promise
> and forced her to comply

The king/father, just like in "The Twelve Dancing Princesses," is an important ally to the "hero." He represents, after all, the legitimacy of patriarchal power in the family and in the State; it is him who has the authority to decide whether or not his daughter should marry, when and to whom. In this tale, as in the previous one, patriarchal authority sanctions and consolidates the "hero's" quest for power through the marriage to a princess. Sexton makes this clear when she tells us that the king forced the girl to comply.

Once in the king's castle, the frog does not hesitate in

making himself a "companion" for the princess. His attitudes, however, are rude and aggressive. As a prelude to the later more intimate contact with the girl in her bed, the frog begins the "friendship" jumping into her lap. Sexton, viewing the frog as the one undesirably responsible for the princess's destiny, is not very optimistic in relation to the girl's future beside him. In her previous descriptions, the frog is always related to illness and infection; now he looks like a messenger of death, for as he sat on the princess's lap, "he was as awful as an undertaker."

From a Freudian viewpoint, Bruno Bettelheim interprets the frog's insistence in being with the princess, her first feelings of aversion to the frog and her final consentment to the love of the prince, as conveying respectively the boy's immature desire to establish a symbiotic relationship to a mother-figure, and the girl's early anxiety and fear of her first erotic experiences, which, in time, she overcomes, giving way to a healthy and mature relationship with the opposite sex. According to Bettelheim, the closer the frog gets to the princess, the more she becomes a person able to think about the other and not only about her golden ball(herself) (328-29).

Anne Sexton, nevertheless, (although she and Bettelheim agree as regards the phallic component in the image of the frog) offers a more critical interpretation of the rigid sex-role divisions enforced by the tale. She sees the frog's persistence in being near the princess, not as an immature or childish behavior, but as part of an insidious patriarchal law which defines gender roles and creates limited expectations towards

women. The princess, or any woman, lives a traumatic experience as she sees her world invaded by a stranger who insists on imposing his own way:

> Next he was at her plate
> looking over her bacon
> and calves' liver.
> We will eat in tandem,
> he said gleefully.
> Her fork trembled
> as if a small machine
> had entered her.
> He sat upon the liver
> and partook like a gourmet

Sexton's comic language conveys the princess's rejection: "the princess chocked /as if she were eating a puppy." Once more Sexton calls our attention to the frog as a dangerous infectious disease, which may be as well a foreboding of death, or of a much greater loss (or more definitive) than the loss of the girl's ball in the beginning:

> it wasn't exactly hygienic
> from her cup she drank
> as if it were Socrates' hemlock.

In the princess's bed, the frog becomes an imminent sexual threat, as Sexton had predicted in the prologue: "frog is my father's genitals." Just like Rapunzel's prince with his "dancing stick," the "sinuous frog" involves the princess in a circle of seduction, which only creates in her a stronger feeling of repulsion. Sexton narrates the bed scene as if it represented the princess's' final condemnation to be infected by the patriarchal virus-- the frog:

> Next came the bed
> the silky royal bed
> Ah! the penultimate hour!
> there was the pillow
> with the princess breathing
> and there was the sinuous frog
> riding up and down beside her.

Even the frog's attempt to sensitize the girl with words is useless. She seems irremediably terrified at the mere sight of him:

> I have been lost in a river
> of shut doors, he said,
> I have made my way over
> the wet stones to live with you.
> She woke up aghast.
> I suffer for birds and fireflies
> but not for frogs, she said,
> and threw him across the room.
> Kaboom!

The princess's sudden reaction to speak out her revolt and throw the frog violently against the wall may have different connotations in the different versions of the tale. As we have mentioned in the second chapter, fairy-tale heroines are often victims of what Ruth Bottigheimer has called narrative silencing. In "The Frog Prince," the girl is forced by her father to accept the disgusting animal as her friend and companion and is not expected to say a word in opposition. Considering the conservative tone of most of the Grimms' tales, behind the girl's violent attitude lies, not a strong-willed woman, but William Grimm's own moralistic voice, reacting against the frog's untimely sexual advances. In Sexton's version, however, behind the girl's voice and attitude there is no such moralistic

intention, but a hearty reaction against the way patriarchy infringes upon women's freedom to decide their own lives. In Sexton's view, the frog is a violator, not a desirable prospective husband, as he turns out to be in the Grimms' tale.

The authority of the father/king over his daughter is reinforced in the Grimms' version. As the frog hits the wall, he is magically disenchanted and becomes a handsome prince(he tells the princess that he had been under a spell cast over him by a wicked witch-- as is usual in fairy tales, powerful women misuse their power). It is clear in the Grimms' text that the princess marries the prince because her father wishes her to do so: "so, in keeping with her father's wishes, she accepted him as her dear companion and husband" (_The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm_, vol.1 4).

As the mother, in tales like "Cinderella," passes down to her daughter a legacy of submission, the father passes down to his daughter's husband a legacy of authority and control over her life. In Sexton's version, the disenchantment of the frog leads to the enchantment of the princess (as we have mentioned previously, Sexton often views marriage as a form of enchantment). The ugly frog, in spite of having taken on an attractive shape, still retains the poisonous/infectious feature that invades and takes control of the princess's life. Behind the prince's meek and harmless appearance, Sexton lets us recognize the old violator and deceiver:

> Like a genie coming out of a Samovar,
> a handsome prince arose in the

corner of her royal bedroom.
He had kind eyes and hands
and was a friend of sorrow.
Thus they were married.
After all he had compromised her.

Sexton ends her tale emphasizing once more the total loss of the girl's self to her husband. Through marriage, the princess becomes the prince's exclusive property, since, according to the patriarchal law, the father/king has transferrod his protective/repressive power over his daughter to her husband. The husband/prince treats his wife as a precious jewel(once again women are objects to be admired and "protected"), which he carefully keeps away from strangers, just like Snow White in the prince's far off castle. Now that she is his property, the prince has to make sure that no one else --not even herself-- will have her,so

He hired a nightwatchman
so that no one could enter the chamber
and he had the well
boarded over so that
never again would she lose her ball,
that moon, that Krishna hair,
that blind poppy, that innocent globe,
that madonna womb.

Through Sexton's ironic tone, we can see that she opposes both the Grimms patriarchal/moralistic conservatism, which preaches women's passive subservience to their fathers and husbands, and Bettelheim's orthodox freudianism, which identifies in the tale a "natural" development from repulsion to acceptance of one's sexuality. In demythicizing the tale, Sexton brings back to the surface the ideological intentions behind the apparently innocent story for children. She turns inside out what appears to

be natural in the Grimms' text, like the mythical "and-they-lived-happily-forever-after" endings, and discloses the patriarchal interests that have built such a structure. Sexton's sarcastic anti-mythical discourse re-inverts mythical inversion so that history once again shows through "nature." She, in a way, to use Barthes image, adjusts the mirror so that we no longer have an upside-down image of the world but the world as it stands. In "The Frog Prince," the main target of her criticism is the way male control of women's destiny is disguised in the original tale as a form of paternal protection, which is, in due time and according to the father's taste, transformed into "romantic" love and consolidated through marriage.

In "Briar Rose(Sleeping Beauty)," Sexton expands on the same theme of paternal love and overprotection to criticize the implications of such a smothering relationship between father and daughter to the development of a girl's autonomous and mature personality.

In the prologue to the poem, Sexton asks us to reflect upon a girl's emotional condition as she struggles through a therapeutic regression in time(perhaps this could be related to Sexton's own psychiatric experiences) to regain her self-identity, but cannot get away from the father's overpowering presence. The girl's voyage back in time also leads to an inward voyage of self-discovery, in which she has to retrace her developmental stages --she learns to "talk again"-- and rescue her matrilineal origins, "struggling into her mother's pocket book." Nevertheless, the girl's voyage is abruptly interrupted by a somewhat seductive and sinister summoning:

Little doll child,
come here to papa.
Sit on my knee.
I have kisses for the back of your neck.
A penny for your thoughts, princess.
I will hunt them like an emerald.

I believe "papa" here has much in common with the frog-violator, since both seem eager to invade and control the girl's life. In exchange for her thoughts --her own privacy and individuality-- the father promises security and stability and thus crystallizes the girl as his own "little doll child" forever: "come be my snooky/ and I will give you a root."

Now Sexton turns to the narrative mode as she retells the Grimms tale: "once/ a king had a christening/ for his daughter Briar Rose." The same overprotective father/king, we learn in this section, has been partly responsible for the terrible fate that awaits his daughter. Having forgotten to invite the thirteenth fairy to the girl's christening, he incites the bad fairy to exercise her fury against his own daughter:

he asked only twelve fairies
to the grand event
the thirteenth fairy,
her fingers as long and thin as straws,
her eyes burnt like cigarrettes,
her uterus an empty teacup,
arrived with an evil gift.
She made this prophecy:
the princess shall prick herself
on a spinning wheel on her fifteenth year
and then fall down dead.

The Grimms' old fairy, in Sexton's description, looks more like a thwarted mother-figure, who, instead of giving life to a

daughter, condemns her to perpetual slumber. The father, one would expect is aghast and Dame Sexton sharply remarks:

> The king looked like Munch's Scream.
> Fairies' prophecies,
> in times like those,
> held water.

Nevertheless, the twelfth fairy softens the curse, turning death into a hundred-year sleep.

After the unfortunate christening, the king does all he can to prevent the fairy's prophecy from coming true. Eventually, he becomes the only man in Briar Rose's life, while she becomes his "goddess." The king's excessive love for his daughter and his eagerness to protect her from evil ends up restricting the girl's activities and enclosing her in a lifeless environment, in which her only source of security and her only prospects of fulfillment is to be found in the father himself. Here, Sexton calls our attention to the harmful overprotection of fathers towards their daughters, so common and well-accepted in our patriarchal culture:

> The king ordered every spinning wheel
> exterminated and exorcized.
> Briar Rose grew to be a goddess
> and each night the king
> bit the hem of her gown
> to keep her safe.
> He fastened the moon up
> with a safety pin
> to give her perpetual light
> He forced every man 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.

Nonetheless, in spite of the king's obsessive care, the time comes when Briar Rose finally pricks her finger and falls asleep. The sleeping princess, despite her vulnerable and helpless state, is protected from every men who had not "scoured their tongues" by a "bunch of briar roses" that "grew/ forming a great wall of tacks/ around the castle." Sexton's sarcasm is certainly directed to the Grimms puritanism, which has imprisoned and carefully kept the adolescent girl away from early sexual advances by other princes, who "could not pry themselves loose and died miserable deaths" (The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm, vol.1 204)

But, after a hundred years had passed, a prince finally got through the thorny bushes and found the lovely sleeping virgin. This scene conveys many mythic messages which have been incorporated into our culture's code of gender behavior, in the name of nature and propriety. Briar Rose's resurrection with a prince's kiss implies that only the courage and persistence of a man can rescue a sleeping woman back into life and give fulfillment, stability and a meaning to her otherwise meaningless and lifeless existence. The only thing that can break the fairy's curse and revify the whole kingdom is male energy and power. Thus, the princess must show her gratitude for having her life back, devoting her whole life to the man who saved her. We can perceive that an interesting inversion is operated in this tale. In the beginning we have a thwartd mother-figure taking life away

from a girl and at the end we have a man bravely restoring this same girl to life, and in so doing, becoming, in a way, the owner of her life and the designer of her destiny.

In Bettelheim's Freudian interpretation, Briar Rose's catatonic state symbolizes the adolescent's usual period of inertness and self-contemplation, which precedes the moment of awakening and "great" realizations(266). In Bettelheim's view, the father's attempts to retard the blossoming of his daughter's sexuality are of no avail, for, in spite of being kept under a lifeless condition for a "hundred" years, Briar Rose is finally awakened into a mature affective relationship with the prince. According to Bettelheim, the adolescent Sleeping Beauty overcomes an egocentric stage and becomes at last ready for sex and marriage. Her union to the prince suggests the final accomplishment of maturity and the harmonious consolidation of heterosexual love.

The Grimms text may, in fact, corroborate Bettelheim's view. As the prince leaned over and kissed Briar Rose, she "opened her eyes, woke up and looked at him fondly." Her look is, of course, one of acceptance, deep love and gratitude. She is now ready to substitute another man for her father. But what we hear from Anne Sexton's Briar Rose when she wakes up is something completly different: "He kissed Briar Rose/and she woke up crying:/Daddy! Daddy!".

"Daddy" has been, indeed, the only man Briar Rose had any kind of contact with in her entire life. As suggested in the two previous tales,' the lover/husband is but a disguised father-figure, and Sexton's Sleeping Beauty never accomplishes the kind

of maturation Bettelheim finds in her; rather, she is forever infantilized and becomes not a wife but a daughter to her own husband.

Sexton's Briar Rose has yet another peculiarity, a "fear of sleep," which makes her an insomniac. In fact,

> she could not nap
> or lie in sleep
> without the court chemist
> mixing her some knock-out drops.

While sleeping, Briar Rose experienced a death-like existence, and sleep was the prison which prevented her from living fully(or living at all). It is no wonder that when she wakes up Dame Sexton cries out: "presto! she's out of prison!". Briar Rose's fear of sleeping may come indeed from an awareness of the powerless and helpless condition which paralyzed her forces and turned her into a vulnerable object, a nonperson.

Along with the fear of sleep comes the fear of dreams. In dreams, Briar Rose can foresee her future and feel too close to death. Each time she falls asleep again, the prophecy of the fairy is revived, since in dreams she can foresee her own destruction by time:

> Further, I must not dream
> for when I do I see the table set
> and a faltering crone at my place
> her eyes burnt by cigarrettes
> as she eats betrayal like a slice of meat.

We can find in Briar Rose's dream-view of herself a similarity

with the bad fairy Sexton described earlier: "her eyes burnt by cigarrettes/her uterus an empty teacup." However, there is yet a more striking similiarity between "old" Briar Rose and a well-known fairy-tale villain, Snow White's stepmother. Just like the evil queen who wishes to eat little Snow White's lungs and liver out of jealousy of the girl's beauty, Briar Rose envisages herself eating "betrayal like a slice of meat," thus suggesting the repetition of the same pattern and the naturalness of a relation of envy and betrayal among women who live within and by patriarchal laws. Here Sexton also suggests that the sleeplike existence that women are supposed to live under patriarchy leads to a thwarted womanhood. Briar Rose does not even see herself as a woman but as a "faltering crone."

In the next stanza, Sexton lets us hear Briar Rose herself reflect upon her life after the marriage to the prince. Through her acount, we can perceive a bitter tone of discontent and regret for the kind of life she leads. Not able to distinguish between being awaken or being asleep(or between being alive or dead), Briar Rose reports of an existence surrounded by death, completly sterile and lifeless:

> I must not sleep
> for while I sleep I'm ninety
> and think I'm dying
> Death rattles in my throat
> like marble.

Briar Rose's dissatisfaction with her life makes her unable to live fully; the medicine she takes to sleep numbs her senses and

she lives a death in life. For life holds no attractive to her, and she is impotent to feel or to act upon things. She remains as vulnerable and passive as she had been during her hundred-year sleep. In fact, what is implicit here is that there has been no resurrection at all. Rather, Briar Rose has been again taken to another kind of prison: marriage; and, unlike in the Grimms' text, marriage here is not a promise nor a guarantee of eternal happiness. Briar Rose's account is perhaps symbolic of contemporary women's general feeling of having their potentials curtailed by the demands of patriarchal marriage, which restrict and control their activities. (We should not forget that Sexton's book was written and published during the rebirth of the feminist movement, a period in which many books were being written about women's unequal condition both within the family and in society, and the restrictions that married life imposed on a woman's intellectual and professional activities outside the family were among the most discussed topics in the forum of discussions). Sexton's Briar Rose shows an acute but painful consciousness of her condition as a powerless commodity for whom life makes no difference:

> I wear tubes like earrings
> I lie as still as a bar of iron
> 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.
> You could lay her in a grave,
> an awful package,
> and shovel dirt on her face
> and she'd never call back: Hello there!

The inert and submissive girl only felt liberated from her confined life with the stimulation of a kiss:

> But if you kissed her on the mouth
> her eyes would spring open
> and she'd call out: Daddy! Daddy!
> Presto!
> She's out of prison.

Briar Rose is doomed to look for freedom and life in an endless and fruitless repetition of the "resurrection" kiss. The sensation of being awakened may be a renewed promise of life, yet the only thing Briar Rose says at the moment she wakes up is "Daddy! Daddy!", which indicates an immature attachment to her earlier suffocating relationship to her father.

Differently from the other Transformations poems, which have only prologues, Sexton adds an epilogue to her "Briar Rose." In this section, because of a sudden shift from third to first person, as Diana H. George has also noted, it is difficult to know whether the speaker is Briar Rose or Dame Sexton herself. Here we are told, very similarly to "The Frog Prince," that a "loss has taken place"; something has been stolen somewhere back in time. By what we can guess, it was not an object but a subject that has partly disappeared. What the speaker reports here is the loss of her own personality and selfhood: "there was a theft/ that much I am told/ I was abandoned/ that much I know." Looking back into her memories the speaker remembers of a time in her life when she was powerless, passive and submissive, and thus easily manipulated by other people's wishes. She was treated as an object, a nonentity, which took on whatever shape her mentors

desired. Lacking any power of decision over her own life, the speaker has a fragile notion of her identity:

> I was forced backward
> I was forced forward.
> I was passed hand to hand
> like a bowl of fruit
> Each night I am nailed into place
> and I forget who I am.

Then, the overpowering figure of her childhood emerges from her memories: "Daddy?" and the speaker bitterly avers: "that's another kind of prison." What she finds in front of herself is not a prince/husband,

> but my father
> drunkenly bent over my bed,
> circling the abyss like a shark
> my father thick upon me
> like some sleeping jellyfish.

The implied message here is that overprotection from fathers prevents a girl's growth into mature womanhood and reduces her freedom to live as an individual. The father, as a power-figure, encloses the daughter's life within his own dictates and(like the father of the prologue) makes sure she remains his "little doll child" forever. (The root he offers the girl in the prologue as a symbol of security is the same root that keeps her immobilized at his feet). The father, in this sense, like the frog, becomes a death-figure, which insiduously surrounds and invades the daughter's individuality, in order to guarantee that she becomes in fact a daughter of patriarchy and lives according to its norms and values. And, as we have mentioned previously, it is normative

in our patriarchal culture that fathers transfer to their daughters' husbands all their power and authority over them, thus father and husband assume similar roles in a woman's life, that is why the speaker cannot distinguish her father from her husband(the prince), since both are conflated into one authoritative figure.

Finally, the speaker, who may as well be Briar Rose herself, reflects upon her own "resurrection." Like a fairy-tale Lady Lazarus, the girl seems irremediably disappointed with the kind of life she finds after "death." The kiss which supposedly freed her from the fetters of sleep took her to another prison and her life is as much like death as death itself:

> What voyage this, little girl?
> This coming out of prison?
> God help--
> This life after death?

Sexton here is utterly pessimistic in relation to women's prospects of growth and maturation in a patriarchy. In her sardonic language, marriage configurates itself as a prison-like institution that keeps women as submissive children for the rest of their lives. As the husband is still the father, the wife should remain the obedient and dedicated daughter. Instead of advancing progressively, woman's development stops in an earlier stage, and she does not develop enough self-confidence and self-initiative to become independent from the image of the father/protector and live as a full human being.

CONCLUSION

When I first decided to write my dissertation on Anne Sexton, I thought it would be difficult, if not impossible, to disregard biographical information. The confessional label attached to Sexton's work has, in fact, created many preconceptions, which has prevented a more sensible approach to her poetry.

I believe that literature reflects the cultural environment where it is produced, either to endorse its values and morals or to oppose and reject them. We have seen in chapter one, however, that traditional critics, concerned with pre-established literary norms, were not able to find behind Anne Sexton's confessional tone and unusual choice of subject matter (often private and taboo) neither a reflection nor a response to a social unbalance of which women were victims. Considering the great controversy around Sexton's poetry, I decided to dedicate my first chapter to a recapitulation of her poetic development together with comments on the early negative and later positive criticism her work received.

We have seen how orthodox critics like John Holmes, for one, have accused Sexton of being too self-centered and childish, believing that her "confessions" could not be of any interest or

help to anyone. Sexton's response to Holmes' censoring was the poem "For John Who Begs Me not to Enquire Further," in which she not only defends herself, but the whole Confessional School. In the poem, Sexton points to the universality of private confessions and to our fear of revealing our, sometimes ugly, inner truths.

Sexton herself has started the discussion that less orthodox critics would take up later on. Going against the traditional approach to her poetry, which regards everything she writes as autobiographical (we have seen how critics like Ralph Mills Jr. were sure that Sexton had a brother only because she wrote an elegy for a fictitious brother, "For Johnny Pole on the Forgotten Beach"), these critics began to correct certain distorted views of Sexton's poetry. Beverly Fields, as we have seen, believes that Sexton purposedly makes use of a confessional tone to "confess" to someone else's experience (see chp. 1 p.17); William Shurr accurately refers to Sexton's poetry as pseudobiographical; L.J. Dessner defends the idea that all that is ever written "never happened," and that "confessional" poetry, like all literature, is a result of craft and artifice; and Paul Lacey sees in confessionalism a new form of poetic expression which disobeys orthodox literary standards.

As we have discussed in chapter one, when orthodox aesthetic standards and works of art do not coincide, it is the critical standards that need to be revised (see Ostriker 13). With the advent and consolidation of feminist criticism in the late 1960s -- a critical trend which refuses to apply gratuitously traditional approaches to a literary piece --, works which were

not in harmony with the orthodoxy of the time, especially those written by women, could finally be judged in more sensible terms.

Feminist criticism, as we have seen, has been crucial to a fair reassessment of Sexton's work, in that it has acknowledged the socio-cultural relevance of its themes. Critics like Margaret Honton, Lillian Robinson, Stephanie Demetrakopoulos, Carole Ferrier, Jane McCabe, Alicia Ostriker, among others, have all pointed to the universal meanings one can extract even from Sexton's most intimate works. These critics helped set Sexton's poetry in the context of feminist writing in the 1960s and early 1970s. And it was in the work of these critics that I have found the support I needed to approach Sexton's poetry without taking into account biographical details, and turn the focus of my analysis on to the cultural criticism embedded in the revisionist poems of Transformations (1971).

Rewriting traditional fairy tales from a very critical perspective, Sexton was finally able to set her inner dissatisfactions in a more universal context and criticize the culture in which she was brought up. We have seen that fairy tales are very far from being innocent and uncommited narratives. Furthermore, studies have shown that the tales do play a considerable part in shaping children's concept of the world and of their role in it before they can even read (Don't Bet on the Prince xii). In chapter two, I have focussed specifically on the fairy tale as an important means to convey the worldview of the dominant culture, which is predominantly male.

We have seen that, added to the Grimms' own editorial

attempts to transform oral folk tales into written prescriptions for children's good behavior, based on the values and morals of the rising bourgeoisie of their time. The Children and Household Tales has been incorporated into the body of western culture as a natural, thus rightful, conveyor of proper behavior and gender arrangements. As we have discussed previously, tales like "Snow White," "Cinderella," "Rapunzel," "The Frog Prince" and "Sleeping Beauty" offer models of gender behavior in keeping with the expectations of a patriarchal society, where the man is the hero who saves the beautiful and powerless woman. The repetition of this pattern, as we have noted, has deceptively turned the powerful-prince-saves-powerless-princess plotline into the natural, thus desired, role real men and women should assume in real life. Popularly deprived of an acknowledged author or editor, and believed to convey natural truths about human nature, the fairy tale has become myth, as Roland Barthes has defined it in Mythologies and Image- Music- Text. And we have discussed in chapter two the insidious way myth seizes the original meaning of a folk tale to introduce a new meaning, which is made to appear innocent and whose intentions are hidden behind the tale's original meaning, so that all that is artificial and culturally-determined becomes part of folk culture, part of the very nature of human kind.

Ever since the late 1960s, with the growth of the feminist movement, we have been witnessing attempts to reverse patriarchal myths of womanhood, and the "silent" sex begins to speak not to lie or deceive, but to correct and demythicize old misconceptions regarding women's social and sexual identities. And many have

been the writers who have turned to the fairy tale institution to revise and debunk commonly held beliefs about women.

Having in mind Ruth Bottigheimer's notion that all alternative retellings of fairy tales derive from a dialectics between culture and text, and that the new meanings introduced by a revisionist text reflect the culture in which it is produced, we can say that Anne Sexton's Transformations grows out of dissatisfaction with the hegemonic male discourse of the classical tales and with the sexist social values these confirm and propagate. Written during a period of effevervescent feminist discussions, Sexton's text speaks with the voice of the cultural changes initiated in her time. Her text reflects the current tendency to review and rethink male-devised myths about women. In Jack Zipes' opinion, the trend to alter the sexist plotlines that are so pervasive in fairy tales in favor of a feminist viewpoint might be a response to the efforts of the feminist movement, and a way of offering new choices and alternative socialization models for both sexes. In Zipes' own words, not only are innovative fairy tales "indicators of social, psychological and political change," but "they are also agents of a new socialisation" (xii).

In Transformations, Sexton, as we have mentioned, does not offer alternative models of gender arrangements, but she questions present arrangements with such sarcastic discontent (which more often than not she invests with an acid-comic irony) that makes us aware of the need to change these patriarchally defined sex-role models. Sexton shows in her retellings that

fairy-tale motifs like the hero's unaffected bravery and the "heroine's" helpless passiveness are not inborn characteristics of the sexes at all, but values subtly embedded in the tales' narrative structure to safeguard the needs of a dominant male culture. Jack Zipes, in the introduction to Don't Bet on the Prince, comments on Sexton's pessimistic tone as a powerful device to provoke in the reader a desire for change (19). As she dissects the difficulties and the shortcomings of being a woman in a male-oriented society, Sexton, in Zipes' opinion, shows how patriarchy reduces the possibilities for women to achieve maturity and autonomy. And the question that she poses at the end of every retold tale is why present sexual arrangements must be so damaging (21).

As the central knot of the conflict in fairy tales usually lies in the family, Sexton has the chance to criticize the very structure of patriarchal family, where the father is the rightful authoritative figure, the mother the exponent of male-defined womanhood, and the daughter, a picture of her mother.

In all the poems we have analyzed previously, we could perceive how Sexton is concerned with the implications of patriarchally-defined mother-daughter and father-daughter relationships to the daughter's process of maturation into womanhood. In her poems, Sexton rips off the curtain of morality that has for so long covered and protected the family to discover a diseased and damaging institution.

In "Snow White" and "Cinderella" (tales which have suffered modifications both in the process of patriarchalization of folk tales and through William Grimm's editorial interventions, as

discussed in chapter 2), Sexton cracks open the innocent surface of the tales and reveals to us (step)mothers and (step)daughters contending against one another in the hope of being accepted into a male center. In both tales, Sexton criticizes a female relationship based on envy and competition, and calls our attention to the lack of a truly female selfhood. In all the poems that follow, we have observed how women, whether they want it or not, are lured into this male center, made to internalize its rules and live according to them. In these two tales specifically, it is the mother who provides the means through which the daughter becomes the image of the mother herself, reflected in a patriarchal mirror. Sexton captures well this idea in "Snow White," where the girl ends up "referring to her mirror/ as women do." Transformed into a "doll," Snow White shares her destiny with many other fairy-tale heroines like Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, the princess of "The Frog Prince," Rapunzel and the twelve princesses. None of them achieve autonomy nor a mature sense of selfhood. They, like the housewives described by Betty Friedan in The Feminine Mystique, live oppressed by a masculine order, and never have the chance or the freedom to build up an identity of their own, since they are encased in a male-defined way of life. "Cinderella and the prince," as Sexton says, lived "like two dolls in a museum cage"; while the princess in "The Frog Prince" is locked up in her room with a "nightwatchman" outside the door. In fact, in all the poems we have analyzed, Sexton finishes up with a sense of imprisonment: Snow White gets lost within the frames of her mirror; Rapunzel becomes a "rose"

tied to a "stem"; the twelve princesses have their feet, so to speak, tied up forever; and Sleeping Beauty never wakes up from the death-prison her life has become.

In "Rapunzel," however, Sexton has attempted at a more radical break with the fairy-tale patriarchal family, suggesting a female relationship based on mutual love and solidarity. Differently from the narcissistc competition around a male center that characterized women's relationship in "Snow White" and "Cinderella," here Sexton tries to eliminate a male referential, isolating the two women from patriarchy. In the poem, as we have seen, there is no patriarchal female model, and, apparently, no authoritarian father-figure, and the two women love and mother each other. But Sexton was never so idealistic and the utopian relationship ends with the appearance of the prince, who, as in all the other poems, represents the reinstauration of the lost paternal order. We could observe that all of Sexton's heroines undergo a period outside patriarchal order, then pass through a period of training or education to learn its laws (in "Snow White" this period corresponds to the time she spent in the dwarfs house), and are finally admitted into patriarchy through marriage. This is indeed one of the strongest mythic messages conveyed by the Grimms that Sexton tears down in her sarcastic narratives. The Grimms, as we have seen in chapter two, wanted their tales to convey acceptable models of gender behavior and socialization, and marriage should represent the natural, eternal and healthy union of two "mature" individuals. The reconstitution of the family is the major and final objective of all the fairy tales we have analyzed here. In "Rapunzel" we have seen that

Sexton does not believe that heterosexual love and marriage as defined by patriarchy is the natural outcome of human development and maturation. Rapunzel, who had had contact with only one woman in her entire life, is afraid of the prince's "beastly" figure, and, like the princess of "The Frog Prince," feels repulsion for him at first. Both girls, however, succumb to marriage, and Sexton refers to their union to the princes more as a result of cultural imposition than as the natural outcome of romantic love. The same happens in "The Twelve Dancing Princesses," where the father/king finds a way to intrude into his daughters' intimacy, puts and end to their entertainment and makes the oldest one marry the same man who discovered their secret.

We could note that in all the poems discussed we have either a mother or stepmother who lives by, and reinforces the daughters' conformity to, a patriarchal system of life, or a father or father-figure, like the prince in "Rapunzel," who seduces the heroine into marriage, as if through marriage she would be protected against Mother Gothel or of any harm in the outside world. As the values imposed on women and the center around which the action of the tales revolve are all male, Sexton's heroines never achieve maturity or a sense of selfhood -- they live for an order that exists outside of themselves. Among her "heroines," the one who best epitomizes this selfless condition is Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty).

The girl of the prologue, as we have seen, embarks in a traumatic inward search for her self-identity, and in the process she tries to establish a connection to her mother, but the

authoritarian father breaks the matrilineal tie to bring the girl back to his center. This girl may represent any of Sexton's "heroines." Like Snow White, Cinderella, the princess of "The Frog Prince" and Briar Rose herself, she lacks a strong female model. All the fairy-tale mothers we have seen are nothing but spokepersons for a masculine order that governs their world.

The two approximate mother-figures we can find in "Briar Rose" are the bad and the good fairy. And we can perceive that they are mere surrogates for the classical fairy-tale opposites: the evil stepmother and the good biological mother. The bad fairy, we can argue, plays a role similar to that of Snow White's stepmother, who uses her magic to eliminate a potential rival -- we should not forget that, not having been invited to the girl's christening, the bad fairy has been displaced; likewise, Snow White's stepmother lost her place as the most beautiful woman of the kingdom. And similarly to Snow White who ends up "becoming" her stepmother, Sexton's Briar Rose envisages herself as an old crone, occupying the bad fairy's place at the table.

The good fairy appears, obviously, as a positive counterpart of the thwarted mother-figure, embodied by the evil fairy. But, nevertheless, the two of them, like Cinderella's stepmother and biological mother, live by the same masculine set of values. The difference between them being that the good fairy, like the dove, instead of competing with the girl for a "privileged" place in patriarchy works to transform the daughter into the paradigm of femininity embodied by the figure of the original mother.

In the prophecy of the Grimms' good fairy, it is a king's

son who wakes up Briar Rose into the "security" and "stability" of a male-dominated relationship, which Sexton had criticized in the prologue of her poem.

In "Briar Rose," differently from "Snow White" and "Cinderella," and similarly to "The Twelve Dancing Princesses" and "The Frog Prince," the father/king is an overpowering presence. In the years that precede the curse, he absorbs his daughter into his world and takes care that no other man approaches her. Briar Rose lives enclosed within a barren environment, where the only source of life comes from her father. When she wakes up with the prince's kiss, Sexton informs us that Briar Rose has not overcome her early attachment to her father, and, seeing the prince, she cries out: "Daddy, Daddy!".

Unable to distinguish between her father and any other man, nor even between life and death, Briar Rose lacks inner strength to live as an independent individual. Rather, she sees herself as an object manipulated by others, nothing but a non-person. Like all other fairy-tale heroines who have come to marriage expecting eternal happiness, Briar Rose, in Sexton's painful but realistic eye, becomes a castrated and frustrated person.

In this poem, Sexton sees no way out for a woman in patriarchy. As a child and an adolescent, she is tied to a repressive and smothering relationship to an authoritarian father; through marriage, she is admitted into the patriarchal community, and, once inside it, she is doomed to become that "little doll child" for her entire life. The fairy who brings a good omen in Briar Rose's christening has also an "evil" side: it

is she who determines the girl's destiny according to the values and norms of the father/king. In other words, we could say that in all tales everything and everyone conspires to the girl's conformity to the "happy" housewife myth.

Sexton herself became a housewife in the late 1940s, a time when the figure of the housewife was a sacred myth and when Disney's "Sleeping Beauty" dictated the model for young girls. Writing Transformations in the early 1970s, a time when radical transformations of the myths of womanhood were actually taking place, Sexton transfers to her Briar Rose this sense of loss of selfhood, which is a typical symptom of a woman who lives oppressed and repressed under the rule of masculine norms. In this sense, Sexton modernizes the fairy tale and makes it meaningful to the culture in which she is writing. All the inner conflicts, the disclosure of suffering, personal weaknesses and the exposure of the grotesque reality of the human self that she once assigned to a confessional "I" are present in Transformations in the figure and voice of classical fairy-tale heroines, who had been crystallized by myth as eternal and definitive models of femininity. Sexton, in a direct and simple language, lets these heroines show us that the story is different: Snow White becomes a narcissistic doll, Cinderella is mumified, so to speak, and Briar Rose becomes a neurotic insomniac. There is no place for romanticism in Sexton's poems; her heroines are as human as all women ever were.

APPENDIX

CHAPTER THREE

The Gold Key

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 a story or two.
I have come to remind you,
all of you:
Alice, Samuel, Kurt, Eleanor,
Jane, Brian, Maryel,
all of you draw near.
Alice,
at fifty-six do you remember?
Do you remember when you
were read to as a child?
Samuel,
at twenty-two have you forgotten?
Forgotten the ten p.m. dreams
where the wicked king
went up in smoke?
Are you comatose?
Are you undersea?

Attention,
my dears,
let me present you this boy.
He is sixteen and he wants some answers.
He is each of us.
I mean you.
I mean me.
It is not enough to read Hesse
and drink clam chowder.
We must have the answers.
The boy has found a gold key
and he is looking for what it will open.
This boy!

Upon finding a nickel
he would look for a wallet.
This boy!
Upon finding a string
he would look for a harp.
Therefore he holds the key tightly.
Its secrets whimper
like a dog in heat.
He turns the key.
Presto!
It opens the book of odd tales
which transform the Brothers Grimm.
Transform?
As if an enlarged paper clip
could be a piece of sculpture.
(And it could.)

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs

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 Rhône,
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.
She is as white as a bonefish.

Once there was a lovely virgin
called Snow White.
Say she was thirteen.
Her stepmother,
a beauty in her own right,
though eaten, of course, by age,
would hear of no beauty surpassing her own.
Beauty is a simple passion,
but, oh my friends, in the end
you will dance the fire dance in iron shoes.
The stepmother had a mirror to which she referred --
something like the weather forecast --
a mirror that proclaimed
the one beauty of the land.
She would ask,
Looking glass upon the wall,
who is fairest of us all?

And the mirror would reply,
You are the fairest of us all.
Pride pumped in her like poison.

Suddenly one day the mirror replied,
Queen, you are full fair, 'tis true,
but Snow White is fairer than you.
Until that moment Snow White
had been no more important
than a dust mouse under the bed.
But now the queen saw brown spots on her hand
and four whiskers over her lip
so she condemned Snow White
to be hacked to death.
Bring me her heart, she said to the hunter,
and I will salt it and eat it.
The hunter, however, let his prisoner go
and brought a boar's heart back to the castle
The queen chewed it up like a cube steak.
Now I am fairest, she said,
lapping her slim white fingers.

Snow White walked in the wildwood
for weeks and weeks.
At each turn there were twenty doorways
and at each stood a hungry wolf,
his tongue lolling out like a worm.
The birds called out lewdly,
talking like pink parrots,
and the snakes hung down in loops,
each a noose for her sweet white neck.
On the seventh week
she came to the seventh mountain
and there she found the dwarf house.
It was as droll as a honeymoon cottage
and completely equipped with
seven chamber pots.
Snow White ate seven chicken livers
and lay down, at last, to sleep.

The dwarfs, those little hot dogs,
walked three times around Snow White,
the sleeping virgin. They were wise
and wattled like small czars.
Yes. It's a good omen,
they said, and will bring us luck.
They stood on tiptoes to watch
Snow White wake up. She told them
about the mirror and the killer-queen
and they asked her to stay and keep house.
Beware of your stepmother,
they said.
Soon she will know you are here.
While we are away in the mines
during the day, you must not

open the door.

Looking glass upon the wall . . .
The mirror told
and so the queen dressed herself in rags
and went out like a peddler to trap Snow
White.
She went across seven mountains.
She came to the dwarf house
and Snow White opened the door
and bought a bit of lacing.
The queen fastened it tightly
around her bodice,
as tight as an Ace bandage,
so tight that Snow White swooned.
She lay on the floor, a plucked daisy.
When the dwarfs came home they undid the lace
and she revived miraculously.
She was as full of life as soda pop.
Beware of your stepmother,
they said.
She will try once more.

Looking glass upon the wall . . .
Once more the mirror told
and once more the queen dressed in rags
and once more Snow White opened the door.
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.
She opened her eyes as wide as Orphan Annie.
Beware, beware, they said,
but the mirror told,
the queen came,
Snow White, the dumb bunny,
opened the door
and she bit into a poison apple
and fell down for the final time.
When the dwarfs returned
they undid her bodice,
they looked for a comb,
but it did no good.
Though they washed her with wine
and rubbed her with butter
it was to no avail.
She lay as still as a gold piece.

The seven dwarfs could not bring themselves
to bury her in the black ground
so they made a glass coffin
and se it upon the seventh mountain
so that all who passed by
could peek in upon her beauty.

A prince came one June day
and would not budge.
He stayed so long his hair turned green
and still he would not leave.
The dwarfs took pity upon him
and gave him the glass Snow White --
its doll's eyes shut forever --
to keep in his far off castle.
As the prince's men carried the coffin
they stumbled and dropped it
and the chunk of apple flew out
of her throat and she woke up miraculously.

And thus Snow White became the prince's bride
The wicked queen was invited to the wedding
feast
and when she arrived there were
red-hot iron shoes,
in the manner of red-hot roller skates,
clamped upon her feet.
First your toes will smoke
and then your heels will turn black
and you will fry upward like a frog,
she was told.
And so she danced until she was dead,
a subterranean figure,
her tongue flicking in and out
like a gas jet.
Meanwhile Snow White held court,
rolling her china-blue doll eyes open and
shut
and sometimes referring to her mirror
as women do.

Cinderella

You always read about it:
the plumber with twelve children
who wins the Irish Sweepstakes.
From toilets to riches.
That story.

Or the nursemaid,
some luscious sweet from Denmark
who captures the oldest son's heart.
From diapers to Dior.
That story.

Or a milkman who serves the wealthy,
eggs, cream, butter, yogurt, milk,
the white truck like an ambulance
who goes into real estate
and makes a pile.

From homogenized to martinis at lunch.

Or the charwoman
who is on the bus when it cracks up
and collects enough from the insurance.
From mops to Bonwit Teller.
That story.

Once
the wife of a rich man was on her deathbed
and she said to her daughter Cinderella:
Be devout. Be good. Then I will smile
down from heaven in the seam of a cloud.
The man took another wife who had
two daughters, pretty enough
but with hearts like blackjacks.
Cinderella was their maid.
She slept on the sooty hearth each night
and walked around looking like Al Jolson.
Her father brought presents home from town,
jewels and gowns for the other women
but the twig of a tree for Cinderella.
She planted that twig on her mother's grave
and it grew to a tree where a white dove sat.
Whenever she wished for anything the dove
would drop it like an egg upon the ground.
The bird is important, my dears, so heed him.

Next came the ball, as you all know.
It was a marriage market.
The prince was looking for a wife.
All but Cinderella were preparing
and gussying up for the big event.
Cinderella begged to go too.
Her stepmother threw a dish of lentils
into the cinders and said: Pick them
up in an hour and you shall go.
The white dove brought all his friends;
all the warm wings of the fatherland came,
and picked up the lentils in a jiffy.
No, Cinderella, said the stepmother,
you have no clothes and cannot dance.
That's the way with stepmothers.

Cinderella went to the tree at the grave
and cried forth like a gospel singer:
Mama! Mama! My turtledove,
send me to the prince's ball!
The bird dropped down a golden dress
and delicate little gold slippers.
Rather a large package for a simple bird.
So she went. Which is no surprise.
Her stepmother and sisters didn't
recognize her without her cinder face
and the prince took her hand on the spot

and danced with no other the whole day.

As nightfall came she thought she'd better
get home. The prince walked her home
and she disappeared into the pigeon house
and although the prince took an axe and broke
it open she was gone. Back to her cinders.
These events repeated themselves for three
days.
However on the third day the prince
covered the palace steps with cobbler's wax
and Cinderella's gold shoe stuck upon it.
Now he would find whom the shoe fit
and find his strange dancing girl for keeps.
He went to their house and the two sisters
were delighted because they had lovely feet.
The eldest went into a room to try the
slipper on
but her big toe got in the way so she simply
sliced it off and put on the slipper.
The prince rode away with her until the white
dove
told him to look at the blood pouring forth.
That is the way with amputations.
They don't just heal up like a wish.
The other sister cut off her heel
but the blood told as blood will.
The prince was getting tired.
He began to feel like a shoe salesman.
But he gave it one last try.
This time Cinderella fit into the shoe
like a love letter into its envelope.

At the wedding ceremony
the two sisters came to curry favor
and the white dove pecked their eyes out.
Two hollow spots were left
like soup spoons.

Cinderella and the prince
lived, they say, happily ever after,
like two dolls in a museum case
never bothered by diapers or dust,
never arguing over the timing of an egg,
never telling the same story twice,
never getting a middle-aged spread,
their darling smiles pasted on for eternity.
Regular Bobbsey Twins.
That story.

Rapunzel

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 . . .

Let your dress fall down your shoulder,
come touch a copy of you
for I am at the mercy of rain,
for I have left the three Christs of
Ypsilanti.
For I have left the long naps of Ann Arbor
and the church spires have turned to stamps.
The sea bangs into my cloister
for the young politicians are dying,
are dying so hold me, my young dear,
hold me . . .

The yellow rose will turn to cinder
and New York City will fall in
before we are done so hold me,
my young dear, hold me.
Put your pale arms around my neck.
Let me hold your heart like a flower
lest it bloom and collapse.
Give me your skin
as sheer as a cobweb,
let me open it up
and listen in and scoop out the dark.
Give me your nether lips
all puffy with their art
and I will give you angel fire in return.
We are two clouds
glistening in the bottle glass.
We are two birds
washing in the same mirror.
We were fair game
but we have kept out of the cesspool.
We are strong.
We are the good ones.
Do not discover us
for we lie together all in green
like pond weeds.
Hold me, my young dear, hold me.

They touch their delicate watches
one at a time.
They dance to the lute
two at a time.
They are as tender as bog moss.
They play mother-me-do
all day.
A woman
who loves a woman
is forever young.

Once there was a witch's garden
more beautiful than Eve's
with carrots growing like little fish,
with many tomatoes rich as frogs,
onions as ingrown as hearts,
the squash singing like a dolphin
and one patch given over wholly to magic --
rampion, a kind of salad root,
a kind of harebell more potent than
penicillin,
growing leaf by leaf, skin by skin,
as rapt and as fluid as Isadora Duncan.
However the witch's garden was kept locked
and each day a woman who was with child
looked upon the rampion wildly,
fancying that she would die
if she could not have it.
Her husband feared for her welfare
and thus climbed into the garden
to fetch the life-giving tubers.

Ah ha, cried the witch,
whose proper name was Mother Gothel,
you are a thief and now you will die.
However they made a trade,
typical enough in those times.
He promised his child to Mother Gothel
so of course when it was born
she took the child away with her.
She gave the child the name Rapunzel,
another name for the life-giving rampion.
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 or touch her.
She locked her in a tower without a door
or a staircase. It had only a high window.
When the witch wanted to enter she cried:
Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair.
Rapunzel's hair fell to the ground like a

rainbow.
It was as yellow as a dandelion
and as strong as a dog leash.
Hand over hand she shinnied up
the hair like a sailor
and there in the stone-cold room,
as cold as a museum,
Mother Gothel cried:
Hold me, my young dear, hold me,
and thus they played mother-me-do.

Years later a prince came by
and heard Rapunzel singing in her loneliness.
That song pierced his heart like a valentine
but he could find no way to get her.
Like a chameleon he hid himself among the
trees
and watched the witch ascend the swinging
hair.
The next day he himself called out:
Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair,
and thus they met and he declared his love.
What is this beast, she thought,
with muscles on his arms
like a bag of snakes?
What is this moss on his legs?
What prickly plant grows on his cheeks?
What is this voice as deep as a dog?
Yet he dazzled her with his anwers.
Yet he dazzled her with his dancing stick.
They lay together upon the yellowy threads,
swimming through them
like minnows through kelp
and they sang out benedictions like the Pope.

Each day he brought her a skein of silk
to fashion a ladder so they could both escape
But Mother Gothel discovered the plot
and cut off Rapunzel's hair to her ears
and took her into the forest to repent.
When the prince came the witch fastened
the hair to a hook and let it down.
When he saw that Rapunzel had been banished
he flung himself out of the tower, a side of
beef.
He was blinded by thorns that pricked him
like tacks.
As blind as Oedipus he wandered for years
until he heard a song that pierced his heart
like that long-ago valentine.
As he kissed Rapunzel her tears fell on his
eyes
and in the manner of such cure alls

his sight was suddenly restored.

They lived happily as you might expect
proving that mother-me-do
can be outgrown,
just as the fish on Friday,
just as a tricycle.
The world, some say,
is made up of couples.
A rose must have a stem.

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.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Twelve Dancing Princesses

If you danced from midnight
to six a.m. who would understand?
The runaway boy
who chucks it all
to live on the Boston Common
on speed and saltines,
pissing in the duck pond,
rapping with the street priest,
trading talk like blows,
another missing person,
would understand.

The paralytic's wife
who takes her love to town,
sitting on the bar stool,
downing stingers and peanuts,
singing "That ole Ace down in the hole,"
would understand.

The passengers
from Boston to Paris
watching the movie with dawn
coming up like statues of honey,
having partaken of champagne and steak

while the world turned like a toy globe,
those murderers of the nightgown
would understand.

The amnesiac
who tunes into a new neighborhood,
having misplaced the past,
having thrown out someone else's
credit cards and monogrammed watch,
would understand.

The drunken poet
(a genius by daylight)
who places long-distance calls
at three a.m. and then lets you sit
holding the phone while he vomits
(he calls it "The Night of the Long Knives")
getting his kicks out of the death call,
would understand.

The insomniac
listening to his heart
thumping like a June bug,
listening on his transistor
to Long John Nebel arguing from New York,
lying on his bed like a stone table,
would understand.

The night nurse
with her eyes slit like Venetian blinds,
she of the tubes and the plasma,
listening to the heart monitor,
the death cricket bleeping,
she who calls you "we"
and keeps vigil like a ballistic missile,
would understand.

Once
this king had twelve daughters,
each more beautiful than the other.
They slept together, bed by bed
in a kind of girls' dormitory.
At night the king locked and bolted the door.
How could they possibly escape?
Yet each morning their shoes
were danced to pieces.
Each was as worn as an old jockstrap.
The king sent out a proclamation
that anyone who could discover

where the princesses did their dancing
could take his pick of the litter.
However there was a catch.
If he failed, he would pay with his life.
Well, so it goes.

Many princes tried,
each sitting outside the dormitory,
the door ajar so he could observe
what enchantment came over the shoes.
But each time the twelve dancing princesses
gave the snoopy man a Mickey Finn
and so he was beheaded.
Poof! like a basketball.

It so happened that a poor soldier
heard about these strange goings on
and decided to give it a try.
On his way to the castle
he met an old woman.
Age, for a change, was of some use.
She wasn't stuffed in a nursing home.
She told him not to drink a drop of wine
and gave him a cloak that would make
him invisible when the right time came.
And thus he sat outside the dorm.
The oldest princess brought him some wine
but he fastened a sponge beneath his chin,
looking the opposite of Andy Gump.

The sponge soaked up the wine,
and thus he stayed awake.
He feigned sleep however
and the princesses sprang out of their beds
and fussed around like a Miss America Contest
Then the eldest went to her bed
and knocked upon it and it sank into the
earth.
They descended down the opening
one after the other. The crafty soldier
put on his invisible cloak and followed.
Yikes, said the youngest daughter,
something just stepped on my dress.
But the oldest thought it just a nail.

Next stood an avenue of trees,
each leaf made of sterling silver.
The soldier took a leaf for proof.
The youngest heard the branch break
and said, Oof! who goes there?
But the oldest said, those are

the royal trumpets playing triumphantly.
The next trees were made of diamonds.
He took one that flickered like Tinkerbell
and the youngest said: Wait up! He is here!
But the oldest said: Trumpets, my dear.

Next they came to a lake where lay
twelve boats with twelve enchanted princes
waiting to row them to the underground castle
The soldier sat in the youngest's boat
and the boat was a heavy as if an icebox
had been added but the prince did not suspect

Next came the ball where the shoes did duty
The princesses danced like taxi girls at
Roseland
as if those tickets would run right out.
They were painted in kisses with their secret
hair
and though the soldier drank from their cups
they drank down their youth with a nary a
thought.
Cruets of champagne and cups full of rubies.
They danced until morning and the sun came up
naked and angry and so they returned
by the same strange route. The soldier
went forward through the dormitory and into
his waiting chair to feign his druggy sleep.
That morning the soldier, his eyes fiery
like blood in a wound, his purpose brutal
as if facing a battle, hurried with his
answer
as if to the Sphinx. The shoes! the shoes!
The soldier told. He brought forth
the silver leaf, the diamond the size of a
plum.

He had won. The dancing shoes would dance
no more. The princesses were torn from
their night life like a baby from its
pacifier.
Because he was old he picked the eldest.
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 with
diamonds,
never again their shoes worn down to a laugh,
never the bed falling down into purgatory
to let them climb in after
with their Lucifer kicking.

THE FROG PRINCE

Frau Doktor,
Mama Brundig,
take out your contacts,
remove your wig.

I write for you.
I entertain.
But frogs come out
of the sky like rain.

Frogs arrive
With an ugly fury.
You are my judge.
You are my jury.

My guilts are what
we catalogue.
I'll take a knife
and chop up frog.

Frog has no nerves.
Frog is as old as a cockroach.
Frog is my father's genitals.
Frog is a malformed doorknob.
Frog is a soft bag of green.

The moon will not have him.
The sun wants to shut off
like a light bulb.
At the sight of him
the stone washes itself in a tub.
The crow thinks he's an apple
and drops a worm in.
At the feel of frog
the touch-me-nots explode
like electric slugs.

Slime will have him.
Slime has made him a house.

Mr.Poison
is at my bed.
He wants my sausage.
He wants my bread.

Mama Brundig,
he wants my beer.
He wants my Christ
for a souvenir.
Frog has boil disease
and a bellyfull of parasites.
He says: Kiss me. Kiss me.
And the ground soils itself.

Why
should a certain
quite adorable princess
be walking in her garden
at such a time
and toss her golden ball
up like a bubble
and drop it into the well?
It was ordained.
Just as the fates deal out
the plague with a tarot card.
Just as the Supreme Being drills
holes in our skulls to let
the Boston Symphony through.

But I digress.
A loss has taken place.
The ball has sunk like a cast-iron pot
into the bottom of the well.

Lost, she said,
my moon, my butter calf,
my yellow moth, my Hindu hare.
Obviously it was more than a ball.
Balls such as these are not
for sale in Au Bon Marché.
I took the moon, she said,
and now it is gone
and I am lost forever.
A thief had robbed by day.
Suddenly the well grew
thick and boiling

and a frog appeared.
His eyes bulged like two peas
and his body was trussed into place.
Do not be afraid, Princess,
he said, I am not a vagabond,
a cattle farmer, a shepherd,
a doorkeeper, a postman
or a laborer.
I come to you as a tradesman.
I have something to sell.
Your ball, he said,
for just three things.
Let me eat from your plate.
Let me drink from your cup.
Let me sleep in your bed.
She thought, Old Waddler,
those three you will never do,
but she made the promises
with hopes for her ball once more.
He brought it up in his mouth
like a tricky old dog
and she ran back to the castle
leaving the frog quite alone.

That evening at dinner time
a knock was heard at the castle door
and a voice demanded:
King s youngest daughter,
let me in. You promised;
now open to me.
I have left the skunk cabbage
and the eels to live with you.
The king then heard of her promise
and forced her comply.

The frog first sat on her lap.
He was as awful as an undertaker.
Next he was at her plate
looking over her bacon
and calves' liver.
We will eat in tandem,
he said gleefully.
Her fork trembled
as if a small machine
had entered her.
He sat upon the liver
and partook like a gourmet.
The princess choked
as if she were eating a puppy.
From her cup he drank.
It wasn t exactly hygienic.
From her cup she drank
as if it were Socrates hemlock.

Next came the bed.
The silky royal bed.
Ah! the penultimate hour!
There was the pillow
with the princess breathing
and there was the sinuous frog
riding up and down beside her.
I have been lost in a river
of shut doors, he said,
and I have made my way over
the wet stones to live with you.
She woke up aghast.
I suffer for birds and fireflies
but not frogs, she said,
and threw him across the room.
Kaboom!
Like a genie coming out of a samovar,
a handsome prince arose in the
corner of her royal bedroom.
He had kind eyes and hands
and was a friend of sorrow.
Thus they were married.
After all he had compromised her.

He hired a night watchman
so that no one could enter the chamber
and he had the well
boarded over so that
never again would she lose her ball,
that moon, that Krishna hair,
that blind poppy, that innocent globe,
that madonna womb.

Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)

Consider
a girl who keeps slipping off,
arms limp as old carrots,
into the hypnotist's trance,
into a spirit world
speaking with the gift of tongues.
She is stuck in the time machine,
suddenly two years old sucking her thumb,
as inward as a snail,
learning to talk again.
She s on a voyage.
She is swimming further and further back,
up like a salmon,
struggling into her mother's pocketbook.

Little doll child,
come here to Papa.
Sit on my knee.
I have kisses for the back of your neck.
A penny for your thoughts, Princess.
I will hunt them like an emerald.
Come be my snooky
and I will give you a root.
That kind of voyage,
rank as honeysuckle.

Once
a king had a christening
for his daughter Briar Rose
and because he had only twelve gold plates
he asked only twelve fairies
to the grand event.
The thirteenth fairy,
her fingers as long and thin as straws,
her eyes burnt by cigarettes,
her uterus an empty teacup,
arrived with an evil gift.
She made this prophecy:
The princess shall prick herself
on a spinning wheel in her fifteenth year
and then fall down dead.
Kaputt!
The court fell silent.
The king looked like Munch's Scream.
Fairies' prophecies,
in times like those,
held water.
However the twelfth fairy
had a certain kind of eraser
and thus she mitigated the curse
changing that death
into a hundred-year sleep.

The king ordered every spinning wheel
exterminated and exorcized.
Briar Rose grew to be a goddess
and each night the king
bit the hem of her gown
to keep her safe.
He fastened the moon up
with a safety pin
to give her perpetual light.
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.

On her fifteenth birthday
she pricked her finger
on a charred spinning wheel
and the clocks stopped.
Yes indeed. She went to sleep.
The king and queen went to sleep,
the courtiers, the flies on the wall.
The fire in the hearth grew still
and the roast meat stopped crackling.
The trees turned into metal
and the dog became china.
They all lay in a trance,
each a catatonic
stuck in the time machine.
Even the frogs were zombies.
Only a bunch of briar roses grew
forming a great wall of tacks
around the castle.
Many princes
tried to get through the brambles
for they had heard much of Briar Rose
but they had not scoured their tongues
so they were held by the thorns
and thus were crucified.
In due time
a hundred years passed
and a prince got through.
The briars parted as if for Moses
and the prince found the tableau intact.
He kissed Briar Rose
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.

Briar Rose
was an insomniac . . .
She could not nap
or lie in sleep
without the court chemist
mixing her some knock-out drops
and never in the prince's presence.
If it is to come, she said,
sleep must take me unawares
while I am laughing or dancing
so that I do not know that brutal place
where I lie down with cattle prods,
the hole in my cheek open.
Further, I must not dream

for when i do i see the table set
and a faltering crone at my place,
her eyes burnt by cigarettes
as she eats betrayal like a slice of meat.

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.
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.
You could lay her in a grave,
an awful package,
and shovel dirt on her face
and she'd never call back: Hello there!
But if you kissed her on the mouth
her eyes would spring open
and she'd call out: Daddy! Daddy!
Presto!
She's out of prison.

There was a theft.
That much I am told.
I was abandoned.
That much I know.
I was forced backward.
I was forced forward.
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.
What voyage this, little girl?
This coming out of prison?
God help —
this life after death?

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