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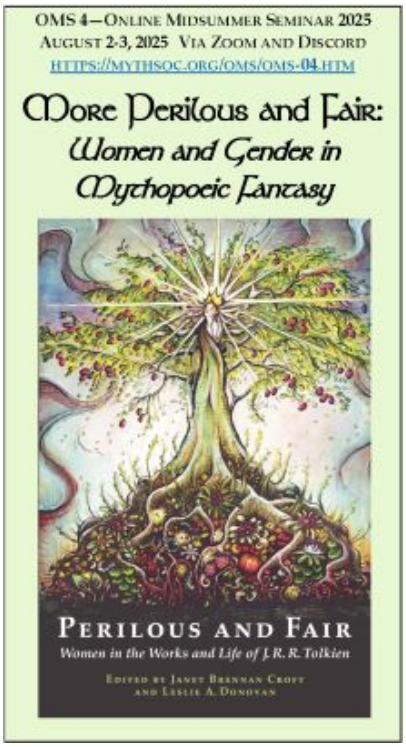

Anne Sexton and Anima Transformations: Transformations as a Critique of the Psychology of Love in *Grimm's Fairy Tales*

Abstract

Uses "Jung's theories of anima as a critical framework [...] to demonstrate that Sexton's poems [...] critique the psychology of romantic love that informs the Grimm Brothers' tales and the impact of that ideology on women."

Additional Keywords

Anima figures in literature; Anima in Anne Sexton; Feminist criticism; Grimm Brothers. Fairy Tales; Sexton, Anne. "The Maiden Without Hands"; Sexton, Anne. "Snow White"; Sexton, Anne. Transformations

Anne Sexton and Anima Transformations

Transformations as a Critique of the Psychology of Love in Grimm's Fairy Tales

John Bruschka

"And they all lived happily ever after" — that is the formula that stands for the complex relationship of marriage in what we call fairy tales, which, like Shakespearean comedies, deal primarily with courtship and end with a wedding feast. Marriage, with all of its attendant adjustments and difficulties, is rarely addressed by either comedy or the folktale. Anne Sexton, in her poetic reinterpretation of the Grimm's tales, *Transformations*, exposes the difficulties women face in the transition from courtship to marriage. Her poems recast the "happily ever after" formula in the stories collected by Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm, and present Sleeping Beauty as a prisoner in an incestuous marriage; Cinderella and the prince as two dolls on a shelf; and, at the end of "The White Snake," calling marriage "living happily ever after — / a kind of coffin, / a kind of blue funk."[1] In her essay, "That Story: Anne Sexton and Her *Transformations*," Alicia Ostricker tells us: "What she does with this material is to seize it, crack it open, and make it personal."[2] More than that, Ostricker continues: "Sexton's interpretations discover and release elements already implicit in these stories" (O 259). Sexton's breezy tone, her confident, modern diction, and the tension she creates by playing this modern language against the classic "fairy tale" diction makes the poems transformations rather than re-tellings. But it is the radical change in point of view that makes them Sexton's and brings to light the "elements already implicit in these stories." Shifting the point of view from the man's, as it most certainly is in Grimm, to the woman's shakes loose a major theme, buried in the original, the role of *anima* projection in both our folk tradition and our attitudes toward women.

The romantic ideal of love and marriage fostered by our patriarchal society, reified in Grimm, is brought into critical focus in *Transformations*. The foundation of this romantic ideal, I would argue, is what Jung called the *anima* and the resulting confusion men experience between the real, human women they meet in life and the ideal, divine Woman of *anima*. The conflict has little to do with women; it is a man's internal conflict externalized and imposed upon women. Sexton, like most women, is a victim of this conflict and her poems demonstrate her resentment. Telling these traditional tales from a woman's perspective reveals the misogyny inherent in marriage, especially since the rise of romantic love. Half of the poems in *Transformations* concern marriages that, in all but one poem, are depicted as cruel, selfish, shallow, or deathlike. Gruesome and ironic, "Snow White" typifies Sexton's view of marriage driven by *anima* projection. I therefore use it to represent that group, while "The Maiden Without Hands" is important to discuss because it is the one exception. Using Jung's theories of anima as a critical framework should allow me to demonstrate that Sexton's poems, consciously or not, critique the psychology of romantic love that informs the Grimm brothers' tales and the impact of that ideology upon women.

Jung has written extensively on *anima*, and his successors and commentators have written curious interpretations of this aspect of Jungian theory. To avoid confusion, the concise definition of *anima* in "Marriage as a Psychological Relationship" will be our bench mark. In this work Jung states:

> Every man carries within him the eternal image of woman, not the image of this or that particular woman, but a definite feminine image. This image is fundamentally unconscious, an hereditary factor of primordial origin engraved in the living organic system of the man, an imprint or "archetype" of all the ancestral experiences of the female, a deposit, as it were, of all the impressions ever made by woman — in short, an inherited system of psychic adaptation. Even if no women existed, it would still be possible, at any given time, to deduce from this unconscious image exactly how a woman would have to be constituted psychically. The same is true of the woman: she too has her inborn image of man. Actually, we know from experience that it would be more accurate to describe it as an image of men, whereas in the case of the man it is rather an image of woman. Since this image is unconscious, it is always unconsciously projected upon the person of the beloved, and is one of the chief reasons for passionate attraction or aversion.[3]

Jung's description of anima has five primary implications; first, men create the definition of womanhood while women, it seems, must accept a definition of manhood; second, *anima* is a collectively made portrait of an ideal Woman, yet *animus* focuses on actual men as a group; third, the object of a man's affection must be able to live up to his projected image; fourth, there is, to Jung, something natural and immutable about this situation; and finally, Jung sees women as inferior to men. In *Aion* Jung describes how anima operates in fictional settings such as Grimm's tales or Sexton's poems: "Whenever she [*anima*] appears, in dreams, visions, and fantasies, she takes on personified form, thus demonstrating that the factor she embodies possesses all the outstanding characteristics of a feminine being."[4] This passage refers to dreams and fantasies; but, literature is, as Maria Tatar notes, a codification of our collective fantasy[5] — folktales may be thought of as collective fantasies, and poems as public dreams.

In literature, as in Jungian psychology, men impose the ideal Woman of their *anima* upon real women while women are required, by this *anima* projection, never to deviate from an archetypal image of divine Woman. They are, in short, told not to be human. Robert Johnson addresses this problem in *We: Understanding the Psychology of Romantic Love*, in which he draws the distinction between romance and love. In romance "the instant a man falls 'in love,' he goes beyond love itself and begins the worship of his soul-in-woman."[6] This he contrasts with love, "the power within us that affirms and values another human being as he or she is" (J 191). Romance is, therefore, falling in love with your own *anima*, selfish at best and at its worst a denial of humanity to women. The divine Woman, in the patriarchal view, is without blemish. She is, by the standards of the culture, a young and beautiful virgin totally devoted to the service of man, an impossible standard by which any human woman must fail even if she took this as her goal. She is, in other words, powerless. Sexton, like the Grimms, albeit for a different purpose, portrays Snow White as the ultimate *anima* projection.

Snow White, or Little Snow White as she is called in Grimm,[7] is a child; Sexton says she is thirteen (S 16), in Grimm she is only seven (G 126). She is beautiful — so beautiful that the dwarfs cannot bring themselves to bury her (S 130). The Prince is so fascinated by her beauty that he won't leave her coffin — her beauty incorruptible, even in death. Sexton's description of Snow White's beauty is ironic; in praising her ethereal beauty, Sexton compares her to inanimate objects:

> the virgin is a lovely number:
> cheeks as fragile as cigarette paper,
> arms and legs made by Limoges,
> lips like Vin Du Rhône,
> rolling her china-blue doll eyes
> open and shut. (S3-7)

This characterization reveals Sexton's antipathy toward Snow White, or at least her resistance to Snow White's role as *anima*, by underscoring the fact that she is not quite human. She is a "living doll," eternally virgin. Snow White's virginity is assumed by the Grimms, but Sexton is explicit; her Snow White maintains her purity even though she is beset by sexuality:

> 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. (S 53-9)

Her potential for sexuality is only revealed by her eyes which " . . . shut for the thrust / of the unicorn" (10-11).

Sexuality, for both men and women, is a critical measure of power, and it is a major step in the process of self-possession. An adult, a sexually mature being, cannot be wholly possessed by another, which may be the reason that girls, in the Western folktale tradition are often prevented from becoming adults — the heroic efforts of Sleeping Beauty's parents to prevent her from pricking her finger, from bleeding, is a case in point. In resisting the carnal, Snow White preserves her ability to be the carrier of *anima* by retaining her own powerlessness; she never attains self-possession. She is possessed first by her father, then by the dwarfs, and then given to the prince as a bride. Snow White has no choices, no autonomy. Her safety is in her innocence; sexuality will lead to her disqualification as an embodiment of *anima*. She will, with mature sexuality, become fully human like her passionate step-mother the queen. Sexton's sympathy for the queen is obvious; in fact, she waits until the final stanza to give in to the tradition and apply the epithet "wicked"(S 148) to the queen. The Grimms, on the other hand, label her wicked almost immediately (G 127). Sexton shows the queen as a woman who sees herself in flux; moving from the ideal into the real, soon to be replaced by the newest young girl that can be used to represent the *anima*. This transformation lets her see herself, for the first time, as human and aging (S 40). She becomes real, and *anima* immediately transfers to Snow White. Free of the burden of *anima* the queen gains power. Her power is not confined to sexual autonomy: she possesses the magic mirror, she can disguise herself, she knows poisons (read medicine) — she has become a crone. For this knowledge and power she is tortured to death, made to dance in red hot iron shoes; knowledge, pride, and passion are not tolerated in women, either in fairy tales or in real life. The lesson of Snow White is, it seems, that if a woman does not or, worse, will not abide the *anima* projection of a man, she deserves to suffer and die.

Sexton transforms the story of Snow White, revealing the fact that women are made to suffer because men cannot resolve their conflict with their feminine side. Oddly enough however, when confronted with a story of a successful re-integration of *anima* Sexton seems confused, even belligerent. "The Maiden Without Hands," whether the Grimm's version or Sexton's, demonstrates that love and marriage need not be a prison for women, and while this is not the place to psychoanalyze the poet, Sexton seems curiously unwilling to accept the possibility. The maiden is a poor girl whose father cuts off her hands to cheat a wizard (S 25); in Grimm, the father mutilates his daughter for financial gain promised by the devil (G 84). In either case this disfigurement makes her imperfect and thereby not *anima*. The maiden, like Snow White, must leave home, but unlike Snow White who wanders through the woods until she finds the dwarfs to protect and feed her, the maiden, in spite of her misfortune, can fend for herself. Sexton claims that "she was, I'd say, / without resources" (S 50-51) and states that she could not feed herself (S 47). Yet in Grimm the maiden clearly does so (G 85). The difference between the two versions is curious and significant be-

cause it seems to show Sexton's difficulty in granting the maiden power. Sexton is, unwittingly perhaps, caught in the same cultural trap of *anima* projection that she rails against in Snow White. When the "good, kind king"(S 40) decides, rather arbitrarily, to marry the maiden, Sexton, with just cause, questions his motives. The prologue describes a coward, a king who marries a cripple to avoid the dangers of the world (S 1-21). Sexton again seems unwilling to admit the idea of love between equals — two injured lovers. This story is not about romantic love; love is never mentioned in this marriage. The maiden, although never granted a name, is not labeled a bride. The imperfect couple is married, but in this poem, that is just the beginning of the story. The king, who has not yet resolved his struggle with *anima*, wants her to carry his *anima*, so, in an attempt to make her "perfect," he has silver hands made for his new wife (S 61). Sexton calls the silver hands "tin mittens" exposing the hollowness of the gesture (S 62). The reaction to the hands in court focuses on the king and what he has done; everyone seems to realize the meaning of the hands:

> The court bowed at the sight of them from a distance.
> The leisurely passerby stopped and crossed himself.
> What a fellow he is, they said of the king,
> and kept their lips pursed as for a kiss. (S 60-6)

The hands are a symbol, like the cross, of great power — the power of the unconscious manifested in the ideal of *anima*.

The plot continues as the king now goes to war, a man's rite of passage in the romantic tradition, leaving his pregnant wife behind. A son is born and messages are sent, which are intercepted and changed by the wizard (or devil) who is seeking a kind of displaced revenge. Eventually the king returns, and after great trials, finds his wife and son, Painbringer, alive and surprisingly well. The queen's hands have miraculously grown back while she was alone. Sexton says it is because she and Painbringer were so good (S 96). Whether she is "good" because she is a mother, or because she has borne an heir, or because she has survived on her own, is not clear, yet she is doing very well for a woman "without resources."

> so he found his beloved.
> She brought forth the silver hands.
> She brought forth Painbringer
> and he realized they were his,
> though both now unfortunately whole. (S 113-117)

The queen, now "unfortunately whole," forces the king to become whole as well. The first step is for the king to recognize that the silver hands and Painbringer are his. Forced to be a parent, a more uncertain task than being a warrior, and to take back the hands that are the symbol of his own *anima*, he must now accept responsibility for his child and himself. Now he is a human, "And he makes the best of it"(S 124). The queen and the king have become whole and human and individually powerful. There is suffering for them. Their fear and resignation are real, as is the remembrance of the pain of achieving the self, symbolized both by Painbringer and by the hands.

> All their lives they kept the silver hands,
> polished daily,
> a kind of purple heart,
> a talisman,
> a yellow star. (S 130-134)

It is a life shared by three people struggling to meet the challenges that face people who love each other rather than the twitter-pated reveling of two people "in love."

The difference between "Snow White" and "The Maiden Without Hands" is the difference between a wedding and marriage. Sexton seems angry about the fate of Snow White, maybe even angry at her, yet Sexton understands Snow White. The Maiden and her marriage are enigmatic for Sexton and, therefore, she spends a large portion of the poem questioning the possibility of such a marriage of mature equals. Reality for Sexton and, I imagine, most women of her "fairy tale" generation, more closely follows the story of the doomed Snow White. Her life, after losing the status of anima, must be a slow decline into the "treachery" of her step-mother, ending with torture and death so another virgin may take her place. Perhaps it is a bit premature to relegate this phenomenon to an earlier time — the story is played out all around us; TV, movies, books, magazines, and fairy tales all honor the beautiful, the young, the virgin. She is the one saved in the horror film, the one who rises to the top in the Gothic romance, and the one who is rewarded in everyday life. The patriarchy we live in does not honor women as humans, preferring them as symbols. When women become whole, as in "The Maiden Without Hands," the reaction, like Sexton's, is suspicion, even hatred. Men do not seem to want the work of reconciling their feminine side, like the king in "The Maiden Without Hands," so women are continually oppressed by the responsibility of being both themselves and carrying a part of a man's psyche. Anne Sexton took up the cultural myths posited in the stories collected by Jakob and William Grimm and spun out a new statement of our shared mythology. Her vision is radical; it is the other side of the coin. The brothers Grimm collected stories designed to reify, to perpetuate the patriarchal control of society. They gave us men's truth. Sexton delivers stories of oppression. She gives us a woman's truth.

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