universität wien

DIPLOMARBEIT

Titel der Diplomarbeit

„Feminist Fairy-Tale Poetry:

Sara Henderson Hay, Anne Sexton and Olga Broumas“

Verfasserin

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angestrebter akademischer Grad

Magistra der Philosophie (Mag.phil.)

Wien, im Mai 2012

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt:	A 343
Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt:	Anglistik und Amerikanistik (Diplom)
Betreuerin:	o.Univ.-Prof. Dr. Margarete Rubik

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION **1**

1. THEORETICAL INTRODUCTION **4**

1.1. THE FAIRY TALE AS A HISTORICAL PRODUCT *5*

1.2. FEMINIST FAIRY-TALE CRITICISM *16*

1.3. REWRITING THE FAIRY-TALE GENRE *23*

1.4. CONCLUSION *29*

2. SARA HENDERSON HAY – *STORY HOUR* **32**

2.1. SARA HENDERSON HAY: THE NEW WOMAN *32*

2.2. POETIC METHOD: CONSERVATISM UNVEILED *35*

2.3. WOMEN'S ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS: PERSONAE AS STRATEGY *47*

2.4. CONCLUSION *58*

3. ANNE SEXTON – *TRANSFORMATIONS* **60**

3.1. ANNE SEXTON: THE HOUSEWIFE *60*

3.2. POETIC METHOD: THE WITCH-POET *64*

3.3. WOMEN'S ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS: THE FEMININE GROTESQUE *75*

3.4. CONCLUSION *91*

4. OLGA BROUMAS - *BEGINNING WITH O* **94**

4.1. OLGA BROUMAS: THE POSTMODERN FEMINIST *94*

4.2. POETIC METHOD: 'A POLITICS OF TRANSLITERATION' *96*

4.3. WOMEN'S ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS: THE LESBIAN CONTINUUM *106*

4.4. CONCLUSION *119*

5. CONCLUSION: A COMPARATIVE READING OF "RAPUNZEL" **122**

BIBLIOGRAPHY **131**

PRIMARY SOURCES *131*

SECONDARY SOURCES *133*

INDEX **138**

APPENDIX **142**

DEUTSCHE ZUSAMMENFASSUNG *142*

ABSTRACT IN ENGLISH *143*

CURRICULUM VITAE *144*

INTRODUCTION

When we think about modern feminist rewritings of fairy tales we tend to recall such prominent writers as Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood or perhaps A.S. Byatt. All three of these authors are widely-read and well-known for their reinterpretations of folklore, fairy tales and mythological material. However, beyond the surface of the most well-known authors in the genre, there is a vast river of feminist fairy-tale rewritings in all shapes and forms. Particularly in poetry, women of the twentieth century have been more than busy in turning fairy-tale material into their own subversive feminist rewritings. Two great anthologies on fairy-tale renditions in poetry were published in 1985 and 2003: *Disenchantments: An Anthology of Modern Fairy Tale Poetry* and *The Poets' Grimm: 20th Century Poems from Grimm Fairy Tales,* respectively. Both of these collections contain among other fairy-tale poems a whole host of feminist fairy-tale poetry.

This is how I discovered that three female American poets published a collection of fairy-tale poetry each in the short span of 14 years: between 1963 and 1977. These poets are Sara Henderson Hay, Anne Sexton and Olga Broumas. Despite each poet's remarkably similar project in close temporal proximity, these three poets have never been analyzed side by side in an effort to compare each writer with the other and to discover how and why they differ and what has drawn them to rewriting fairy-tales at this particular time in American literary history.

The first poet is Sara Henderson Hay, today a very little known American poet, who wrote a collection entitled *Story Hour* published in 1963. This collection contains thirty sonnets all inspired by and based on popular fairy tales. Despite Hay's relative success as a poet in mid-century, her poetry has almost entirely vanished from today's bookshelves and has virtually received no critical attention since. Except for the occasional acknowledgment of her work in fairy-tale anthologies or reviews of feminist fairy tales, only one article has been written in which Hay's fairy-tale poetry is seriously considered. This article was written by Ellen McGrath Smith and published in the journal *Sagetrieb* in 2006 and is an analysis of Hay's

Story Hour as a literary predecessor to the much more famous *Transformations* by Anne Sexton. Much of Smith's brilliant analysis on Hay's poetry and status as a feminist fairy-tale writer informs my own chapter on Sara Henderson Hay.

The second poet is Anne Sexton. Sexton is a much more famous and prominent poet than Hay and she, too, has written an entire collection dedicated to rewritings of fairy tales. This collection is called *Transformations* and was published only eight years later in 1971. *Transformations* was very well received by feminist critics and Sexton remains a prominent poet to this day. Her fairy-tale poems are included in many anthologies and are widely discussed in secondary studies of her work.

The third poet is the only living poet of this triad: the Greek American poet Olga Broumas. Her poetry collection *Beginning with O* was first published in 1977 and contains poems both based on mythology and fairy tales. I will be focusing on the section of her collection entitled "Innocence", which contains her seven fairy-tale poems. Broumas's poetry has been reviewed more frequently than Hay's but is still not as widely known as Sexton's.

The collections *Story Hour, Transformations* and *Beginning with O* share more than just coincidental similarities. In the story of their collections I found the story of three female poets whose poetry has been firmly shaped by the history of female writers in the mid- to late twentieth-century. The way each writer has reacted to fairy tales and reshaped them in their own work is by no means accidental but reveals the literary and cultural influences that went behind them. In order to recover the literary and cultural influences of each poet my thesis contains a short survey on the literary and cultural background in which they were writing, which has great bearings on the style and content of their poetry. Each poet has a unique approach to fairy tales, which I will showcase by analyzing both form and content of the tales. In my chapters entitled "Poetic Method" I will focus on the form and style of their fairy-tale poetry and in "Women's Roles and Relationships" I will highlight how these poets have re-imagined the female types presented in fairy tales.

In order to place each poet in the wider context of feminist reactions and rewritings to fairy tales in the mid- to late twentieth century I have also outlined approaches to the fairy tale and in particular feminist approaches in the theoretical background that prefaces this thesis. This chapter includes reflections on the complex role of women in fairy tales, both as producers and protagonists. The critics Jack Zipes and Elizabeth Harries have both been fundamental in recovering the forgotten and complex history of women in fairy tales and their research has greatly informed this chapter. Both remind us that the fairy tale is a complex and shape-shifting genre in which women have always played an important role.

As I hope to show, reviewed together, the three poets Hay, Sexton and Broumas create and continue a powerful female fairy-tale lineage. Although we may be less familiar with the fairy tales written by women than those that have been written by men in the last couple of centuries, a female-imagined and penned fairy-tale current has always existed. Whether consciously or not, the poets in this thesis all belong to this lineage.

1. THEORETICAL INTRODUCTION

"[…] tiefere Bedeutung
Liegt in dem Märchen meiner Kinderjahre,
Als in der Wahrheit, die das Leben lehrt."

— Friedrich Schiller ("Die Piccolomini" 3. 4.)

"In an utilitarian age, of all other times, it is a matter of grave importance that Fairy tales should be respected."

— Charles Dickens ("Frauds on the Fairies" 168)

"If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales."

— attributed to Albert Einstein (qtd. on *SurLaLune Fairy Tales*)

Consider the above quotations attributed to German poet Schiller, British novelist Dickens and scientist Einstein. In each one of them we can recognize how highly they valued the fairy tale. Schiller believed the fairy tale contains deeper meaning and that if you want to get at the truth the fairy tale is your best bet. Dickens holds that the fairy tale is "a matter of grave importance" and deserves respect in an age in which reason and science have taken over the public consciousness. And Einstein even claims that fairy tales provide a means of making children more intelligent. They are, so to speak, an educational device.

As we can see all three attributed greatness and an enormous amount of value to the fairy tale as if the fairy tale were a sort of universal truth-telling device, which is not so much shaped by humans but a collective consciousness, whose sum total is greater than that of each individual. As romantic and bona fide as these reflections on the fairy tale may seem, these types of beliefs about the fairy tale have unfortunately been deeply destructive for the fairy-tale genre itself because they obscure the history of the genre and elevate it to the status of myth. This type of fairy-tale reverence therefore led to a dangerous petrification of the genre and the values contained within. As will become clear in the following chapters this has not only been negative for the genre itself but particularly for the role of women in

the production of a representation in fairy tales.

In an attempt to explain how the petrification of the fairy tale is and has been destructive for the genre I will highlight the various scholarly approaches which have both interpreted the fairy tale as a historical product or an ahistoric universal truth-telling device in the first chapter, before outlining the most important stations along the fairy-tale's history. An understanding of the genre's history is indispensable if we want to understand its role today and in particular the role of women both in and outside of the fairy tale. This then leads to the second chapter, which is a short overview of some of the most important criticism women have leveled at the fairy tale in the twentieth century and yet again brings home the fact that the genre cannot be understood without its historical development. And finally, in the last chapter I will outline the way in which women writers have dealt with the fairy tale in the second half of the twentieth century, which provides the necessary context for the fairy-tale poetry of Sara Henderson Hay, Anne Sexton and Olga Broumas.

1.1. THE FAIRY TALE AS A HISTORICAL PRODUCT

Today fairy tales are as much a part of our cultural knowledge as they were at Schiller's, Dickens's or Einstein's time. However, the diverse range of fairy tales on offer far exceeds the kinds of tales available in previous centuries. The traditional tales as collected by Charles Perrault, the Brothers Grimm or Andrew Lang have long been absorbed into popular culture and have re-emerged alongside countless forms. Fairy tales today are not only disseminated through the printed text but also through picture books and comics, through the media of film, music, theater, opera or the Internet as well as numerous other forms that the current age of technology allows us.

However, even despite the abundance and diversity of fairy tales on offer there still exists the very same popular notion in our time that the fairy tale somehow contains universal truths and transcends history. There exists a general belief that

the fairy tale harks back to an original *urform* of itself. In our minds this original form, the *real* tale, has its roots somewhere in the past and emerged there from the mouths of the simple folk, who told tales to each other by the fire place. The fairy tale, we believe, tells us something about the true nature of human beings and their relationships in its genuine, pure and authentic way. We imagine fairy tales as timeless metaphors for situations in our lives through which we can be connected to our natural and uncorrupted roots. In this sense nothing much has changed since the times of Schiller, Dickens or Einstein in our opinion and reverence of the fairy tale.

This view on fairy tales has also resonated with various academics and scholars of the fairy tale in the twentieth century. Their approaches to the interpretation and study of fairy tales have supported and fostered this popular understanding of the fairy tale as a pure, timeless and, above all, universal genre. Critics as diverse as Vladimir Propp, Max Lüthi and Bruno Bettelheim all strove to discover the true essence of fairy tales, their greatness and timelessness.

Vladimir Propp, a structuralist theorist, claimed in his influential work *Morphology of the Fairy Tale* (1928) that all fairy tales follow a limited set of identifiable structures. He writes that "fairy tales possess a quite particular structure which is immediately felt and which determines their category, even though we may not be aware of it" (6). These functions, as he calls them, are universal and can therefore be found in all fairy tales as his quotation above suggests. Another critic, Max Lüthi, a mid-century Swiss literary critic, has similar ideas on the fairy tale in claiming that all fairy tales contain essential underlying meanings and similarly to Propp's analysis have limited formal criteria which define the genre.[1]

The influential Freudian scholar Bruno Bettelheim's psychoanalytic approach to fairy tales also attributes universal qualities to the genre. Bettelheim views fairy tales as expressions of individual development, which nevertheless deal with

[1] In the literary study *Das europäische Volksmärchen* (1947) Lüthi delineates the formal criteria of the European fairy-tale genre.

universal problems. According to Bettelheim, fairy tales "depict in imaginary and symbolic form the essential steps in growing up and achieving an independent existence" (73). He sees fairy tales as didactic and educational stories which help children to grow up and develop into sensible adults who know how to cope with life's problems. To Bettelheim fairy tales reflect the psychoanalytic struggle of "enable[ing] man to accept the problematic nature of life without being defeated by it" (8). He writes:

> This is exactly the message that fairy tales get across to the child in manifold form: that a struggle against severe difficulties in life is unavoidable, is an intrinsic part of human existence – but that if one does not shy away, but steadfastly meets unexpected and often unjust hardships, one masters all obstacles and at the end emerges victorious. (8)

What the approaches of Propp, Lüthi and Bettelheim have in common is that they assume that fairy tales contain universal truths which transgress the constraints of time, place, class, gender, race or ideology. They assume that anybody can view fairy tales from the same perspective and find in them universal structures and meanings. But is this really true? Do all fairy tales follow the same structure and patterns? Do fairy tales really tell us something about our true nature and confront us with basic human predicaments? Is it really a truth-telling device which contains deeper meaning?

More recently a number of fairy-tale scholars have argued against a universal understanding and interpretation of fairy tales. These critics stress historical and cultural relativity and argue that no genre can be viewed in complete disregard of its time and place in history. Robert Darnton, on writing about the cultural history of the French fairy-tale tradition, laments Bettelheim's complete lack of historical analysis. Darnton believes that Bettelheim "treats [fairy tales], so to speak, flattened out, like patients on a couch, in a timeless contemporaneity" (13). Where Bettelheim views fairy tales as timeless proofs of our souls' doings, Darnton believes that fairy tales have a history and that this history is relevant to the interpretation of each fairy tale and the genre.

The Marxist critic Jack Zipes, who is a prominent voice in fairy-tale studies, would agree wholeheartedly with Darnton's view on Bettelheim. Zipes also believes that all fairy tales must be read and understood within their socio-historical contexts. In order to prove his point, Zipes has extensively researched the origins and the history of the fairy tale. His research shows that the way we see the fairy-tale genre today has nothing to do with its supposed pure and folksy roots or the nature of the human soul but everything to do with diachronically shifting ideologies which have shaped the genre's meaning and its importance to us as a cultural institution.

In his works Zipes traces the development of the Western fairy tale through history. Zipes laments the fact that there is only little awareness in our time of the history of folk and fairy tales because the culture industry has so profoundly shaped our ideas of folk and fairy tales that we can no longer distinguish between these as two separate genres (*Magic* 3). In order to fully comprehend Zipes's understanding of the fairy tale, his idea on how the folk and fairy tale are separate genres must be clarified.

We commonly believe that both folk and fairy tales are authentic rural tales transmitted over centuries with no historical, ideological or social realities that have shaped them along their journey. Their form and existence is seen in terms of absolutes, which conveniently transgress history. Zipes writes:

> Folk and fairy tales are generally confused with one another and taken as make-believe stories with no direct reference to a particular community or historical tradition. Their own specific ideology and aesthetics are rarely seen in the light of a diachronic historical development which has great bearing on our cultural self-understanding. (*Magic* 4)

Zipes insists on a clear distinction between folk tales — or *Volksmärchen* — and fairy tales — or *Kunstmärchen* (*Magic* 2). Folk tales are part of an oral tradition and belong to the realm of folklore. Oral folk tales circulated among the lower classes and were characterized by their participatory nature. As oral tales their content and meaning is not fixed but can change from speaker to speaker and listener to listener. (*Magic* 11).

In contrast, the fairy tale is a literary genre and therefore text-based by nature and

can only be transmitted by the practice of reading and re-reading. The genre only came into existence with the rise of the printing press and a culture of reading and writing. (*Magic* 11).

Although the literary fairy tale was highly influenced by the oral folk tale, these two genres are not the same.[2] According to Zipes, the rise of the literary fairy tale depended on a "violation of oral story telling" ("Disney" 24), because the shift from oral into literary tale brought with it a number of changes from one genre to another ("Disney" 24). The literary fairy tale lacks the communal aspect of the oral folk tale and allows for private enjoyment through the medium of the book (*Magic* 12). The literary fairy tale was also based on a separation of social classes, as fairy tales could only be read by people who could read and afford books, which excluded the uneducated lower classes from participation in the genre ("Disney" 24). This elitism was heightened by the use of a "high" form of the language instead of the vernacular for the literary fairy tale ("Disney" 24). In short, the upper classes appropriated the oral folk tale from the lower classes for their own uses and this shift necessarily brought with it a shift in the nature of the genre. The oral folk tale was reinvented to suit the tastes, values and ideas of the upper classes and no longer reflected the concerns of the lower classes ("Disney" 23-24). The oral folk tale still continued to exist alongside the fairy tale but it has its own history and should not be confused with the history of the literary fairy tale, which is the genre we today refer to as the fairy tale ("Disney" 23). The history of the fairy tale is in this sense the history of the literary fairy tale. These two terms remain interchangeable because the fairy tale is text-based by definition.

The European critics Mayer and Tismar also define the genres oral folk tale and literary fairy tale along similar lines as Zipes. Above all they stress the high level of intertextuality as a defining characteristic of the fairy tale. They claim that fairy tales are always self-referential, because they display an awareness of their own historicity as well as acknowledging other forms, such as the oral folk tale, other

[2] Cf. On the distinction of folk and fairy tales Zipes gives a clear list of contrasts in *Breaking the Magic Spell* (11).

literary fairy tales or legends as their influence (2-3). Mayer and Tismar particularly stress the artificiality of the fairy tale as the fairy tale, unlike the oral folk tale, is "not passed on anonymously through oral transmission, but is mostly written down and disseminated as an original creation of a specific, identifiable author" (1, my translation). Fairy tales are therefore always an artificial and synthetic product of a certain author. They are not, as is often believed, accurate and reliable transcriptions of oral folk tales. To assume that folk tales were recorded 'truthfully' into fairy tales as if by oral transcript and therefore reflect the true origin and nature of the tales is bogus. Every version is automatically endowed with the ideologies and beliefs held by the writer/speaker and the time, place and culture within which it was produced. Therefore the fairy tale, or *Kunstmärchen*, too, is always an artificial creation and must be read and analyzed with its cultural context in mind.

If we define and analyze the fairy tale as a historical product as Darnton, Zipes and Mayer and Tismar do, we can begin to understand how our present notion of the nature of the fairy tale came to be. We do not believe that the fairy tale is an authentic, truth-telling, timeless and universal genre because this is simply the nature of such tales and always has been *but* because the ideologies that went into creating fairy tales made fairy tales seem like they were just that: pure, rural, oral, folksy, simple, original. Fairy tales, however, as history shows were not created, collected, or written by the simple, rural lower classes for the simple, rural lower classes but by the reading and writing classes for the reading and writing classes. A brief outline of the fairy tale's history will show how the fairy-tale genre has developed into our present-day notion of it.

According to Zipes the fairy tale as a genre was first institutionalized at the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth century ("Disney" 23). Literary fairy tales did exist before the end of the seventeenth century, however, the genre did not have a sustained impact on literature and society before the late

seventeenth century (”Disney” 23).[3] From the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century onward the fairy tale was mainly endowed with the values and ideologies of the aristocracy. Particularly in France, where the fairy tale experienced a heyday in the late seventeenth century, it was the aristocracy who shaped the form, content and style of the fairy tale in order to suit the needs and ideology of its class. As Zipes writes the fairy tale “in the eighteenth century excluded the common people and addressed the concerns of the upper classes” (*Magic* 10). The fairy tale was filled with “an ideology of conservatism which informed the socialization process functioning on behalf of the aristocratic class” (*Magic* 10-11). One of the most influential fairy-tale writers of late seventeenth century France is Charles Perrault, whose *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* published in 1697 had a major influence on future fairy-tale collectors and is still being read today. In this volume Perrault used several well-known folk tales and transformed them into moralistic tales for adults and children. His tales exemplify the morals and beliefs of the aristocratic classes and his succinct and poignant style came to be regarded as a benchmark for later writers of fairy tales.[4] Through Perrault's tales the gap between the oral folk tale tradition and its offspring in the form of the literary fairy tale becomes visible. Perrault does not simply attempt to record the oral tradition of storytelling but uses popular motifs and themes in order to stylize them into new tales, which reflect aristocratic values and a strong dedication to the age of reason (*Magic* 8).[5] Every one of his tales is followed by a short moral which is intended to help make sense of the tale and exemplifies the values of his class.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century the fairy tale began to acquire a negative connotation. Its magical and supernatural content was regarded as subversive and harmful to the ideology of the Enlightenment. The fairy tale was

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[3] Zipes mentions Francesco Straparola and Giambattista Basile as earlier fairy-tale writers (”Disney”23).

[4] Cf. Harries gives examples on how Perrault's style was praised as the most beautiful and authentic by later writers and researchers, e.g. the Brothers Grimm (22-31).

[5] Cf. Zipes analyzes eighteenth-century versions of the tale “Beauty and the Beast” as an example of how aristocratic values shaped the form of fairy tales (*Magic* 8-9).

pushed to the margins of society and was used by writers to react in protest against utilitarianism. The fairy tale had turned into a subversive tool. (*Magic* 12-14; "Definition" xxiv).

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the fairy tale experienced a revival in the hands of the bourgeoisie. The aristocratic classes were no longer at the apex of power but had been replaced by the bourgeois public sphere. Romanticism craved a return to the simpler and purer human nature and favored nationalism over internationalism. It is in this vein that the oral culture of the simple folk celebrated a revival. Renewed interest in folk tales served as a tool of resistance to the universification of the Enlightenment (*Magic* 13-14). The most sustained and significant effort in the collection of folk and fairy tales was made by the Brothers Grimm at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Their *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* was first published in 1812 and remains one of the most remarkable collections of fairy tales to this date.

The Brothers Grimm were so influential and popular that it can almost be said that it is they who singlehandedly invented the genre as we know it today. Their collections and style of fairy tales became so dominant that they have shaped our (mis)conception of the origins and nature of fairy tales to this date. Elizabeth Harries refers to the Brothers Grimm as "the architects of many of our received ideas of the tales" (22) and stresses their influence on canon formation and our present-day understanding of fairy tales.[6] Zipes, too, acknowledges that the Brothers Grimm mark the beginning of a process of institutionalization of a particular brand of fairy tale that was only completed by the end of the 19th century (*Magic* 15).

This particular brand of fairy tale no longer focused on the themes and interests of the upper classes as the tales of Perrault and his contemporaries did but homed in on the lower and rural classes as the romanticized protagonists. The Brothers

[6] Cf. In *Twice upon a Time* Harries dedicates a chapter to the history of the dominance of certain fairy tales in today's fairy-tale canon (19-45).

Grimm idealized the lives of the rural, simple and lower class folk along with their story-telling tradition, because they wrote from within the hotbed of romanticism and nationalism, which informed their ideology and way of thinking. In the foreword to the first edition of *Kinder-und Hausmärchen* from 1812 it becomes clear how strongly the Brothers Grimm romanticized their tales. Throughout the foreword they praise the tales' purity ("Innerlich geht durch diese Dichtungen dieselbe Reinheit, um derentwillen uns Kinder so wunderbar und selig erscheinen; [...]" (8)), simplicity and poeticism ("Weil diese Poesie dem einfachsten Leben so nah liegt, so sehen wir darin den Grund ihrer allgemeinen Verbreitung [...]" (11)) and strongly emphasize the tales' strictly oral roots ("Alles ist [...] nach mündlicher Überlieferung gesammelt [...]" (7)), whereby they stress that these tales are so pure and beautiful that they would not want to and simply would not be able to create them themselves. The tales are authentic and original because they are inconceivable:

> Kein Umstand ist hinzugedichtet oder verschönert und abgeändert worden, denn wir hätten uns gescheut, in sich selbst so reiche Sagen mit ihrer eigenen Analogie oder Reminiszenz zu vergrößern, sie sind unerfindlich. (13)

But as Harries points out, the Grimms' effort to preserve an ancient, oral storytelling tradition served primarily as a means to underpin their romantic ideology but was in reality only a fabricated truth:

> [The Grimms'] work is based on a nostalgic and futile quest to recover a past that never quite existed. [...] Though storytelling has undoubtedly existed for thousands of years, the Grimms had to imagine it in a certain way in order to ground their own collecting efforts. They had to posit a rupture or separation between literate and oral culture, between modern, self-conscious writing and older, supposedly natural, spontaneous storytelling or ballad singing. Their nostalgia for a vanishing or vanished culture – assumed to be simpler and more poetic than their own – still permeates most fairy-tale collecting and research." (23)

In short, what Harries stresses is that the Brothers Grimm should not be taken literally when they insist that their collection is purely an unbiased documentation of peasant story-telling but their collection must be read and understood

considering their intentions as writers within the Romantic and Naturalistic vein of the times. The Brothers' Grimm idealized view of oral story-telling among the simple folk functioned as a determining factor in the shape and style of the tales they preserved and reinvented for their collection of tales. They did not record or reproduce tales objectively but reinvented the whole genre to suit their needs and tastes.

The Brothers' Grimm reinventions of the tales, however, were highly successful and strongly shaped the future of the genre. The key elements of Grimmean fairy tales are still seen as the hallmarks of the fairy tale genre today. The below selection of the most prominent features and changes to the traditional tales by the Brothers Grimm show how our present-day notion of the genre conflates with that of the Grimms. All of these elements are still part of our notion of what constitutes a *real* and *authentic* fairy tale today.

(1) The Brothers Grimm imitated Perrault's succinct and compact form of story-telling.[7] Their tales were written in simple, straight-forward and, at times, naive language, which served to imitate the language of the lower rural classes and created a sense of orality within the tales. This imitation of orality and simplicity is also what gives the Brothers' Grimm tales their authentic and trustworthy quality.

(2) The Brothers Grimm steeped the tales in the ideology of their time and class and shaped the tales accordingly. They wrote from within a patriarchal and Protestant society and their ideologies and beliefs are strongly reflected in their tales. Women and men are assigned particular gender roles and industriousness, frugality, diligence, humility and religiousness among other values are emphasized and positively portrayed.[8]
(3) The Brothers Grimm sanitized their tales so as to make them more suitable for a younger audience. In fact, fairy tales had only begun to be considered as

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[7] Cf. In the foreword to the first edition of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* the Brothers Grimm emphasize their adoration for Perrault's simple and unadorned style (12).

[8] Cf. In *Why Fairy Tales Stick* Zipes mentions how the Grimms added Christian values and rid the tales of indecency as the trend towards fairy tales for children spread across Europe (85).

children's literature in the nineteenth century (*Stick* 86) and the Brothers Grimm's effort at removing all sexual (e.g. sexual relationships, pregnancy, incest) and corporal (e.g. fecal) references from the tales (which had previously not been uncommon in many tales) helped bring fairy tales into the nursery (*Stick* 85).[9]

According to Zipes these key elements contributed to the institutionalization of the fairy tale as a genre by the end of the 19th century ("Disney" 26). The only other major revolution in the aesthetics of the fairy-tale genre that happened after the Brothers Grimm is the appropriation of the genre for the motion picture by Walt Disney in the twentieth century ("Disney" 27). Although Walt Disney's fairy-tale versions include some considerable changes to their Grimmean forerunners that were particularly tailored to a twentieth-century American audience, Disney also retained many of the original Grimmean ideals presented in fairy tales.[10] The Protestant values injected into the Grimmean fairy tale closely reflect the Puritan values that shaped American culture and conflate in such national ideals as the American dream. Disney homes in on these ideals and weaves them into the fairy-tale plot. Disney also created his motion pictures for a young audience and, as Zipes points out, severely infantilizes and simplifies his plot and characters ("Disney" 33, 40). Most importantly, however, Disney reinforces the patriarchal gender roles of the Grimmean tales and arguably even strengthens these ideals ("Disney" 36-37).[11] The Disneyan fairy tales may represent another step in the development of the fairy-tale genre but they hardly replace their Grimmean precursors but only make them more delectable to a modern American audience.

In conclusion, considering the fairy tale as a product of historical development relativizes the fairy-tale genre and puts its efforts into perspective. The fairy tale as we know it today in mostly its Grimmean form does not come directly from the

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[9] Cf. In *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales* Maria Tatar also chronicles the Grimms' editorial efforts in relation to references to sex and violence (3-38).

[10] Cf. Zipes gives a list of the main changes to the genre by Walt Disney in "Breaking the Disney Spell" (39-40).

[11] Zipes uses the example of Disney's *Snow White* (1937) to show how Disney's view on women's roles is framed even more harshly by male discourse than the Grimmean version of the same tale.

mouths of the simple folk and does therefore not communicate to us some underlying universal truth of mankind. Quite the opposite is true: what the fairy tale communicates to us is the context in which these tales were created and this context is historically contingent and therefore relative. More than universal truths the fairy tale and the reverence for its rather stable and unshifting canon tells us something about our values and truths today. Quite often these values coincide with the values portrayed in the traditional tales. For women, of course, many of these traditional values are toxic. Therefore fairy tales received harsh criticism by feminist thinkers of the twentieth century and beyond.

1.2. FEMINIST FAIRY-TALE CRITICISM

So far, considering the history of the fairy tale as outlined in the previous chapter, women have played no role at the producing end in the formation of the fairy-tale as a genre and cultural institution. Men have dominated this genre for centuries and have shaped the fairy tale accordingly. Both Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm, the most influential raconteurs in the genre, have written their tales from within patriarchal ideologies and their fairy tales frequently attest to their gender biases.

The fact that male-told fairy tales, as we know them today, often contain stereotypical, one-dimensional and hackneyed portrayals of women has first begun to receive sustained critical attention by feminist thinkers from the mid-twentieth century onward, peaking with the rise of the Second Wave. As early as in *The Second Sex* (1949) Simone de Beauvoir uses female fairy-tale characters to illustrate the female stereotype, which she believes to be predominant in our society. She writes:

> Woman is Sleeping Beauty, Donkey Skin, Cinderella, Snow White, the one who receives and endures. In songs and tales, the young man sets off to seek the woman; he fights against dragons, he combats giants; she is locked up in a tower, a garden, a cave, chained to a rock, captive, put to sleep: she is waiting. *One day my prince will come . . . Someday he'll come along, the man I love . . .* The popular refrains breathe dreams of patience and hope in her.

> The supreme necessity for woman is to charm a masculine heart; […]. (305)

De Beauvoir compares women's roles in society to those assigned to them in fairy tales. Women are passive and waiting objects, whose goal it is to be rescued and loved by a man. Men, in contrast, are active agents, who go out into the world to seek adventure.

Later feminist critics of the Second Wave have homed in on the very same predicaments fairy tales present to women according to de Beauvoir. These feminist thinkers believed that fairy tales perpetuate patriarchal myths by instilling harmful stereotypes into the minds of young boys and girls through the consumption of these tales. They insisted that to liberate women from the restrictive roles assigned to them in patriarchal society these myths – communicated through the fairy tale – had to be broken down.

In the feminist classic *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978) Mary Daly writes that fairy tales are "particularly gruesome examples" of "chilling evidence of mind-control through dismembering myth" and gives the story of „Cinderella" as an example of how women are mind-controlled and conditioned through the fairy tale (90). Marcia Lieberman in her influential essay "'Some Day My Prince Will Come': Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale" (1972) argued in a similar way stating that fairy tales "have been made repositories of the dreams, hopes and fantasies of generations of girls" (385). She claims that fairy tales present a set of limited female stereotypes to women, which have an effect upon the formation of women's identities and their behavior within society. Lieberman believes that fairy tales are harmful to women because women may form their "psycho-sexual self-concepts" upon the tales they are fed in childhood (385).

In "Feminism and Fairy Tales" (1979) Karen E. Rowe also focuses on the effect of the fairy tale on the socialization process of women. She argues that fairy tales teach women how to behave within patriarchal norms and therefore hamper women's development away from their subordinate position in patriarchal society.

She writes:

> [S]ubconsciously women may transfer from fairy tale into real life cultural norms which exalt passivity, dependency, and self-sacrifice as a female's cardinal virtues. In short, fairy tales perpetuate the patriarchal *status quo* by making female subordination seem a romantically desirable, indeed an inescapable fate." ("Feminism" 237)

Rowe recognizes how the consumption and perpetuation of fairy tales leads to an impasse in the development of female consciousness rather than presenting viable solutions to her problems.[12] Through the fairy tale women are led to believe that certain female virtues are desirable and they then transfer these virtues into their own lives.

This type of feminist criticism of fairy tales focuses largely on the relationship of socialization and gender through the consumption of fairy tales. These critics move away from a universal view of fairy tales to one that recognizes gender as difference. All these critics, as Donald Haase states, "encouraged a self-conscious, critical engagement with the classical tales as a means to liberate women to imagine and construct new identities" (7). However, Haase also notes that many of these critics "utilized [fairy tales] simply as evidence to demonstrate the sociocultural myths and mechanism that oppress women" but eventually fail to analyze the tales in more detail (3). Their criticism therefore often remains largely superficial and generalized.

A more detailed analysis of individual tales is provided by critics who focused on literary and/or historical details of specific tales and analyzed these in context. Most heavily attacked were the Grimmean tales since these are some of the most influential and widely known tales on both sides of the Atlantic. Feminist critics of the Second Wave took a closer look at the gender roles represented in fairy tales and began to be concerned with issues such as voice and voicelessness, active and passive agents, mother-daughter relationships, sex and violence, object and subject

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[12] This view is completely contrary to Bettelheim's position on the problem-solving functions of the fairy tale, see ch. 1.1.

positions and the model of marriage as the one and only achievement for women. In *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar provide a detailed feminist and heavily postmodern analysis of “Little Snow-White“” (*KHM* 53)[13] by the Brothers Grimm, in which they take a close look at the female roles and relationships within the tale (36-44). Another example is Maria Tatar’s book-length study *The Hard Facts of the Grimms’ Fairy Tales*, which examines the topics of sex and violence in the Grimm stories.

The problem with feminist approaches that criticize the fairy-tale genre as a whole or specific, popular tales in more detail is that they base their criticism on the most canonized of the tales and thus fail to question the sovereignty of these types of tales as the sole representative for their genre. Instead they accept that the classic tales we know today are synonymous with the genre. These critics’ acceptance of the current fairy-tale canon shows how dominant and ingrained it is in our culture. Our reverence of the current fairy-tale canon reveals a patriarchal culture which allows these tales to thrive and have an effect upon our understanding of gender roles.

Since the inception of the fairy-tale genre there has always been one model or type of fairy tale which has been considered the more appropriate or superior. This type of tale is the one introduced by Charles Perrault, then popularized by the Grimms and later adopted by a whole host of celebrated fairy-tale writers and collectors, like Andrew Lang or Hans Christian Andersen. These types of tales have been included in fairy-tale canons from the very beginning while all other tales which did not subscribe to the fairy-tale traditions and styles carved out by these early writers have been marginalized and eventually forgotten. Feminist critics who use the canonical tales as a basis for their criticism of the genre may be said to

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[13] For easy reference tales by the Brothers Grimm throughout this thesis are cited with *KHM* (*Kinder- und Hausmärchen*) and a number referring to the sequence in which they appear in the collection. This is a common citation format for Grimms’ tales; hence *KHM* 53 is the 53rd tale in their collection. Unless otherwise noted all German citations refer to the “Ausgabe letzter Hand” from 1857 edited by Hans Rölleke and published by Reclam in 1980. The English titles are consistent with Margaret Hunt’s translation from 1884.

follow the wrong course. The crux of the problem lies not in the genre itself but in patriarchal canon formation.

Feminists have criticized male-biased canon formation in all realms of literature, proposing that female writers have always existed but were eradicated from the canon because they did not suit patriarchal cultural values. For years feminists have striven to uncover forgotten literary texts and to put them back into the forefront of literary canons. A similar approach has been taken by feminist critics who argue that the fairy-tale model as epitomized by the Grimms is by no means the only fairy-tale model available but that for centuries women (and men) have written a variety of fairy tales in all forms and styles but that only one model survived due to a patriarchal preference in canon formation. This process of canon formation is obviously not as simple as if one person were striking out unfit tales from a list but a trend, in which slowly over time certain tales were removed from the canon and eventually completely forgotten.

Elizabeth Harries is one such critic who focuses on fairy-tale canon formation and reminds us that fairy tales have existed in all shapes and forms for a long time. In her book *Twice upon a Time* (2001) she uncovers the forgotten history of female fairy-tale writers. Her criticism is therefore not based on examining the contents of popular, traditional tales but on explaining how and why women-penned tales are not part of today's canon. As she explains, in late seventeenth century France, at the same time as Perrault was writing his *Histoires ou contes du temps passé,* a large number of female so-called *conteuses* visited the French salons and participated in the shared tale-telling and writing of the upper class (23). In fact, what is today considered the very first known fairy tale "L'île de la felicité" was written by a woman - by Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy - (Harries 23) and more than two thirds of all fairy tales written and produced in the 1690s were penned by women (Harries 21). These tales were highly popular in their time and included in collections throughout the eighteenth century (Harries 26). However, as early as the mid-nineteenth century the only known fairy-tale writer of that time was Charles Perrault (Harries 21) — a fact that remains true to this day. The female tales were rarely published and anthologized after the French revolution, stopped

being circulated, and were not used as literary models for later fairy-tale writers (Harries 26).

Instead tales by female writers were criticized by the male establishment of writers and critics from their very inception (Harries ch. 1, II). This bias against fairy tales penned by women was still kept alive when the Grimms were writing their own versions in the early nineteenth century. In the foreword to the first edition of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, the Grimms refer to the writers Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy and Henriette-Julie de Murat, as Perrault's second-rate imitators (12). Clearly this is not so, as both d'Aulnoy and Murat were progenitors of the genre penning their tales before or concurrently as Perrault penned his. The reason the Grimms rejected the fairy tales by the French *conteuses* is because they believed that their style of fairy tale writing was inferior to Perrault's (Grimm 12).

The *conteuses* typically wrote heavily adorned tales with a lot of detail and fanciful language. Their tales were usually rather long and often digressive, containing several intertwined plot lines. The *conteuses* always embedded their tales into a wider narrative structure, or an introductory dialog or frame, which set the scene of the tale; or they embedded one tale within another, or several smaller tales along a main frame tale (Harries 106-107).

Harries refers to the type of tales mainly written by the *conteuses* as "the complex tale". In contrast, she calls the Perraultian and Grimmean fairy-tale model "the compact tale" (16). Where the complex tale can often be long and elaborate, the compact tale is poignant and simple in style and language (12). Where the complex tale tries to look at the other side of the story and often features frequent use of self-reference, the compact tale gives the impression as if the tales stemmed directly from the mouths of the peasant folk using everyman's third person (16). But Harries goes even further with her distinction between these two tale types, suggesting that the complex tale, as opposed to the compact tale, even has a subversive and perhaps revisionary quality:

> "Compact" tales are usually presented as foundational or original, literally

> as stories that tell us of origins, as stories that do not seem to depend on other stories but come to us as unmediated expressions of the folk and its desires. Their carefully constructed simplicity works as an implicit guarantee of their traditional and authentic status. "Complex" tales, on the other hand, work to reveal stories behind other stories, the unvoiced possibilities that tell a different tale. They are determinedly and openly "intertextual" and "stereophonic" [...]. (17)

Both tale types represent different kinds of story-telling of which only one style has survived as the appropriate mode for fairy-tale telling and that is the compact tale. The Grimms strongly rejected the *conteuses*' style because they thought that their adorned and elaborated tales corrupted the language of the pure and simple folk. Instead they praised Perrault's tales for their simplicity, authenticity, and truthfulness (Grimm 12). However, as we have seen, neither the *conteuses*' model nor the Grimmean model is the more authentic or truthful fairy tale. Both types of tale-tellers wanted to create tales that suited their tastes and vision of what constitutes a good fairy tale. The Grimms may have pretended that their model was the more authentic but their model was just as fabricated as that of the *conteuse*s. As Harries strongly points out, there is no way of telling which tale type or tales are more authentic as all tales are based on oral versions to which we have absolutely no access. She writes:

> We need to begin by acknowledging that all fairy tales have a history, that they are anything but ageless or timeless. Though they may have roots in oral narratives, all the stories we now call fairy tales have been written and rewritten, printed and reprinted over centuries. Some versions of the tales are simpler and more familiar to us than others, and therefore may seem more authentic, but we have no access to any original versions or urtexts. Rather, all we have are versions of versions, narratives spun and respun for hundreds of years. (3-4)

Harries, along with many other scholars,[14] proposes an inclusion of forgotten fairy tales, like those by the *conteuses*, into our canon to widen our understanding of fairy tales. This approach seems more fruitful to me than a mere criticism of the most canonized tales because it puts the Grimmean tales in perspective, pushing

[14] Zipes, for example, also stresses the importance of widening the fairy-tale canon to include a variety of tales in the fairy-tale mode and fosters the dissemination of different fairy tales through the publication of his fairy-tale anthologies and in his research.

them off their pedestal as the sole proprietors of the right tale. More importantly, however, looking at the fairy tale from Harries' point of view opens the canon up to experimentation. If we see the Grimmean model as the only true and authentic model of the fairy tale all other tales written in the fairy-tale mode appear as mere second-rate copies with no legitimation in the canon. However, knowing that the fairy tale is a genre which precisely thrives and lives off of rewriting opens the genre up to a world of possibilities, in which the Grimmean model is only one of many, just as legitimate as any other tales. The Grimms lose their offensive patriarchal dominance over the genre (as criticized by de Beauvoir et al.) and what seems truly offensive is not their tales but the petrification of their tales by a patriarchally dominated society to this day. This realization eventually led to a whole-sale attack on the fairy-tale canon and spurred feminists on to create alternative canons.

1.3. REWRITING THE FAIRY-TALE GENRE

Understanding the fairy-tale canon as a shape-shifting and fluid process in which no *one* fairy-tale style or mode takes precedence over another allows for a host of different versions to be incorporated into the canon. With this understanding women can legitimately enter the fairy-tale canon. Many feminist writers and critics of the Second Wave have worked at diversifying the fairy-tale canon to include a more positive and varied view on women and gender relations in fairy tales.

Some critics, writers and collectors of fairy tales have worked towards publicizing lesser known fairy tales which show a diversity of female roles and relationships. Fairy tales of all types and kinds have been written for many centuries, however, only some have made it into our present-day canon. In trying to raise awareness of less popular, but nonetheless relevant, tales feminists have put together a range of anthologies to showcase fairy tales with strong female figures and relationships. Examples of such anthologies are the collections of fairy tales edited by Angela Carter: *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales* (1990) and *The Second Virago Book of Fairy*

Tales (1992). These anthologies are collections of lesser known tales from around the world in which female heroines are center stage in every story. Many more similar anthologies were collected in the second half of the last century both for children and adults, like *Womenfolk and Fairy Tales* (1975) by Rosemary Minard or *Clever Gretchen and Other Forgotten Folktales* (1980), which contains rewritten tales by Alison Lurie. What all these feminist anthologies have in common is that they try to rectify the hackneyed and one-dimensional portrayals of women in the classic canonical tales and show that a diversity of tales and gender representations within fairy tales have always existed.

Another approach feminists have taken to make fairy tales more acceptable to and inclusive of women is to either write entirely new tales or to rewrite existing tales. Generally these two approaches are listed as two distinctive ways of dealing with the existing canon. However, I find it difficult to distinguish clearly between what a new tale and what a rewritten tale is since the fairy-tale genre itself is characterized by intertextuality and self-reflexivity. Commonly a tale such as "The Princess Who Stood On Her Own Two Feet" (1982) by Jeanne Desy about a self-reliant and independent princess is considered a new tale, because it is not based on an existing story. However, the tale nevertheless begins with "A long time ago in a kingdom by the sea there lived a princess […]" (39) and is filled with typical fairy-tale tropes such as wizards and princes, kings and queens and the quest for a suitable prince. In this sense "The Princess Who Stood On Her Own Two Feet" is as much a rewriting as perhaps Francesca Lia Block's "Wolf" (2000) ", which features no royalty but a modern-day girl who runs away from her abusive stepfather in L.A. to her grandmother's house in the desert. Clearly, Block references "Little Red Riding Hood" only without the typical fairy-tale tropes with which Desy's story is replete. Therefore I find the distinction between retellings and new tales both vague and pointless. A much better way of categorizing new/retold tales that have emerged in the fairy-tale mode is to distinguish between tales that challenge and upset previous forms and those which simply regurgitate what has already been said in a different format but nonetheless state the exact same. The former has a revisionist and subversive quality while the latter is conservative and unprogressive. In this sense both Desy's and Block's tales would qualify as

subversive tales and thus fall into the same category of tales.

The process of either writing new tales or rewriting tales, or writing subversive or conservative tales is not new. This process cannot possibly be new since rewriting is at the very heart of the fairy-tale genre itself. Even the Grimmean tales are an act of rewriting, since the tales they recorded were not new but were often taken from older sources and only rewritten to suit the tastes and needs of their times. Both Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm include a version of, for example, "Little Red Riding Hood", "Cinderella" or "Sleeping Beauty" in their collections. On the perhaps more subversive end of the spectrum, examples would include the many fairy tales that were written in the Victorian period in England. These tales written by both men and women at the time were often written with the purpose of mocking and questioning Enlightenment and Puritan thinking. Examples of such tales are Oscar Wilde's fairy tales, such as "The Happy Prince" or "The Selfish Giant" among many.

Each generation seems to bring forth a new group of writers interested in using the fairy tale to upset dominant ideology by reversing, questioning or contradicting existing tales. During the Second Wave feminist thinkers were this new group of writers of their generation who found the ideas and ideologies presented in and disseminated through the fairy tale repulsive and offensive to the feminist cause. In fact, feminist thinkers were not only opposed to fairy tales but to any canonical and culturally relevant text, and specifically narrative, which gave a simplistic, one-dimensional and stereotypical portrayal of women as inferior to men. At the forefront of such critical rewritings were rewritings of mythology. As Rachel DuPlessis points out myths hold "a special status" in our society as "institutions of cultural recruitment" (106). Myths are part of our cultural canon and are virtually and literally treated as sacred texts of humankind. This holds true both for the Graeco-Roman and Judeo-Christian myths, which are both highly valued in our society, but keep perpetuating an ideal of women which does not agree with much of feminist thinking. It is therefore not surprising that many feminist critics have a highly negative relationship to myths. Angela Carter calls myths "extraordinary lies designed to make people unfree" ("Notes" 38) - an opinion which is reflected in a

lot of feminist writing of the Second Wave.

The particular problem with myth is that myths are fundamental to an understanding of our society and often serve as a blueprint for the way we see ourselves within society. The famous mythologist Jaan Puhvel says the following about myths:

> In myth are expressed the thought patterns by which a group formulates self-cognition and self-realization, attains self-knowledge and self-confidence, explains its own source and being and that of its surroundings, and sometimes tries to chart its destinies. [...] Myth operates by bringing a sacred (and hence essentially and paradoxically "timeless") past to bear preemptively on the present and inferentially on the future [...]. (2)

This statement holds true for both Graeco-Roman, Judeo-Christian, or in fact any other myth our society draws its meaning from. However, if we base our self-understanding on existing mythologies women will be eternally excluded from both source and destiny of these myths. Another problem with mythology Puhvel addresses is that mythology in order to be effective has to naturalize history. Roland Barthes in his study on myths has also analyzed the peculiar status of myth in our culture and recognizes that myth is not an eternal truth but a historical product. Paradoxically, however, the very essence of myth is that it must resist and evaporate history to create meaning. Myth, he writes, "has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification and making contingency appear eternal" (142). Myth fakes the natural and eternal and always represents itself as something that has existed forever in a universal, timeless vacuum. Myth is what "transforms history into nature" (129) and thus makes the concepts embodied in myths (for example, gender relations) seem natural. Mythology pretends to represent "mankind" in its purest and most natural form, when in reality, its position as myth in our culture is historically contingent.

In postmodernist terms, myth as identified by Puhvel and Barthes can be aligned with the concept of metanarratives (or grand récites) by Jean-François Lyotard. A metanarrative can be understood as a narrative which aims to give an all-encompassing, universal and totalizing explanation of historical knowledge or

experience. Therefore the idea of a metanarrative is very similar to Barthes's understanding of myth since both are transhistorical. Lyotard suggested that to circumvent metanarratives — a necessity in the postmodern age which is identifiable by its "incredulity towards metanarratives" (Lyotard xxiv) — small and localized narratives (or petit récites) should replace metanarratives. A small and localized narrative allows for a multiplicity of viewpoints and ideologies which can exist alongside each other instead of being consumed by a totalizing metanarrative. To postmodern feminists the ideology of gender is viewed as a metanarrative and was sought to be deconstructed. Only by deconstructing the ideologies behind gender can they be proven wrong and replaced by alternative views and understandings of gender.

Fairy tales and the transhistorical, mythological values and belief structures they aim to express squarely fit into the idea of metanarratives. Fairy tales contain a whole host of gender ideologies which are offensive to and inconsistent with postmodern feminist thinking. As a reaction to the fairy tale as metanarrative many feminists created their own versions of fairy tales. These versions were aimed at exposing the patriarchal gender ideologies inherent in the traditional fairy tales. These versions can be seen as small and localized narratives that readily replace the existing metanarrative. These rewritings often show completely different ideas of gender and put history back into the fairy tale. Rewritings by women prove that other types of fairy tales can be equally valid and a part of the genre.

This trend of rewriting either fairy tales or mythological texts literally boomed among feminist writers of the Second Wave. Countless novels, short stories, and above all poetry, have been written since the Second Wave by feminist writers in an effort to rewrite and remold our cultural understanding of gender in fairy tales. The texts are too numerous to list a representative selection of titles but some anthologies and bibliographies are worth mentioning in this context. The anthology *Don't Bet On the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England* (1986) edited by Jack Zipes is a collection of rewritten feminist tales from the 1970s and 1980s and represents a good selection of the

type of tales women were writing during the Second Wave. Zipes's collection *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood* (1983) also includes a selection of contemporary feminist rewritings and so does the more recent *Spells of Enchantment: The Wondrous Fairy Tales of Western Culture* (1991). Another extensive bibliography of rewritings of fairy tales can be found on the excellently researched and maintained website *SurLaLune Fairy Tales* by Heidi Anne Heiner.[15]

Despite this apparent abundance of rewritten tales, the task taken on by women to rewrite so-called sacred texts of our culture is not as straightforward and uncomplicated as the plethora of texts might suggest. As Rachel DuPlessis points out in the following quotation to rewrite myth as a woman is a very difficult task because myth is considered both "powerful and primary" in our culture:

> When a woman writer chooses myth as her subject, she is faced with material that is indifferent or, more often, actively hostile to historical considerations of gender, claiming as it does universal, humanistic, natural, or even archetypal status. To face myth as a woman writer is, putting things at their most extreme, to stand at the impact point of a strong system of interpretation masked as representation, and to rehearse one's own colonization or "iconization" through the materials one's culture considers powerful and primary. (106)

The idea that women "stand at the impact point" or must fight against a powerful system with a certain amount of rage or anger is reflected in a lot of literature on women rewriting canonical texts. Nancy Walker refers to women rewriting myths and fairy tales as "[a]cts of disobedience" (1) and according to Alicia Ostriker women rewriting mythology perform "an enactment of feminist antiauthoritarianism" (87). In her essay "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking" (1982) Ostriker also evokes a Promethean image of women when she borrows the phrase "thieves of language" (or *voleuses de langue*) from Claudine Herrmann to describe what women have to do in order to redefine myth for themselves (69): steal and adapt language to their own needs. She recognizes that this task is difficult for women because myth is "an inhospitable terrain for women writers" (71) since it has largely been colonized by men for

[15] http://www.surlalunefairytales.com/

centuries. However, she recognizes a distinctive trend among women writers in the sixties and seventies for rewriting myths and cites both Anne Sexton and Olga Broumas (although not Sara Henderson Hay) as representatives of this trend. The core of the particular idea of "revisionist mythmaking" put forth by Ostriker "lies in the challenge to and correction of gender stereotypes embodied in myth" (73). Ostriker's evaluation and interpretation of "revisionist mythmaking" clearly shows that a trend of rewriting existed.

However, the most important characteristic of "revisionist mythmaking" or simply rewritten tales is recognized by most critics as "the possibility of cultural transformation" (Walker 6). The petrification of fairy tales naturally leads to an impasse in its development. A rewriting of fairy tales, however, allows the genre to grow with the times and to remain a genre filled with fantasy and Utopian visions for the future. For women the possibility of transformation, which can bring about a shift in gender ideologies, is, as Zipes says, "a political act", which contains "the hope that future generations will not adapt the atavistic forms and ideas found in traditional tales, but that they will arrange their lives in response to non-sexist social conditions" (”Introduction” 33). In his view the words of famous feminist writer and activist Adrienne Rich are echoed when she wrote about the importance of "re-vision" for women in 1971:

> "Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part of our refusal of self-destructiveness of male-dominated society." (35)

1.4. CONCLUSION

Fairy tales are a historical product. The reason we read, enjoy and pass on the tales of Perrault, Grimm and other well-known writers and collectors of traditional tales is not because these tales are naturally better and more fairy-tale-like than

other tales that have existed over time but because these tales' literary reception was most successful. The tales have been written in a particular style and mode and have come down to us unaltered because of a set of socio-historical trends and developments which have favored the so-called "compact" tale type over other tale types.

Women have always been a part of the history of the fairy tale. Only their influence on the genre and tales they have written have not been as widely recognized and disseminated as the more popular and traditional tales of Perrault, Grimm, et al. The reason for this is not that women's fairy tales are inferior to the traditional tales but that societal tastes and mores have preferred the traditional tales. These tastes have been governed, as feminists claim, by a patriarchal power structure which does not see fault in the depiction of stereotypical and one-dimensional gender roles in fairy tales but welcomes them.

As a result, women have reacted in protest against the establishment of the "right" fairy tale by writing their own fairy tales. These fairy tales largely focus on changing gender stereotypes and on presenting a more varied view of female roles which are more in tune with late twentieth-century ideas on gender. Ultimately these tales can have an effect on the way we see gender and can make cultural change possible.

However, as the example of the *conteuses*' tales shows women writing fairy tales is not a new trend. Women have been writing their own tales for centuries and have always been a part of the fairy-tale genre. The feminist writers of the Second Wave are therefore simply a continuation of a greater female fairy-tale lineage. Their tales do not stand on their own but are part of a complex female fairy-tale history.

Sara Henderson Hay, Anne Sexton and Olga Broumas are also part of this female fairy-tale lineage. By writing poems in the fairy-tale mode they have inscribed themselves into the female history of the genre. Their poems do not adhere to the traditional standards of form and content of typical fairy tales but reinvent and reinterpret the genre for the twentieth century and beyond. Their poems are not

anomalies and should not be treated as such because they are part of a long-standing tradition, which began with the *conteuses* and is still continuing to this day.

The close temporal proximity of the three poetry collections published by Hay, Sexton and Broumas (1963, 1971 and 1977, respectively) also creates a female fairy-tale poetry lineage in and of itself. As much as the history of the female fairy tale has been influenced by socio-cultural trends, so has the poetry of Hay, Sexton and Broumas been influenced by the three generations in which they have come to poetry. These trends and influences can be seen in their poems and form an equally important part of this female fairy-tale lineage.

2. SARA HENDERSON HAY – *STORY HOUR*

Sara Henderson Hay is the first in the line of three female poets who have used fairy tales as a central theme of their poetry collections in mid- to late twentieth-century America. Hay's collection of thirty poems was published in 1963 and aptly entitled *Story Hour*. This collection is relatively unknown today although its poems are arguably as vibrant and relevant today as in 1963.

In the following chapters I will show how Hay uses fairy tales to spin her own poetry in her collection *Story Hour*. After a short introduction to this relatively unknown poet, which will place her poetry and life as a poet in context, I will focus on Hay's poetic method in *Story Hour*. As will become obvious Hay is a very traditional poet in her use of classical forms of poetry, which makes her poetry seem conservative at first. However, below the surface Hay is not as conservative and traditional as it may seem. Following this discussion on Hay's poetic method is an analysis of her depiction of female roles and women's relationships in *Story Hour*. Hay is outspoken about women's roles and widely comments on marriage, mother-daughter relationships, old age, and romantic relationships. She turns many of these themes upside down and uses traditional tales as a contrast to her views. In the conclusion I will sum up Hay's poetic legacy in the tradition of female writers who have used fairy tales as a main spring board for their inspiration and rewritings.

2.1. SARA HENDERSON HAY: THE NEW WOMAN

Sara Henderson Hay is an American poet, whose popularity peaked at mid-century. Hay was born on 13 November 1906 into an affluent family with strong ties in the societal circles of Pittsburgh.[16] She received a good education and showed an early

[16] There are very few biographical sources available on Hay. Except for the occasional biographical stump or obituary in print and online reference materials or newspapers, Hay's life has been surveyed in more detail by Agnes Dodds Kinard in a biographical memoir published together with a

interest in reading and writing. From her own papers, now housed at the Hunt Library at Carnegie Mellon University[17] in Anniston, Alabama, it becomes obvious that Hay was well-educated from an early age on:

> Since my early childhood, the written word, in books, has always had for me an utter magic [...] Long before I could read, my mother read to me, mostly poetry, the sonorous rhythms of Evangeline, the lovely and now out of fashion lines of Tennyson and Swinburne, even Shakespeare . . . . Poetry was my first love . . . And when I could read myself . . . the Carnegie Library (in Anniston) was where I spent a charmed time, heading to it when school was out, and on Saturday mornings standing bemused, trying to choose which of all the wealth of high adventure, fantasy, romance and exotic far away places and lives I could take home with me . . . . [...]. (qtd. in Kinard 2)

Hay's early familiarity with classical poetry and her avid interest in reading is evidence for her privileged background. Hay flourished in school from an early age, publishing her first poetry at the age of ten. She attended high school in Anniston, Alabama, and later college, first at Brenau College in Georgia before transferring to Columbia University. She continued writing poetry throughout her school and college years and was published regularly in local periodicals as well as in college magazines. By the age of twenty-five Hay's poetry had already been included in four anthologies and two years later her first collection of 66 poems appeared. After graduation from Columbia University in 1929 Hay took up employment. She worked as a secretary for a publishing company, was a freelance proof-reader and editor, and wrote poetry reviews for several magazines. By that time Hay was twenty-eight, a working woman, still unmarried and a successful published poet. Only a generation earlier - and indeed also a generation later - Sara Henderson Hay's life and career would have been viewed as an anomaly. Hay, however, was coming of age during the inter-war years, an era in which women had gained hitherto unparalleled freedom and rights. The status of women in society had been changing rapidly since the beginning of the century. It was during Hay's lifetime

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selection of Hay's poetry as *Seasons of the Heart* in 1989. All biographical information on Hay, except where otherwise noted, has been taken from this publication.

[17] See the following link from Carnegie Mellon University Libraries for information on the Sara Henderson Hay Collection:

https://libwebspace.library.cmu.edu:4430/specialcollections/shhay.html.

that women attained the right to vote, college education became more accessible to women than ever before, career opportunities for women expanded beyond the domestic services in the home, and fewer women considered a life in domesticity.[18] The so-called New Woman was the product of these times. As Jean V. Matthews writes "[a]s a type, the New Woman was young, well educated, probably a college graduate, independent of spirit, highly competent, and physically strong and fearless" (13). In this light Hay does not appear as an anomaly but as a representative of the New Woman whom this era had brought forth.

As a poet Hay's popularity peaked in the 1940s and 1950s. By that time she had published several volumes of poetry and was well respected by the literary establishment. Her poetry was widely published and reviewed in eminent magazines such as *The New York Herald Tribune*, the *New Yorker* and *Saturday Review* (Smith 45). As Smith points out, Hay was a highly visible poet in mid-century, "who was well known and read seriously by reviewers" (46). Her public prominence peaked with the publication of her fifth volume of poetry *Story Hour* in 1963. It received wide publicity, was accompanied by a televised interview and many of the poems were included in anthologies and pedagogical material in schools (Kinard 25). *Story Hour* was reprinted in a new edition in 1982, which includes eleven more previously unpublished poems. For these new poems Hay largely drew her inspiration from nursery rhymes. Soon after the reprint the popularity of her work must have declined since Hay is largely unknown today and *Story Hour* forgotten.

Hay continued to write and publish poetry throughout her life, extending over five decades and producing six volumes of poetry until her death on 7 July 1987.

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[18] Matthews traces the development of the New Woman and changing attitudes to the position of women society in*The Rise of the New Woman: The Women's Movement in America, 1875-1930*.

2.2. POETIC METHOD: CONSERVATISM UNVEILED

In comparison to many of Hay's contemporaries, Hay was a very conservative poet in form and style. This is also true for her collection *Story Hour*. However, as I will show, her poetic form may seem conservative and old-fashioned on the surface but when looking beyond form Hay appears to be a very witty, ironic and daring poet. She is critical and mocking and openly pokes fun at traditional tales and society's mores and values. She debunks the traditional tales and reveals their biases while at the same time revealing her own political and moral stance.

The conservatism of Hay's poetry manifests itself primarily in her adherence to formal structures of poetry. All of Hay's poems in *Story Hour* are sonnets and therefore follow a regulated structure of poetic expression. None of Hay's poetry, be it in *Story Hour* or in any other of her collections, is written in free verse, although many of her contemporaries availed themselves of this type of verse.

Hay was outspoken about her dislike for the type of free verse, or "the obscurist school of poetry", her generation of writers produced (qtd. in Kinard 22-23). In a letter to an aspiring poet, she commented on her misgivings about poets who "abandon a natural simplicity for a contrived complexity":

> I've always felt it unfair for a poem to appear, as they sometimes do today, to be merely the jotted down notes, the unorganized stuff which the poet hasn't taken the time or trouble to sort out, but depended on the reader to draw his own conclusions as to the meaning. This kind of improvisation is present in a great deal of contemporary art-music, painting, sculpture, as well as in poetry. (qtd. in Kinard 28)

Ellen McGrath Smith, who wrote an extremely insightful essay for *Sagetrieb* in 2006 on Sara Henderson Hay being a predecessor for Anne Sexton's *Transformations,* points out Hay's conservative style but sees more than only a dislike for free verse as a reason for Hay's abandonment of free verse in favor of formal poetic structure. She claims that Hay's "use of form is a generational marker that reveals her literary identifications and influences" because Hay simply used "the form most available at the time" (48). Smith hereby refers to the form most

available for *women* at the time. Hay's generation of writers was still marked by a lack of female writers available as role models to other female writers. At mid-century, when Hay had reached her apex as a writer, women's poetry had still not been able to negotiate its way into the center of critical attention but much of women's writing was instead "relegated to the 'underground'" (Smith 44). Much of poetry and consequently its critical reception was formed by male writers. The space carved out for women writers was a small and dangerous place in which their poetry was often judged as sentimental and lacking male thrust. In order to be able to write poetry women attempted to mimic male styles of writing in order to eschew derogatory labeling by the critical community.

In this connection Smith cites Adrienne Rich on her experience of coming of age as a woman writer during the 1950s (48). Rich claims that her own style was first influenced by male poets and that "in those years formalism was part of the strategy — like asbestos gloves, it allowed me to handle materials I couldn't pick up barehanded" ("Re-Vision" 39-41). Similarly, formalism may have been a way for Hay to be recognized and accepted as a poet by the male critical establishment of the time.

Hay's poetry was indeed very popular at mid-century and regularly published in renowned periodicals (Smith 45). Her conservative, simple and unpretentious style may have been her very key to recognition and success as a woman poet. A contemporary reviewer of *Story Hour* called her sonnets "delightful" (Spector 38) and in the foreword to the second edition Miller Williams believes that "the choice of the sonnet for the telling of [stories]" is "genius" because "[t]hese sonnets come across as so natural, so relaxed, simply so very good that the poet seems almost to have thought in the form" (xi).

The sonnet form for the telling of fairy tales is indeed not an easy one. Sonnets are characterized by their brevity and condensation of poetic expression. Sonnets are by nature a lyrical form of poetry and not suited for narrative exposition. Fairy tales, however, are narratives. The sonnet form only allows Hay a small and dense frame of fourteen lines for her revisions. This frame is further confined by a

regular meter and line length.

The limited space allowed for Hay's revisions does not make it possible for her to retell entire tales from beginning to end. Hay solves this problem by narrowing her focus down to a small detail of a tale and uses this to base her revision on. Hay often chooses to focus her attention on aspects that have remained uncommented in the traditional tale.

These aspects are often of a psychological nature and highlight conflicts between characters which have never before been addressed. Her poem "One of the Seven Has Somewhat to Say"" is based on the tale "Snow White"" and focuses on the conflict between the dwarfs and Snow White regarding her tidiness and cleanliness around the house. "Only Son" is inspired by the English tale "Tom Thumb" and homes in on a mother's love for her only son, who never grows up. In other poems Hay solves the problem of limited space by extending the tales beyond their original endings and presenting only her alternative ending. In the appropriately titled poem "Sequel". Hay writes beyond the ending of "Beauty and the Beast", focusing on the married couple's life. The poem "The Interview" also takes place after the fact as it features an interview with Cinderella's stepmother after Cinderella had married the prince. Other poems do not reference a particular fairy tale but are either a concoction of several fairy tales in one ("Photograph Album", "The Benefactors") or home in on fairy-tale stock figures, like "The Witch", "The Princess" or "The Fairy Godmother". In this sense Hay's fairy-tale rewritings are miniatures, in which she "strip[s] the tales down to some lost, eccentric, or obscured essential point" (Smith 53).

This "obscured essential point" is often the hinge on which Hay places her criticism of the tale in question. Hay is particularly concerned with the morals and ethics of the traditional tales and their effect on the child reader. A number of her poems directly express her critical stance on the nature of the fairy tale and its moral implications. Most notable in this connection is her poem "Story Hour". “Story Hour” is the opening poem both in the first edition of 1963 and in the 1982 edition.

Smith refers to "Story Hour" as a "metadiscursive" poem, which helps to "frame the collection and perform the function of influencing the reader's attitude toward the base-texts and the poetic revisions Hay presents" (57). Indeed "Story Hour" as the title poem is a central poem to the collection, as it discusses the implications of the consumption of fairy tales at large and therefore stands as a warning or manual to the reader for Hay's own collection of fairy tales. The poem itself is based on the English tale "Jack and the Beanstalk". It was originally published under the same title in an issue of the *New York Herald Tribune* in 1951. For a later publication in McCall's in 1959 it was renamed "Story Hour" (Smith 58).

In "Story Hour" the original tale "Jack and the Beanstalk" " serves only to open up a general discussion of fairy-tale themes. The poem is a sonnet in two stanzas. The first stanza begins with a condensed retelling of the ending of the traditional tale and is followed by the questioning voice of a child listener in line 4:

> He swung the axe, the toppling beanstalk fell.
> Hurrah, hurrah for Jack, the self-reliant.
> The townsfolk gathered round to wish him well.
> Was no one sorry for the murdered Giant?
> Did no one, as the news spread far and wide,
> Protest the means Jack took to gold and glory:
> Guile, trespass, robbery and homicide?
> It is not mentioned in the popular story. (1-8)

The child is inquisitive and scrutinizes the story it has just heard. It is concerned with the morality of the story and seems to feel sorry for the giant who has been murdered. It is doubtful about the potentially immoral means by which Jack has attained his success — "Guile, trespass, robbery and homicide?" (7) — and recognizes that something seems to jar with the traditional story and questions the happy ending related in lines 1-3. The second stanza of the sonnet continues with an adult's reply to the child's questioning remarks and squarely confronts the child with the sobering perspective of reality:

> Dear child, leave off such queries and suggestions,
> And let that gullible innocence prevail
> Which, in the Brothers Grimms' and our own time,
> Applauds the climber, and ignores the crime.

> How requisite to every fairy tale
> A round-eyed listener with no foolish questions. (9-14)

The adult advises the child not to ask any questions because naiveté and "gullible innocence" (10) are necessary to make sense of fairy tales and "our own time" (11). In both the means of success are immoral but nevertheless ignored. As Smith points out, "[w]hat is questioned in the book's framing poem is not simply the tale itself, but all narratives whose stability and survival require the suspension of critical reading" (59).

Hay returns to commentary on the nature of the genre of the fairy tale in several poems in her collection. In "The Formula" (first published in the 1982 edition of *Story Hour*) Hay debunks the simplicity and naiveté of the fairy-tale structure. She sums up the way of the fairy tale in one single stroke by pointing out that no matter how unfortunate you are, "if you follow the rules in everything, / And if you're kind" you will be successful (7-8). The formulaic and predictable pattern of fairy tales is mocked by Hay's indiscriminate list making of stereotypical fairy-tale plot elements in the poem:

> It isn't easy, being the ugly one,
> Or an orphan with the cruelest of stepmothers,
> Or a foundling, or the dull-witted youngest son
> Competing with eleven brilliant brothers. (1-4)

She strings the plot elements together with "or", suggesting their interchangeability and her use of superlatives ("cruelest" (2), "youngest" (3), "brilliant" (4)) highlights the exaggerated and unrealistic plot lines of fairy tales. Still, no matter what the situation, the fairy tale always makes success possible:

> You'll scale the slope that nobody else could climb
> And kill whatever giant disputes your way,
> And reach the impossible goal in record time,
> And win the bride or the groom, as the case may be. (9-12)

Again, events are strung together indiscriminately and "as the case may be" in line 12 underlines their interchangeability. The use of "and" at the beginning of each

line multiplies the extraordinary triumphs fairy tales allow for and creates a sense of excess and absurdity. Hay's mockery of predictable fairy-tale patterns comes to a climactic close in the final lines of the poem: “For this is the formula which never fails. / (At least, that's how it works in fairy tales.)” (13-14).

Here, Hay suggests that fairy tales have an underlying "formula" (13), which, again speaking in a superlative tone, "never fails" (13). In the last lines Hay inserts her judgment of this formula in brackets as if in a whisper, thereby suggesting that this formula does not apply to real life and needs to be taken with a grain of a salt, as she has shown in the poem herself through her constant tone of mockery.

Mockery, irony and humor are prominent and consistent elements of Hay's poems in *Story Hour*. Together with her use of contemporary and flippant language they serve as an antidote to Hay's conservative choice of poetic structure. As Smith notes, "Hay adopts a colloquial diction and syntax that render the High Renaissance courtly form more 'homely'" (53). This creates a contradiction between form and language, which ultimately makes her revisions modern and contemporary. Within this contradiction Hay humorously juggles the implications of the traditional tales against her modern interpretations, which create yet another frame of contradiction.

In her modern interpretations Hay also brings a realist's eye to the text. She firmly grounds her revisions in the everyday. Instead of looking for the numinous and exploring the magical sides of fairy tales, Hay views them from a more sobering perspective. She brings a quirky playfulness to her poems, which makes her poetry seem light-hearted. Reality, however, as Hay reminds us, is often more cruel than fairy tales could ever be.

Her poem "Syndicated Column“ is an excellent example of Hay's poetic method. The poem is at once sobering and frightening, humorous and serious. "Syndicated Column" is based on the story "Bluebeard“. The traditional tale has been rewritten

numerous times, most memorably by Charles Perrault.[19] The Brothers Grimm included their own version of this story in their collection *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, where it is called "Fitchers Vogel" (*KHM* 46).

This fairy tale is particularly gory and horrific and has none of the light-heartedness of other fairy tales. In this tale a young woman is married to a rich nobleman with a blue beard. As soon as they are married the husband, Bluebeard, leaves his newly-wed wife alone at home giving her reign of the house. He gives her a bunch of keys and allows her to explore every corner of the house, except for one room. The wife's curiosity, however, leads her to disobey her husband's orders and so she explores the hidden chamber. In it she finds the remains, the tortured corpses, of her husband's previous wives. The scene is terrifying and described in detail by Charles Perrault:

> She took then the little key, and opened it trembling; but could not at first see any thing plainly, because the windows were shut. After some moments she began to perceive that the floor was all covered over with clotted blood, in which were reflected the bodies of several dead women ranged against the walls: these were all the wives whom Blue Beard had married and murdered one after another. She was like to have died for fear, and the key, which she pulled out of the lock, fell out of her hand. ("Blue Beard" 39-40)

Upon the husband's return he notices that his wife had been to the forbidden chamber and wants to punish her by killing her. At the last moment she is rescued by her brothers.

The central theme of the story, according to Perrault, is woman's curiosity and a lack of obedience to her husband. Perrault tacks a moral in the form of a poem to the end of his tale which is intended to warn the reader of the charms of curiosity:

> O curiosity, thou mortal bane!
> Spite of thy charms, thou causest often pain
> And sore regret, of which we daily find
> A thousand instances attend mankind: ("Blue Beard" 45)

[19] Perrault published his version of "Bluebeard" entitled "La Barbe Bleue" in his collection *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* in 1697.

Perrault does not highlight or criticize Bluebeard's cruelty but his wife's curiosity which led to her downfall in the story. Hence the story of Bluebeard regurgitates the same ancient adage that women are curious by nature, which is harmful to mankind. Popular myths such as, for example, the Biblical myth of Adam and Eve in *Genesis* and the Greek myth *Eros and Psyche* focus on the same topic. It is therefore not surprising that "Bluebeard" is one of the most rewritten, reused and re-imagined fairy tales by women writers of the second half of the twentieth century. The story's suggested moral simply jars with feminist ideas of a woman's place in society. Prominent feminist writers as Angela Carter or Margaret Atwood have used this story to spin their own subversive versions in "The Bloody Chamber" and "Bluebeard's Egg" respectively.[20]

Hay's rewriting of "Bluebeard" is not as openly critical as some of the more straightforward feminist rewritings. At a first glance her rewriting might even be read as outright offensive to women, but more than anything her rewriting is highly ambiguous. Hay recasts the tale in the voice of an agony aunt who gives advice to a distressed wife who cannot cope with her husband's jealousy. The poem begins:

> Dear Worried: Your husband's actions aren't unique,
> His jealousy's a typical defense.
> He feels inadequate; in consequence,
> He broods. (1-4)

The agony aunt's advice makes the husband's behavior seem normal. He is not the harrowing monster of the original tale but on the contrary his "actions aren't unique" (1) and his jealousy is "typical" (2). There is nothing worrisome about their relationship. The agony aunt psychologizes the husband's behavior and thus explains his actions. Even his blue beard is no reason to be concerned about: "As for his growing a beard, and dyeing it blue, / Merely a bid for attention; nothing wrong with him." (9-10).

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[20] An excellent and comprehensive list of modern "Bluebeard" interpretations can be found on *SurLaLune Fairy Tales*: http://www.surlalunefairytales.com/bluebeard/themes.html.

Hay gives a perfectly good explanation for the blue beard. In the traditional fairy tale his blue beard is a natural, if magical, occurrence. Magic is not part of Hay's re-imagining of the tale; instead she applies reason and explains his beard through less numinous practices. His beard is simply a result of his growing and dyeing it, which in turn is "[m]erely a bid for attention" (10). The agony aunt assures the wife that there is no reason to worry. Hay seems to have sided with Perrault's suggested second moral of the tale:

> A very little share of common sense,
> And knowledge of the world, will soon evince
> That this a story is of time long pass'd;
> No husbands now such panic terrors cast;
> Nor weakly, with a vain despotic hand,
> Imperious, what's impossible, command: ("Blue Beard" 45)

Perrault bids his readers apply common sense and logic to this grim story. In modern times, according to Perrault, such a tyrannical husband no longer exists. Hay does exactly that in her re-interpretation of the story: she applies logic and a knowledge of the world through the voice of the agony aunt. She is convinced that the husband means no ill, but simply suggests the wife should cheer up her husband:

> I suggest
> You reassure him; work a little harder
> To build his ego, stimulate his ardor.
> Lose a few pounds, and try to look your best.
> ……………………………………………………………………
> Just be the girl he married; don't nag, don't pout.
> Cheer up. And let me know how things work out. (5-8, 13-14)

On the one hand Hay seems to bring a realist's eye to the story, suggesting as Perrault did, that no husband would be so cruel in modern times. On the other hand, it seems as if the agony aunt is not able to grasp the gravity of the situation, leading her "Dear Worried" (1) into certain death. The reader, knowing full well what fate awaits Bluebeard's wife, cannot ignore the irony and ambiguity of Hay's rewriting. This uncertainty of meaning is created through intertextuality with the

traditional tale, which lurks frighteningly between the lines. In this way Hay's rewriting is as sobering as it is ironic. The double entendre at work in this poem leaves once the wife and once the agony aunt, and by extension society's norms of which she speaks, as the guilty partner. It is up to the reader to decide which to choose.

By a change of perspective Hay throws a different light on a familiar tale in her rewriting of “Bluebeard”. The agony aunt is an outsider who is let into the bloody chambers of a marriage distraught by jealousy. In Hay's poem "Juvenile Court" the same method is at work. In this poem Hay changes perspective and applies logic instead of magic to make the traditional tale "Hansel and Gretel" appear in a different light. In this story Hansel and Gretel are not applauded for their quick wit and trickery to escape the witch's oven but are instead presented as two juvenile delinquents. The poem opens, presenting the scene of crime:

> Deep in the oven, where the two had shoved her,
> They found the Witch, burned to a crisp, of course,
> And when the police had decently removed her,
> They questioned the children, who showed no remorse. (1-4)

In presenting the ending of the story in the form of a crime scene, with the police present, the dark, foreboding forest and the witch's edible house are erased and brought down to real life. The children seem to be the cruel perpetrators in this case, not the witch, as the children "showed no remorse" (4), when questioned and further claimed that

> "She threatened us, " said Hansel, "with a kettle
> Of boiling water, just because I threw
> The cat into the well." cried little Gretel,
> "She fussed because I broke her broom in two,
>
> And said she'd lock up Hansel in a cage
> For drawing funny pictures on her fence ..." (5-10)

The witch is a victim of a violent crime, not an evil and cannibalistic seducer of children. The witch did not threaten to eat the kids but merely tried to punish them for their disobedient and disrespectful behavior. She only threatened the kids as a

result of their behavior, teaching them a lesson and appearing as the reasonable, if violent, adult. At the end of the story the kids are released to their parents "on probation" (14) because evidence was found "[t]he pair had acted under provocation" (13). What was once magical and foreboding in the Brothers Grimm is presented in Hay's words as a simple criminal case before the juvenile court. Magic, trickery and witchery are not words in Hay's vocabulary instead she deals in the realm of facts and reality, making the story one of evidence, probation and police intervention. And yet again the story appears ambiguous and it is difficult to ascertain the guilty party. Are the children merely juvenile delinquents or was the witch more cruel than believed. In Hay's version of the tale the story is judged by different standards, where magic and witchcraft have no say. Hers is a world firmly rooted in the social institutions that govern modern-day society.

Similarly to Smith's argument that Hay uses formal poetic expression to eschew stigma in a male-dominated writing culture I would argue that Hay's use of media, political and bureaucratic register is another way for her to legitimize her own writing and consequently her criticism of both major canonical texts and the social norms and values of her time. In a literary culture in which women's voice has little say and significance, the use of a standardized formal jargon can help mimic power and add the missing credibility. The language of public institutions permeates her entire collection, which is particularly noticeable in many of the titles of her poems: "Letter to the Town Council", "Dr. S — Advises a Worried Mother", "Local Boy Makes Good", "Message to the Vigilantes", "Our Town: Police Docket", "Death of H.D., a Prominent Citizen" or "The Interview" to name but a few. All of these poems take an official form and language used in a type of public institution, such as newspaper columns, letters to the editors, agony aunt columns, newspaper headlines, public announcements or obituaries.

Hay's poem "The Interview" is written as if it were an interview with Cinderella's stepmother published by a local newspaper before Cinderella won the title "Miss Glass Slipper of the Year" (2): "You're from the local press, and want to hear / About her early life? Young man, sit down." (4-5). "Dr. S — Advises a Worried Mother" and "Syndicated Column" are presented as agony aunt columns, both

beginning with a proper form of address: "Madame," (1) and "Dear Worried:" (1) respectively.

This type of letter format is also used in "Letter to the Town Council", which is based on the legend of the "Pied Piper of Hamelin". In this poem the owner of a pesticide supply shop writes a letter to the town council asking them to stop ridding the city of rats as this has an adverse effect on his own business. The poem begins:

> Dear Sirs: We understand a delegation
> Of irate citizens has made demands
> That you, the Council, place in expert hands
> Control of Hamelin's rodent population. (1-4)

The language is contemporary yet formal and imitates the style such official letters take. The poem begins with a proper address and continues in a formulaic language of a high register. The words "delegation" (1), "citizens" (2), "[c]ouncil" (3) and "population" (4) are all borrowed from the language of bureaucracy and public institutions. The humor of this poem arises from the contradiction of form and language as much as from its reference to the traditional tale set against a modern reinterpretation. The Pied Piper, the "expert hands" referred to in line 3, is unwelcome by business owners, "physicians" (9) and "merchants" (10) as the extermination of the rats will result in "loss of jobs and drop in revenue" (14). Both the formality of the letter and the request of the owner of "The Acme Trap and Pesticide Supplies" (6) corporation not to exterminate the rats seem ludicrous and are what ultimately make this poem funny. Within this humorous poem Hay, however, also buries a more serious message. As the second stanza reveals, the business owner is willing to sacrifice the well-being of his fellow citizens for his own entrepreneurial needs:

> Some children have been bitten, it is true,
> Some cats and dogs attacked, some housewives scared,
> But such complaints can hardly be compared
> With loss of jobs and drop in revenue,
> Which any business man will realize
> Must surely follow, Sirs, if you determine

> To interfere with Private Enterprise,
> And rid the town of necessary vermin. (11-18)

The business owner speaks from a capitalist viewpoint, in which "Private Enterprise" (17) takes precedence over state intervention in the regulation of the market. Despite some attacks by rats on the city's inhabitants the business owner insists that the ultimate good for all is the prevention of job loss and decline in revenue. As the letter concludes business cannot survive without "necessary vermin" (18). The poem thus reveals a serious critique of society's values but Hay veils her criticism within a comical tone and highly formulaic language. This makes her poetry seem light-hearted but probing deeper there is a message hidden within the text. As Hay herself writes

> [...] though [the poems in Story Hour] are ostensibly light verse, they are really in deadly earnest, because I wanted to point out in these extraordinary situations and curious ethics and moralities a parallel in contemporary human nature... (qtd. in Kinard 26)

In conclusion, in *Story Hour* Hay homes in on certain elements of fairy tales to create miniatures, which are suited to the sonnet form. At a first glance her poetic style seems light-hearted, simplistic, and trivial but beneath the surface Hay addresses serious issues of society's values and morals. She lays bare the biases within fairy tales through a mocking and ironic tone. However, as Smith argues, many of Hay's stylistic choices may stem from her need to fit in with what was expected of women's poetry at the time. Being a female poet at a time when female poets were mocked for their sentimentality and lack of grandeur made it necessary for Hay to assume a certain tone which garners respect from the critical establishment. Nevertheless, Hay's poetry succeeds in revealing her clever and biting criticism, especially, as will be seen in the next chapter, in commenting on women's roles and relationships in fairy tales and real life.

2.3. WOMEN'S ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS: PERSONAE AS STRATEGY

Traditionally, feminist critics of fairy tales have argued that fairy tales present a

limited and male-imagined view of female characters. Female characters are often depicted as helpless, passive and submissive in traditional tales. In *Story Hour* Hay presents a different view of female fairy-tale characters and often comments on women's roles and relationships within fairy tales and society. As will be illustrated in this chapter, social commentary and interpretation become possible for Hay through the use of personae as a poetic strategy.

Traditional fairy-tales are often exclusively written with a third person omniscient narrator. Hay, however, dismisses the omniscient narrator in order to let her characters speak for themselves. She recasts and re-imagines fairy tales by rewriting them from a different, often female, subject position or persona. Thus female characters in *Story Hour* are given a voice and agency, where traditional tales merely depict women as pawns in a male-dominated society, without a voice or agency of their own. Hay often homes in on psychological conflicts, which have previously remained unconsidered in the traditional tales and often lets her characters speak through an inner monologue. In this way Hay responds to a much criticized gap in the tradition of fairy tales: the lack of female voices in fairy tales. A case in point and a good illustration of Hay's use of a female tale-telling persona — through which Hay presents her social commentary and interpretation of the tale in question — is the poem "The Grandmother".

The poem „The Grandmother" is based on the fairy tale „Little Red Riding Hood". This tale has many derivations and a long and complex history.[21] The most well-known versions of the tale are "Le Petite Chaperon" by Charles Perrault and "Rotkäppchen" by the Brothers Grimm (*KHM* 26). The plots of these versions differ slightly from each other but in both stories the element of seduction, wherein little Red Riding Hood is seduced by the wolf, is emphasized. Perrault's version of the tale is more explicitly sexual and has a strong moral message presented at the end of the tale, in which little girls are warned of the dangers of being seduced and

[21] The collection*Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood* (1993) edited by Jack Zipes presents a variety of versions of this well-known tale. It provides an excellent illustration of how a tale we are commonly only familiar with in very similar versions exists and has existed for centuries in a variety of forms.

raped by wolves. Perrault warns:

> From this short story easy we discern
> What conduct all young people ought to learn.
> But above all, young, growing misses fair,
> Whose orient rosy blooms begin t'appear:
> Who, beauties in the fragrant spring of age,
> With pretty airs young hearts are apt t'engage.
> Ill do they listen to all sorts of tongues,
> Since some inchant and lure like Syrens' songs.
> No wonder therefore 'tis, if over-power'd,
> So many of them has the Wolf devour'd. (”Little Red Riding Hood” 1-10)

Perrault is very explicit in his moral to the tale and clearly warns particularly young girls of the dangers of men who might be out to harm and take advantage of a young girl by luring her in with their "Syrens' songs" (8). Hay's poem "The Grandmother includes none of the sexual or moral implications of either Perrault's or the Brothers' Grimm versions. Hay's version throws an entirely different light on the story. Her central character is the grandmother of the traditional tale. In many classic versions of "Little Red Riding Hood" the grandmother is a silenced character in the narrative. The only time the grandmother speaks is through the wolf's cross-dressing voice. In "The Grandmother the character of the grandmother is given a very strong voice as the poem is an inner monologue of the grandmother herself:

> You wouldn't think they'd let me live alone
> Away out here in the woods, so far from town,
> Old as I am, and winter coming on . . .
> Still, I suppose, they've problems of their own.
> They send the child sometimes, when it's not too late,
> With an extra shawl, and a little basket of food.
> I like to watch her skipping through the gate,
> Bright as a robin in her pretty red hood.
>
> I get so lonely, at the close of day,
> Here by the fire, without a thing to do.
> I've even thought of that poor mongrel stray
> That sulks around, so miserable and thin.
> Next time he scratches, I think I'll let him in,
> And give him a warm bed, and a bone or two. (1-14)

The central theme of Hay's revision is not the seduction of Red Riding Hood by the wolf but the grandmother's loneliness and isolation. Red Riding Hood is only a minor character in the imagination of the grandmother. Whereas the traditional tale focuses on the violation of Red Riding Hood by the wolf, "The Grandmother focuses on the violation of the grandmother by a society that deems it appropriate to let an old woman live by herself in the woods. The grandmother is expelled from society to the edge of the woods with no one to keep her company, except the occasional visit from the child, whom "[t]hey" sometimes send (5). She is pictured as an outcast who is completely isolated from the rest of the world and has no place in society. The grandmother is also pictured as the traditional old peasant woman by the fire telling her stories, only this time nobody listens. She sits "[h]ere by the fire, without a thing to do" as if robbed of her powers to speak and tell her stories (10). Her stories remain monologic as they are spoken into a void.

The only companionship the grandmother can hope for is that of the wolf, who scratches outside her door. In Hay's revision the wolf is not the evil, seductive character pictured by Perrault but a potential companion and salvation to the grandmother's needs. The crime committed in this story is not the seduction of Red Riding Hood by the wolf but the harsh treatment the grandmother has to suffer as an outcast from society. In a way Hay uses the story of Red Riding Hood to voice her own social commentary on the treatment of women in old age in society.

In Hay's revision of the traditional tale of "Little Red Riding Hood" the grandmother is the central character and it is her voice which governs the poem. Through the grandmother's voice and persona Hay expresses her attitudes towards society and gives the tale a new and previously unconsidered perspective and interpretation.

According to Smith, the use of personae to recast and re-imagine the traditional tales is a method Hay uses extensively throughout her collection (58). She argues that Hay's use of personae is a result of the socio-cultural background within which Hay was writing (58). The use of personae instead of an omniscient narrator allows Hay to voice her own opinion without revealing her own subject position as

a woman. Smith writes that "[p]ersonae may have given Hay the distance she needed from her own, gendered authorial self" (58). The voice of the poet only shines through by way of an intermediary in the form of a persona. Hay thus creates a distance between herself and the material at hand. Smith suggests that the use of personae has the function of an "'objectifying' filter" (58) with which a woman writer can write about feelings without sounding sentimental.

Sentimentality in poetry was one of the key faults ascribed to women poets at the beginning of the twentieth century, and this attitude towards women poets continued well into the second half of the century. Modernism favored poetry which was cerebral, impersonal and concerned itself with, as Ostriker puts it, "the decline of Western values, the death of God, man's alienation from nature" (46). Therefore the mere existence of a feminine voice, which is personal by default, "sounds inevitably trivial or distressing" to the modern poet (47). In such a climate the feminine voice has no legitimacy.

Hay was not an advocate of modernism's cold and intellectual poetry but instead defended emotional content in poetry. In her papers preserved in the Hunt Library at Carnegie Mellon University, she writes:

> What is apt to come under fire today is not the technical pattern of a poem, but any tendency of its author to be warmly and directly and candidly emotional. . . . Ingenuous and uncomplicated sentiment is, in these days, very likely to be mis-called sentimentality, something very different indeed. (qtd. in Smith 58)

Hay draws an important distinction between emotion and sentimentality. She also recognizes that these two concepts tend to be wrongly conflated by modern critics of poetry. Since emotion, read as sentimentality, is generally associated with female poets, and intellectuality and impersonality with male poets, the use of personae seems a veritable strategy in defense of the personal and emotional for a woman poet in those times. The mid-century poet Adrienne Rich shares a similar experience. When speaking of her own experience as a writer coming of age in mid-century, Rich mentions how she herself used the persona of a man as a strategy for writing as a woman in her poems. After experimenting with formalism

in her poetry,[22] Rich started using the persona of a man in her poetry (41).

The use of personae as a form of authorial self-effacement, as suggested by Smith, is a strong and valiant argument when placing Hay in the critical context of her time. However, reading Hay's use of personae only as a result of the socio-cultural implications of the literary environment of her time may be selling her poetry short. The use of female personae as tale-telling figures is a strong and powerful method in itself, which allows for a certain way of re-imagining the tales Hay could not have achieved if she had used a poet's I or an omniscient narrator. By continually re-casting traditional tales from a female and/or untraditional viewpoint Hay creates a collection of many voices and perspectives. The traditional fairy tales are rendered homely and intimate as the reader peeks behind the tales into the psychological conflicts of the characters Hay imagines. The result is an utterly polyphonic text with a pastiche of voices previously unheard. Through these voices Hay reinterprets the tales and gives them her own spin with a new view on female roles and relationships.

Hay is particularly concerned with the idealization of marriage in fairy tales and society. In fairy tales marriage is the one and only goal for women. In *Story Hour* Hay paints a dismal picture of marriage and does not share the common fairy-tale view of marriage as salvation and eternal happiness for women. In order to show her criticism and interpret the fairy tales anew Hay lets her female characters speak for themselves. Many of the poems concerned with marriage are a sequel to the traditional fairy tale which ends in marriage. A case in point is the appropriately titled poem "Sequel", which is based on the fairy tale "Beauty and the Beast". The poem begins where the traditional fairy tale ends:

> And there, in the Beast's place, stood a handsome Prince!
> Dashing and elegant from head to toes.
> So they were married, thus the story goes,
> And lived henceforth in great magnificence,
> And in the public eye. (1-5)

[22] See my quotations of Rich in ch. 2.2.

As in many of Hay's interpretations, here too, she uses a certain matter-of-fact tone to sum up the fairy-tale plot in one sweep. This underlines the simplistic and formulaic nature of fairy-tale plot lines and reveals Hay's own doubts about their value and usefulness to the reader. The poem continues with a list of duties the princess and prince have to fulfill in their married life "in the public eye" (5), ironically summing up: "In short, it was the happiest of alliances" (8).

However, in the second stanza Hay begins to change the perspective and looks at the story from the princess's point of view, who did not think it was a happy alliance at all. On the contrary, "the Princess grew perversely sad" (10). She is longing for her old Beast back:

> And thought of the good Beast, who used to walk
> Beside her in the garden, and who had
> Such gentle eyes, and such a loving arm
> To shield her from the briers, and keep her warm. (11-14)

The "handsome Prince" from line 1 is contrasted with the "good Beast" in line 11 and although from the outside it looks as if the prince is the more desirable partner, the princess is only in love with the beast. Marriage, a handsome and rich partner, and consequently the public life that follows are not the princess's salvation. Hay's interpretation of marriage stands in contrast to the values in the traditional tales and paints a more varied picture of women's desires.

This topic is repeated in many of her poems. "The Sleeper" poems are also a fairy-tale sequel. They continue the traditional tale "Sleeping Beauty" beyond its ending of a happy union between the prince and Sleeping Beauty and again show how marriage is not necessarily desirable for men or women alike.

"The Sleeper" is a poem in two parts. The first poem carries the additional title "(She speaks . . .)" and the second the title "(He speaks . . .)". The first poem is cast in the voice of Sleeping Beauty and the second in that of the prince who kissed her out of sleep. In "The Sleeper 1" the princess complains about "this new and noisy world around me!" (4). She wishes the prince had left her "in a rosy trance so

charmed and deep" because she does not like this world to which she has been awoken (2). The princess cannot find "a quiet spot" (6) and misses her "dearest privacy" (10). She feels no obligation or affection to the prince because as the poem concludes "Nothing this clumsy trespasser can do / Will ever touch my heart, or really wake me" (13-14).

In the second poem the prince is none the happier for having roused Sleeping Beauty out of sleep. He misses "that slumbrous look she wore, / The dreaming air, the drowsy-lidded eyes" (1-2) and only realized too late that despite having kissed her awake her heart "never woke at all" (8) and that she sleeps soundly "behind a thorny wall / Of rooted selfishness" (5-6):

> I wish I'd gone away that self-same hour,
> Before I learned how, like her twining roses,
> She bends to her own soft, implacable uses
> The pretty tactics that such vines employ,
> To hide the poisoned barb beneath the flower,
> To cling about, to strangle, to destroy. (9-14)

The prince compares the princess to the brambles behind which she had been locked away for so many years. The princess's beauty in sleep was just a mask to trick her suitors with. Behind this mask the prince only found "poisoned barb" (13), which is ready to "strangle" and "destroy" him (14).

Clearly, the happy ending of the traditional tale is not echoed in Hay's revision. In Hay's poems the marriage between the princess and the prince is one of dissatisfaction and frustration. The princess cannot live up to the expectations of her wifely duties but prefers to withdraw from "this new and noisy world" (”The Sleeper 1” 4). In sleep only the princess is granted the privacy she so dearly craves. The prince interprets her need for privacy as "rooted selfishness" (”The Sleeper 2” 6) and lack of consideration and affection. He sees the princess as "stubborn" (6) and believes she employs vile "pretty tactics" (12) only to destroy him. There is no communication between the two characters, which is symbolized by the space between the poems. They each speak into a void and are consequently misunderstood by the other partner. Smith sees "The Sleeper" poems as a

reflection of "the dilemma of the female artist faced with the conflicting models of the isolated, self-absorbed male genius and the 'angel of the house'" (71). The princess clearly struggles with her duty of representing the lady of the house in the role of wife and princess. She prefers "the cloistered world" (”The Sleeper 1” 11) of sleep where her dreams and thoughts can roam freely. In this sense, sleep symbolizes a withdrawal from society and the restrictive role models assigned to women. As Smith writes, "to be at odds with patriarchy is to be, in a sense, dead to that world; for a woman to claim her own life is tantamount to undergoing social death" (71).

A more radical interpretation of Hay's “The Sleeper” poems is put forward by Christa Mastangelo Joyce, who suggests that Hay's poem contains an “undercurrent of rape” (34) since Sleeping Beauty is awoken from sleep against her will. This implies a form of invasion or trespass made against Sleeping Beauty's body, which she herself was not prepared for. As Joyce notes, interpreting Hay's “The Sleeper” poems as poems of rape aligns Hay's version of “Sleeping Beauty” with previous versions of the same tale which were explicit about the element of rape. Joyce gives Giambattista Basile's version in *Pentamerone* as an example of a version in which Sleeping Beauty is raped (34).

Interpretations of “The Sleeper” poems highlight the violation of woman's privacy and the dilemma of women feeling obliged to perform social roles in society. This theme is recurring in *Story Hour* and also finds expression in the poem "The Princess". "The Princess" is one of a series of poems in which Hay homes in on stereotypical fairy-tale figures. Others are "The Witch", "The Fairy Godmother" or "The Dragon". The poem "The Princess" is an inner monologue of a princess who actively tries to avoid marriage at all costs. In this poem Hay reinterprets the typical fairy-tale quest for a worthy suitor as the princess's own clever strategy to eschew marriage. The princess asks potential suitors for the impossible in the hope that no one will ever succeed so that she "can stay at home, with dear Papa" (8):

> I'll ask for a red rose blossoming in the snow,

> A music box hid in a walnut shell;
> Nine golden apples on a silver bough,
> A mirror that can speak, and cast a spell.
> I'll send them East of the moon, and West of the sun,
> For a wishing ring made of a dragon's claw . . .
> And they will fail, just as the rest have done,
> And I can stay at home, with dear Papa. (1-8)

The prospect of marriage frightens the princess. At night she wakes "[a]ll of a shiver, and my hair on end" (10) from nightmares, in which one of the suitors returns "[w]ith the impossible trophy in his hand" (13).

The objective of the quest for a partner is reversed in Hay's revision. Typically, in fairy tales the king or father designs tasks for potential suitors in order to pick the one worthy of his daughter. In Hay's poem it is the daughter who sends away suitors to fulfill impossible tasks with a completely different purpose in mind. She does not want to find the right partner but wants to avoid getting married at all. She prefers her "dear Papa" (8) over a potential partner in marriage. In a sense, the princess chooses never to grow up since growing-up consequently means to get married and fulfill social roles she does not want to fulfill.

Whereas sleep is a metaphor for withdrawal from social obligations as a woman and for the creative spirit in women in "The Sleeper" poems, it is the security of childhood and the father that represent this withdrawal in "The Princess". In both poems the princesses take action despite their limited means to try to eschew the fate designed for them. In "The Sleeper" the princess denies herself to her partner, swearing that he will never "tear the pattern of my dream" (12), whereas the princess in "The Princess" makes success as impossible as possible for her suitors. In this sense both poems have active female roles.

These kinds of active female roles are present throughout *Story Hour*. Hay paints her female characters as diverse, creative and self-determined women, whose fate does not depend on the choices made for them by others, particularly not by men. "The Marriage" is a rewriting of "The Frog Prince, in which both female voice and female agency dominate the poem. Both the Grimmean version (*KHM* 1) "and Hay's

revision focus on the transformation of the frog into a prince. The difference lies in the reasons for this transformation.

In Grimm, the transformation from undesirable frog to desirable prince is, as Smith points out, "a direct consequence of the daughter's obedience to her father" (63). The daughter is repulsed by the frog but is bound by the law of the father to obey his orders and is consequently rewarded for her behavior. Smith emphasizes that "[i]n such a scenario, the princess figures only as a bargaining chip in an implicit exchange between the two men" (63).

In "The Marriage" it is not the father who decides his daughter's fate but the daughter herself, who chooses to marry who she thinks is a prince. The poem is spoken in the voice of the princess's mother, who is nonexistent in the traditional tale. She speaks for herself and the king about how satisfied they are with her daughter's choice of husband: “The King and I are more than satisfied; / It’s turned out better than we ever hoped.” (1-2).

The daughter, however, is simply deluded and romantic, thinking that she has married a prince while her mother is aware of his true motives:

> We’re quite aware of what his motives were:
> He wanted money, and an easy life,
> But in the end we had to humor her,
> And all she wanted was to be his wife. (5-8)

Nevertheless the daughter's parents are happy with her choice and humor their daughter by respecting her choice. The point is that in Hay’s version the choice lies with the daughter herself and not her father or the prince. The marriage of the frog — whom the daughter thinks is a prince — and the daughter is one the daughter has chosen herself and her parents only had to consent to. In fact, the father’s voice is completely silenced in this poem. The frog does not speak either. All we hear is the mother’s voice and her interpretation of her daughter’s actions and feelings. In this sense, “The Marriage” also portrays active females who decide their fate for themselves and are not bound to decisions made for them by men.

In conclusion, through the use of personae and changes in perspective Hay reinvents plot, meaning and characters of the traditional tales. According to Smith, Hay uses personae in her poetry as a poetic strategy to eschew criticism in a male-dominated critical establishment. The use of personae, however, is a valid strategy in and of itself, which allows Hay to rewrite and re-imagine the tales in a new and creative way. In Hay's world of fairy tales grandmothers, mothers, daughters, wives and princesses have their own thoughts and feelings and are not always happy with the fate designed for them. Therefore they often take their fate into their own hands. In *Story Hour*, Hay makes female voices heard by letting her characters speak for themselves. This is what makes Hay's rewritings interesting, unusual and ultimately subversive.

2.4. CONCLUSION

Despite Hay's success as a poet at her time she seems to have virtually vanished entirely from the literary landscape and today nobody reads Hay. She is only rarely included in anthologies and many of her poetry collections are out of print.

According to Smith the vanishing of Hay's poetry and her popularity is connected with what has been referred to as the postwar backlash (43). While the first women's movement made it possible for women like Hay to enjoy a career and publish poetry, the disappearance of the first women's movement and the return to the ideal woman, the housewife, after the Second World War largely wiped out their efforts. In the literary climate of the 1950s and 1960s women poets were not read seriously anymore and largely ignored. Women's poetry was not seen as high culture and instead mocked for its sentimentality and lack of grandeur (Smith 44).

Hay's formalism and her lack of the type of anger and rage found in feminist poetry a generation her junior may have made her unpopular not only to the feminist poets and critics of her time but also to the critics of our time. On the surface Hay's poetry seems light and tame but as my interpretation has shown, her poetry is full of social commentary and biting remarks, which have been overlooked by the

critical establishment ever since. Hay's poetry also comments on gender roles, is outspoken about the limited and archaic morals of fairy tales and strives to create an alternative and more modern fairy-tale canon. Her fairy-tale poetry therefore belongs to the female fairy-tale lineage just as much as Sexton's and Broumas's poetry do, who have both received considerably more attention from the critical community than Hay.

3. ANNE SEXTON – *TRANSFORMATIONS*

Anne Sexton's *Transformations*, first published in 1971, is a collection of seventeen poems, each based on a fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm. *Transformations* was published only eight years after Hay's publication of *Story Hour*, nevertheless Sexton seemed to have been completely unaware of her predecessor in a remarkably similar project (Smith 46). One of the reasons may have been that despite the temporal proximity of each poet's collection their style of writing clearly betrays a marked generational gap. Where Hay's poetry is formal and distant, Sexton's is experimental and intensely personal.

In the following I will analyze how Sexton uses fairy tales in her poems in *Transformations*. Before focusing on *Transformations* itself I will give a short overview of the conditions under which Sexton came to write poetry. Being a generation younger than Hay the cultural and literary environment in which Sexton was coming of age as a poet is remarkably different from Hay's and ultimately greatly affected Sexton's fairy-tale retellings. In the chapter "Poetic Method" I will turn my focus on *Transformations* and analyze both form and language Sexton uses in her fairy-tale poetry. Contrary to Hay's formal style Sexton uses free verse and adopts a strong female fairy-tale narrator, who pervades her entire collection. Finally I will take a closer look at the way Sexton portrays women's roles and relationships in her collection. As will become clear her view of women's roles and relationships in fairy tales and in her own time is quite disturbing and above all grotesque. In the conclusion I will sum up Sexton's legacy as a fairy-tale poet in the line of these three female fairy-tale poets.

3.1. ANNE SEXTON: THE HOUSEWIFE

Anne Sexton is an American poet, born on 9 November 1928 in Newton, Massachusetts, and is best known for her intimate and personal poetry which

draws heavily on women's issues and experiences.[23] She enjoyed popularity as a poet in her own time and was fervently embraced by the emerging feminist Second Wave after her death by suicide in 1974. Sexton's struggle as a woman poet in a patriarchally dominated literary scene and the direct and candid way in which she addresses female issues in her poetry spoke strongly to feminist readers, writers and critics alike.

Contrary to Sara Henderson Hay, Sexton was not interested in becoming a poet from an early age on but only turned poet at age 28 (Middlebrook *Anne* 64-65). Before that time her life was typical of that of many American women's lives of her time. Sexton had little education, did not attend college, married relatively early and was settled into the domestic role of wife and mother in her early twenties. In comparison, Hay had enjoyed college education, had traveled around Europe, worked as an editor and reviewer and was already a published poet at the same age. The reasons for each woman's development as a poet may be seen as personal but they are above all historical. Although Sexton was born more than twenty years after Hay, Sexton was coming of age in a less emancipated America than Hay and this is strongly reflected in her development as a woman and poet.

As Betty Friedan wrote in her influential bestseller *The Feminine Mystique* "to women born after 1920, feminism was dead history" (163). Friedan argues that post-war America allowed women fewer opportunities for personal and professional development than the inter-war years had done. With the end of the Second World War, women who had previously attended college, had forged out a career for themselves, and had taken on men's duties and jobs (often for a lack of men in the workforce), were now being given a new role in post-war America: that of housewife-mother (Friedan 60-61). In the 1950s the average marriage age of women dropped drastically (Friedan 243), marriage rates consequently soared and so did childbearing rates (Friedan 59), and fewer women attended college

[23] All biographical data on Sexton, except where otherwise noted, has been taken from Diane Wood Middlebrook's entry "Anne Sexton" in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography vol 169.* Ed. J.M. Conte.

(Friedan 243) or entered professional work (Friedan 60).[24] The ideal role for women had changed dramatically from the image of the New Woman earlier in the same century. Friedan writes:

> The suburban housewife—she was the dream image of the young American woman and the envy, it was said, of women all over the world. The American housewife [...] was healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, her children, her home. She had found true feminine fulfillment. (60-61)

Friedan believed that this drastic change in the development of women's position in society, compromising their roles as equal partners with equal opportunities and a personal and professional life of their own, was caused by the traumatic experience of the Second World War the nation had suffered. The fear and insecurities caused by the Second World War had instilled in the American mind a craving for security and togetherness in the safe bosom of home:

> Fulfillment as a woman had only one definition for American women after 1949—the housewife-mother. As swiftly as in a dream, the image of the American woman as a changing, growing individual in a changing world was shattered. Her solo flight to find her own identity was forgotten in the rush of the security of togetherness. Her limitless world shrunk to the cozy walls of home. (92)

Anne Sexton is a prime example of the housewife-mother. Born in 1928, Sexton was in her late teens when the housewife cult swept over America. She married at age 19 and was quickly settled into American suburbia with two children. Where Hay can be viewed as an example of the free-spirited New Woman of her time, Sexton is a perfect example of the typical white suburban American housewife of the 1950s.

Consequently Sexton as housewife turned poet had a rather unusual initiation into the art of poetry. Sexton found her way into writing poetry as a result of her

[24] Friedan gives examples of statistical data on marriage rates, childbearing rates, college education, etc. throughout *The Feminine Mystique.* The sources listed are only examples.

psychological illness.[25] After the birth of her second child Sexton began to suffer from frequent bouts of depression and mental breakdowns and consequently remained in lifelong psychiatric treatment. On the recommendation of her psychiatrist Dr. Martin Orne Sexton first turned to poetry as a form of self-expression (Middlebrook *Anne* 42-43). She later attended a poetry workshop under the direction of John Holmes in Boston, where she found both guidance and poetic role models for her work. Her poetry consequently appeared in several magazines and in 1960 her first collection *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* was published. Sexton continued to write poetry and published a further seven collections of poetry until her suicide in 1974.

Interestingly, Sexton's poetry remained successful after her death, which is quite contrary to Hay’s popularity, which diminished considerably over time. This is mainly because Sexton was embraced by feminist poets and critics of the Second Wave, while Hay was not. Feminist readers and critics of the Second Wave responded particularly positively to Sexton’s addressal of female issues in her poetry. Sexton dealt very openly with personal and psychological issues and her experience as a woman in her poetry and was not shy of using herself as a woman persona in her poems.

What was hailed by later feminists as Sexton's strengths was, however, often criticized in her own time. Critics found her shameless revelation of intimate psychology and women's issues embarrassing and unfit for poetry. Poetry should speak of the universal instead of selfish issues. One particularly harsh critic was fellow poet John Holmes, who suggested to Sexton not to publish her first collection *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* because he believed she would regret the publication of her poetry in later years, claiming that “this record will haunt and hurt you” (203). In a letter to Sexton he wrote:

> Something about asserting the hospital and psychiatric experience seems to me very selfish—all a forcing of others to listen to you, and nothing given the listeners, nothing that teaches them or helps them. . . . It bothers me that

[25] Middlebrook traces Sexton’s initiation into poetry in the chapters “Breaking Down” and “’*These Are My People*’” in *Anne Sexton: A Biography.*

> you use poetry this way. It's all a release for you, but what is it for anyone else except a spectacle of someone experiencing release? . . . (qtd. in Middlebrook "I Tapped my Own Head" 203)

Holmes was deeply concerned about Sexton's use of personal issues in her poetry and believed her poetic subjects to be selfish and thus wholly uninteresting to her readers. Clearly, Holmes did not foresee how strongly Sexton's addressal of female issues would speak to a female readership which was obviously longing for a female perspective in poetry. Instead Holmes equated female with personal and non-universal — a misconception that has influenced the reception of much of female writing not only in the last century.

Whereas Hay reacted to the fear of being accused as an irrelevant, emotional and personal poet with the use of personae as a shield in defense of the personal, Sexton did not use any such shield but openly used her female poet-persona in her poetry, defending it as a universal female consciousness. Ultimately, this is what made her poetry stand out to a whole generation of female readers, writers and critics.

Her collection *Transformations,* despite being based on fairy tales, deals equally heavily with women's issues as all of her other work. The collection has often been viewed as an atypical work for Sexton because her subject matter is drawn from a universal (i.e. fairy tales) source and not from a personal. Nevertheless Sexton insists that this volume was just as much about her as any of her other poetry. In a letter to her publishers she wrote: "It would [...] be a lie to say that they weren't about me, because they are just as much about me as my other poetry" (qtd. in Wagner-Martin 7). The personal and female consciousness, which is visible in the rest of her poetry is equally visible, if not arguably even more prominent throughout *Transformations.*

3.2. POETIC METHOD: THE WITCH-POET

All of the seventeen poems in Sexton's *Transformations* are directly inspired by the

fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm. According to Sexton's daughter, Linda, Sexton became interested in rewriting the Brothers Grimm through her daughter's reading of the fairy-tale collection by the Brothers Grimm (Middlebrook *Anne* 333). In most of Sexton's poems the source texts of the Grimms are still easily recognizable as she sticks quite conservatively to the plot lines already delineated by the Grimms in most of her retellings. Contrary to Hay's efforts in changing plot lines, homing in on plot details, adding prequels or sequels, Sexton's fairy-tale versions do not impress through their imaginative shifts and changes in plot. Instead, the strength and singularity of her retellings are manifested in her use of metadiscursive elements throughout the collection. Sexton replaces the stale and impersonal omniscient third-person narrator found in the Grimmean versions with a powerful, opinionated and intrusive narrator, who comments on her own retellings throughout the collection. This narrator is the witch-poet.

The use of this narrating persona is best illustrated in the very first poem in *Transformations*, in which the witch-poet first appears. This poem is entitled "The Gold Key“ and is based on a fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm with the same name. In various editions of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* the Grimms always placed this tale at the end of their collection. "The Gold Key" is an unusually short tale about a boy who finds a gold key and a chest. The gold key miraculously fits the chest, but as the boy is about to open the chest, the story ends: "and now we must wait until he has completely unlocked it and opened the lid, and then we will learn what wonderful things were lying in the box" (*KHM* 200, 430, my translation). The reader never finds out what is inside the chest as the story ends prematurely and leaves the reader in suspense.

Sexton uses this tale as a starting point for her own collection. Her stories begin where the Brothers Grimm leave off. "The Gold Key" is an important poem in *Transformations* because as an opening poem it sets the scene and tone for the collection as a whole. Sexton's version starts with a prologue to the tale proper. The poem begins:

> The speaker in this case
> is a middle-aged witch, me --

> tangled on my two great arms,
> my face in a book
> and my mouth wide,
> ready to tell you a story or two. (1-6)

Sexton begins her collection by introducing her narrator: “a middle-aged witch” (2). She is not at all ambiguous about her narrating persona but makes it quite clear who is telling these stories. The use of “in this case” in the first line reveals her awareness of other times and instances when these stories might have been told but with a different narrator in mind. She does not ignore the history of the fairy tale but gives it an acknowledging nod, which puts her own efforts into perspective. This self-awareness transgresses the boundaries of the text proper and stands in stark contrast to the tales by the Brothers Grimm, whose uninvolved omniscient narrator creates a fake timelessness and universality. With the use of the “middle-aged witch” Sexton moves away from this impersonal and objective filter applied by the Brothers Grimm to a subjective and female perspective on her tales and in doing so, Sexton also reconnects with a long tradition of female story-telling.

This female story-telling tradition exists along two divergent paths: we may say that one is male-imagined and the other one is female-imagined. The male-imagined female fairy-tale teller is typically a caring and elderly figure in the shape of a grandmother, nurse or servant, who tells stories by the fireside. As Harries points out, "the prevailing myth about the appropriate role for women in the transmission of fairy tales" is "as aging, patient, nurturing conduits of oral culture or spinners of tales" (51). Alternative names for fairy tales such as Mother Goose tales, Mother Bunch tales or old wives' tales all allude to this tradition. Perrault gave his collection *Histoires ou Contes du temps passé* the subtitle *Contes de ma Mere Loye* (Mother Goose Tales) (Harries 28). The female tale-teller is also often depicted in homely domestic settings, sometimes next to a spindle to illustrate the weaving and spinning images connected with tale-telling.[26] She is old, simple, uneducated and domestic.

The term “old wives’ tale” also brings with it another pejorative connotation, which

[26] Harries analyzes the frontispiece to Perrault’s original collection, which exemplifies this idea of the female teller of tales (28-29).

is still prevalent in modern English usage. Old wives' tales are typically lies, pure gossip, nonsense and stories full of false or exaggerated detail. This stigma with which old wives' tales are associated creates, as Angela Carter pointedly observes, a curious predicament for the image of the female story teller, in which her power to tell stories is undermined by suggesting that her stories are lies:

> Old wives' tales - that is, worthless stories, untruths, trivial gossip, a derisive label that allots the art of storytelling to women at the exact same point as it takes all value from it. (*Old Wives'* xi)

Female story tellers are further discredited by the connotations associated with an oral as opposed to a written culture. Harries notes that orality is often equated with the primitive and inchoate whereas written language is seen as more superior and refined (71). This dichotomy puts female tale-telling at the primitive and base end of the tale-telling spectrum, whereas it ascribes superiority to the mostly male-penned fairy-tale texts. Karen E. Rowe refers to this dilemma as "double narration". She writes:

> [D]ouble narration [is the appropriation of a text] in which a presumably male author or collector attributes to a female the original power of articulating silent matter. But having attributed this transformative artistic intelligence and voice to a woman, the narrator then reclaims for himself [...] the controlling power of retelling, of literary recasting, and of dissemination to the folk — a folk that includes the female community of tale-tellers from which the stories would seem to have originated. (*Spin* 61)

In the male-imagined tradition and representation of female tale-tellers, women are aligned with an oral tradition whereas men are synonymous with the interpretation and literary rendition of these dubious and fantastical tales told by women.

The female-imagined fairy-tale teller, on the other hand, is completely different and can, for example, be found in the tales by the French *conteuses*, who wrote in the late seventeenth century. The *conteuses* often imagined a female tale-teller to whom they frequently referred within their tales. This female tale-teller was often imagined as an aristocratic woman who was both literate and learned. In many of their tales this aristocratic woman was a self-reference to their own position as

both fairy-tale tellers and writers of their own tales. As Harries notes, "the *conteuses* often emphasize their own position of knowing, educated, worldly-wise, female subjects, with a wry and sometimes sardonic view of the narrative constellations they are reusing and revising" (15-16). This representation of a female-tale teller stands in stark contrast to the Perraultian uneducated, rural and aging teller of old wives' tales.

While the *conteuses* still imagined and recreated a kind of fake orality in their tales, they elevated orality by placing it in the conversational frames of the French salons. They chose to imitate the oral aristocratic salon culture of their times rather than to recreate simple, rural and folksy language. Their idea of orality was contemporary and educated, which shows both that the oral does not necessarily precede the written but can exist simultaneously alongside the written and that the oral is not inferior or less sophisticated than the written. And lastly, the *conteuses*' image of the female tale-teller as both teller and writer of her own tales does away with the idea of women as nurturing conduits of oral culture and instead places women squarely within an educated culture of writing. Harries writes:

> By framing their tales with traces of salon conversation, [the *conteuses*] represent their tales as part of an aristocratic oral culture. By writing their tales down, they contest the notion that women can only tell the tales that men transcribe and transmit in print. By explicitly setting their work within the traditions of fairy-tale *writing*, they establish themselves as not only literate but learned. And, in a final paradox, by including traces of the oral culture of the salons, they create a new model of femininity: the woman who not only talks — by the fireside to children or in the salon — but also writes. (Harries 72)

In the representations of the female-imagined fairy-tale teller the oral and the written are fused and therefore the dichotomy between the female as primary oral tale-teller and the male as cultivated writer of tales is completely subverted.

Sexton's narrating persona of the witch-poet continues the tradition of the female-imagined fairy-tale teller and writer, because this narrating persona shares many similarities with the *conteuses'* fairy-tale tellers and also ultimately presents the woman simultaneously as writer and teller of her own tales. Most strikingly the witch-poet is far removed from the image of a domestic, nurturing and simple

peasant woman telling stories to children by the fireside as imagined by Perrault. Sexton's tale-telling persona of a witch is powerful and frightening, not lulling and comforting. The witch is somewhat akin to a female monster. She is "tangled" (3) on her "two great arms" (3), has her "mouth wide" (5) and her "face in a book" (4). Her appearance evokes horror as if she was about to devour her listeners.

The poet-persona of a witch is not new to Sexton's poetry. In the body of her work Sexton frequently referred to herself as a witch. As Caroline Hall points out, Sexton's "identification of herself as a witch evokes New England traditions of witchcraft" (105) and is already visible in her earlier poems "The Black Art" and "Her Kind", which is also known as her signature poem. Hall writes:

> in those poems, and in references in many others, the poet-writer-witch characterizes herself as different, misunderstood, and possessed, as one who transforms the ordinary domestic scene into something weird and nightmarish, who pays for her imaginative powers with her sanity or even with her life but who bravely affirms her power nonetheless. She is subversive, creative and shunned. (105)

The witch in *Transformations* shares exactly the same characteristics as the witch in her other poetry as analyzed here by Hall. Firstly, the witch in *Transformations* is a "poet-writer-witch" and a representation of Sexton herself. This is expressed very directly by the "me" at the end of the second line of "The Gold Key": "the middle-aged witch, me". The witch is a self-reference and these abound in *Transformations* and often combine with images of the witch-poet-Sexton as "different, misunderstood, and possessed".

In "The White Snake" Sexton refers to herself as "Dame Sexton" (5) and she has the ability to talk to and understand animals:

> There was a day
> when all the animals talked to me.
> Ten birds at my window saying,
> Throw us some seeds,
> Dame Sexton,
> or we will shrink. (1-6)

The mention of her own name makes the self-reference unambiguous and her

ability to converse with animals gives the witch-poet special powers. Here these special powers are viewed as a talent but in other instances in *Transformations* the witch is literally insane. In "Iron Hans" she says: “I am mother of the insane. / Let me give you my children” (16-17). And then she herself is one of these “children”, whom she lists in the poem: “a woman talking / purging herself with rhymes, / drumming words out like a typewriter” (28-30). She sees her role as poet sitting by her typewriter as an act of insanity and she clears her guilt through her poetry expressed by the word “purging”. In other instances in *Transformations* the witch-poet is not insane but deceptive and two-faced. In "Red Riding Hood" she refers to herself twice as a deceiver:

> Many are the deceivers:
> …………………………………..
> And I. I too.
> Quite collected at cocktail parties,
> meanwhile in my head
> I'm undergoing open-heart surgery.
> …………………………………..
> And I. I too again.
> I built a summer house on Cape Ann.
> A simple A-frame and this too was
> a deception — nothing haunts a new house. (1; 48-51; 62-65)

In these passages Sexton shows that there is more than one side to the witch-poet-persona. There is the public persona, who is “[q]uite collected at cocktail parties” (49) and the private persona, who is “undergoing open-heart surgery” at the same time (51). The poet-persona is in a conflict with herself but is also a multidimensional and complex character. In a way the poet-persona functions as the Scheherazade of *Transformations.* She tells her tales, one after another, while referring back to herself and her own story in the process. By continually referring back to herself as witch and narrator and to herself outside the poem as witch and narrator in her own life, Sexton adds a metanarrative context to *Transformations*. Outside the boundaries of the collection there is yet another frame: the frame of her own story, her autobiography. The collection is balanced uneasily on the margins of reality and fiction and the stories become ever more eerie in the light of Sexton's real-life persona, the witch-poet, or as Ostriker puts it, *Transformations* is a "portrait of a lady who exists beyond the plots, the female as creator” (84).

Another aspect that features strongly in *Transformations* and makes the tale-telling persona of the witch-poet come alive beyond the page is the imitation of orality in the text. This can be seen in "The Gold Key", which continues by introducing the witch's audience. Sexton's audience is not made up of children but adults:

> 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? (12-17)

The witch-speaker addresses her audience directly through phrases such as "do you remember?" (13, 14) and "have you forgotten?" (17) and wants them to participate in the tale-telling event. As Bechtolsheim observes, Sexton stresses the dialogic nature of story-telling. Her stories are not flat and bound to the page by the written word but draw her audience into a dialog with the witch-speaker (21). Sexton thus recreates a sense of orality and makes the story come alive beyond the page.

Throughout the collection Sexton addresses her readership as if speaking to her readers directly using casual and colloquial language and frequent imperatives or direct speech. In "The Wonderful Musician" Sexton introduces the musician to the story with the use of an imperative form: "Consider / the wonderful musician" (27-28). The same form is used at the beginning of "Briar Rose": "Consider / a girl who keeps slipping off" (1-2). In "Iron Hans" she repeats the imperative "take" to list examples of what she terms "the insane" (16): "Take a lunatic / for instance" (1-2), "Take a girl sitting in a chair" (18), or "Take a man who is crying" (24) to list but a few. The imperative "take" is colloquial, addresses the reader directly and prompts the reader to imagine the situation. Other colloquial interpolations by the witch-speaker further underline the orality of the text. Sexton, for example, often interjects her sentences with "say", as in "A man, say, / has twelve children" (7-8) in "Godfather Death", which simulates spoken language. Sexton's use of orality and colloquial language creates a sense of intimacy and immediacy between the speaker and her audience.

In “The Gold Key”, the intimate relationship between the witch and her audience is also visible through their shared body of knowledge, the stories of their childhood. Only now these adults seem to have forgotten these stories. The witch tries to make her audience remember the stories of their past, as if shaking her audience out of sleep:

> Forgotten the ten P.M. dreams
> where the wicked king
> went up in smoke?
> Are you comatose?
> Are you undersea? (18-22)

The audience seems to have buried their past memories deep in their unconscious. The "ten P.M. dreams" (18) are no more, instead they are "comatose" (21) and "undersea" (229) and are unable to connect with their past. The allusion to "dreams" (18) and the witch's insistence on bringing old memories back to life makes their relationship seem like that of an analyst and her patients. Together they have to face the truths of their forgotten stories. The scene seems eerie and frightening as something that is hidden is forced to light. The setting is not that of a pleasant and familial scene by the fireplace where fairy tales are told to amuse and make children fall asleep. The opposite is at work here: the witch is trying to awaken her patients, bring them back to life and make them face their pasts.

Following this introduction the boy of the original story is eventually presented. This is where the prologue ends and Sexton’s retelling of the story begins. "The Gold Key" is thus divided into two parts. The first stanza sets the scene of the poem and functions as an introduction to the story itself. The second stanza is a reworking of the original fairy tale introducing the boy and the chest. This two-part structure is continued throughout the collection. Every poem begins with a prologue and is followed by a retelling of a fairy tale. The prologue is visibly set apart from the story by indentation. The actual story usually begins with a traditional opening phrase, like "Once there was" ("Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" (14); "Rapunzel" (61)), "Once upon a time" ("One-Eye, Two-Eyes, Three-Eyes" (58)), or "Long ago" ("The Little Peasant" (35); "Red Riding Hood" (79)). These stock phrases grab the reader's attention and alert her to the fact that a fairy

tale is about to begin.

Each of the sixteen tales of the collection is in turn embedded within the greater frame of the opening poem "The Gold Key". It is within the setting and the tone of this first poem that the other poems are placed. This structure is reminiscent of Russian dolls, where one doll is placed into another and yet another: there is the prologue to “The Gold Key” which introduces the retelling of “The Gold Key” and both in turn introduce and frame the collection as a whole. Each of the remaining sixteen poems is again introduced by a prologue and sometimes ends with a short commentary. Both prologue and commentary frame the story proper.

In “The Gold Key” the story proper is yet again introduced by the use of direct speech and a colloquial way of addressing the readership:

> Attention,
> my dears,
> let me present to you this boy.
> He is sixteen and he wants some answers.
> He is each of us.
> I mean you.
> I mean me. (23-29)

The little boy of the original Grimm story is transformed into a curious and soul-searching teenager, who "wants some answers" (26). He is not content until he has found out what is inside the chest and neither are the speaker nor her listeners ("He is each of us" (27)). They are all looking for answers. Eventually the boy turns the key to reveal the contents of the chest:

> He turns the key.
> Presto!
> It opens this 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.) (44-51)

What has been inside the chest all along are Sexton's transformed tales. They are to provide the answers to the questions the Brothers Grimm have left unanswered. In

this way, Sexton's collection can be read as her sequel to the Brothers Grimm. "The Gold Key" continues the Brothers Grimm's own version by uncovering the secret of the chest and *Transformations* in turn continues this process of unveiling.

The idea of transformation captured in the title of the collection is addressed in this final passage of the opening poem. Sexton compares transforming the Brothers Grimm to the idea of an ordinary piece of stationary functioning as a work of art. This idea is reminiscent of pop art projects, such as Andy Warhol’s painting of Campbell’s soup cans or Claes Oldenburg’s giant sculptures of mundane objects. Pop art was a prominent art movement during Sexton’s time and could easily have influenced her idea of transformation in this collection. Similarly to pop art, Sexton takes ordinary, seemingly well-known and familiar stories and defamiliarizes them by placing them into a new and more modern setting and culture. The modern culture and language for which she adopts the tales is American contemporary culture. The language in her collection is humorous and colloquial and her tales are steeped in the imagery and jargon of American pop culture.

Allusions to contemporary American culture abound in *Transformations*. Rumpelstiltskin is described as not "Sanforized” (8), referring to an American brand-named product that protects cotton from shrinkage, and he speaks "with Truman's asexual voice" (12), possibly a reference to president Harry S. Truman. The girl spinning straw in “Rumpelstiltskin” is described as a “Poor thing. / To die and never see Brooklyn” (35-36) and when she has become queen she is “as persistent / as a Jehova’s witness” (106-107) not to give her newborn away. Other examples of American cultural references are Snow White, who when being revived by the dwarfs for the first time is "as full of life as a soda pop" (100), or the parson in "The Little Peasant", who upon being discovered in his hiding place in the closet stands "rigid for a moment / as real as a soup can" (133-134), again perhaps alluding to Warhol’s soup cans.

In conclusion, Sexton’s *Transformations* continues the female-tale telling tradition by placing a strong female narrator and writer at the center of the tale. The most prominent feature of Sexton’s poetic method is her use of metanarration, in which the witch-poet is a commanding narrator of the text, living both in and outside of

the text. The written word comes alive and seems immediate through the speaker's constant presence and the boundaries between the real-life poet and the witch speaker are ambivalent. The complexity and multidimensionality of her tales is also reflected in her use of orality, colloquial language and direct speech, through which the speaker and teller of tales interacts with the reader. It can be said that *Transformations* has very strong links to the fairy-tale telling tradition of the *conteuses.* Both the *conteuses*' tales and Sexton's tales are characterized by complicated framing structures, orality, metanarration and literary embellishments. However, whereas the *conteuses* placed their tales in the salon culture of seventeenth-century France, Sexton firmly places her tales in the pop culture of modern America, whose language she adopts with ease.

3.3. WOMEN'S ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS: THE FEMININE GROTESQUE

In *Transformations* Sexton continually turns her attention to the way women's roles and relationships are represented in the Grimmean tales and also reflects upon the way women's roles and relationships play out in her own time. Her preoccupation with women's roles and relationships is particularly noticeable in her selection of fairy tales for her own revisions, because Sexton chose many Grimmean tales with prominent female characters like, for example, "Little Snow-White" (*KHM* 53), "Cinderella" (*KHM* 21) or "Little Briar-Rose" (*KHM* 50). Her representations and interpretations of the way women fare in fairy tales and her own time are, however, often deeply disturbing. Few, if any, of the women and their relationships in *Transformations* are viewed in a positive light. Sexton's negative portrayal of women is often coupled with her use of grotesque imagery and language, in which humor and satire combine with ugliness and horror to create monstrous and ridiculous caricatures of reality. However, before delving into the ways in which Sexton uses the grotesque as a driving force for her representation of women's roles and relationships in *Transformations* I find it necessary to clarify briefly what exactly "grotesque" means — beyond its combination of laughter and horror — and particularly to highlight the complex and interesting relationship of the grotesque and the feminine in literary history.

So, what exactly is the grotesque? At its most basic level the meaning of the word "grotesque" originates from its association with the cave, the Latin word *grotto*. The grotesque describes that which is hidden, secret, dark, within and therefore by extension mysterious, unsettling and incomprehensible. Despite its mysterious and hidden quality the grotesque nevertheless excites and beguiles by arousing conflicting emotions. That which is hidden evokes curiosity, anxiety, amazement and awe precisely because it is hidden and unknown. Geoffrey Galt Harpham in *On the Grotesque* excellently describes our relationship to the grotesque in the following quotation:

> When we use the word "grotesque" we record, among other things, the sense that though our attention has been arrested, our understanding is unsatisfied. Grotesqueries both require and defeat definition: they are neither so regular and rhythmical that they settle easily into our categories, nor so unprecedented that we do not recognize them at all. They stand at a margin of consciousness between the known and the unknown, the perceived and the unperceived, calling into question the adequacy of our ways of organizing the world, of dividing the continuum of experience into knowable particles. (3)

The grotesque excites because it cannot be grasped through the use of reason. It eludes definition and comprehension. One of Mikhail Bakhtin's famous examples of the grotesque in his study *Rabelais and his World* are figurines of old, senile, laughing and pregnant hags (found in a famous terracotta collection). He calls these figurines grotesque because they are ambivalent or as he states: "[i]t is pregnant death, a death that gives birth" (25). The idea of old hags being pregnant is grotesque because it is incomprehensible and therefore deeply unsettling. Death and birth, two opposing concepts, are drawn into one and this image creates unrest. In zombies and vampires, important staples in the art of the grotesque, the gothic and horror, death and birth, or more accurately being alive and dead, are also conflated. Zombies and vampires are the undead or living dead. This ambiguity within them creates a sense of mystery and unease, which evokes the grotesque.

Sigmund Freud's concept of the "uncanny", or *das Unheimliche*, as it is known in its German original, provides another useful definition for the grotesque. Freud states that the uncanny is "everything which ought to have been kept secret and hidden

but has come to light" (236, my translation) and is eerie precisely because it combines that which is "homely", or *heimlich/heimelig*, with what is literally "un-homely", uncanny, or *unheimlich* (237). In the uncanny, the known and the unknown, the comfortable and the uncomfortable, exist together in an ambiguous and unsettling relationship. The uncanny arises wherever two opposing concepts conflate and create unsettling emotions within familiar circumstances. Freud uses many examples to illustrate his ideas in his essay "Das Unheimliche". Freud, for instance, believes insanity in man to be uncanny, because something repressed is forcing its way outside into the light (237). Automatism (237), repeated occurrences, like seeing the same number several times in a day (250), inanimate objects appearing as animate (237) or dead people appearing alive (254) are also all popular sites of the uncanny, or the grotesque, according to Freud. And lastly, of course, Freud also holds that female genital organs can have an uncanny quality because the womb is both *heimlich* in that it is the familiar, safe place where one was born as well as *unheimlich* in the sense of a dark, unknown and secret cave:

> Es kommt oft vor, daß [sic] neurotische Männer erklären, das weibliche Genitale sei ihnen etwas Unheimliches. Dieses Unheimliche ist aber der Eingang zur alten Heimat des Menschenkindes, zur Örtlichkeit, in der jeder einmal und zuerst geweilt hat. (258-259)

Freud's association of the feminine with the uncanny is not new in our cultural history. The idea that women are mysterious and defy all logic, the idea that the womb is a scary, man-eating hole and that women's sexuality is frightening and incomprehensible to man has existed for centuries in Western cultural history. Simone de Beauvoir bases her idea of woman as Other on precisely this uncanny relationship she observed man has to woman when writing that "[woman] is the wished-for-intermediary between nature, the stranger to man, and the fellow being who is too closely identical" (140-141) and she continues to cite numerous examples in our cultural history of the representation of women which all align with the idea of woman as an uncanny, mysterious and grotesque being, only half-human.[27]

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[27] In *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir lists many examples of the ambiguous role of women, especially in her chapter "Dreams, Fears, Idols".

In this sense the idea of the feminine grotesque is a tautology because all that is feminine is inherently grotesque in a world in which patriarchy sets the rules on the representation of gender. However, the grotesque has also been used by female artists and writers as a way to write from within the margins in protest against patriarchal oppression. The Gothic novel, for example, thrived in the hands of women at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and is full of horror, the grotesque, the unspeakable. Susan R. Bowers uses the term "feminist grotesque" to refer to the subversive possibilities the use of the grotesque holds for women writers. She believes that the grotesque provides women writers with a way of rebelling against the patriarchal symbolic order (20-21). The grotesque lies outside the realm of patriarchal reason and is therefore more suited to expressing feminine desires for which the patriarchal symbolic order and language is wholly insufficient. The feminist grotesque allows for contradiction, transverses boundaries and celebrates exaggeration, excess and flamboyancy (21-22). It is therefore ideally suited to express the "female wild zone", a term Bowers borrows from Elaine Showalter to express an exclusively female zone in which "images of female freedom and self-determination" dictate reality (19). The "female wild zone" abounds with possibility and escapes the limiting definition of femininity patriarchy holds for women. In the "female wild zone" women find space for self-expression because the "female wild zone", the feminist grotesque, lies outside the boundaries of patriarchal oppression (19).

A characteristic of texts by women writers who incorporate the grotesque is the excessive violation of taboos. Taboos, like the "female wild zone" itself, lie hidden at the margins of our society but when pushed into light they evoke uncanny and grotesque emotions. Much of what we deem taboos in our society are abject, or cast off. The term abject has prominently been used by the critic Julia Kristeva to refer to precisely the grotesque, the horrific, which threatens the patriarchal symbolic order because it escapes definition and reason entirely. The abject is perverted, sick, shameful and corrupted. Examples of the abject cited by Kristeva are often associated with the material, the bodily, as the body itself rests at the margins of our human-ness, our soul: bodily fluids, such as blood, saliva, sweat, semen, pus are all part of the abject, so are dead bodies, cadavers, corpses, cesspools (3). Insanity, madness, incest, perversion and corruption are also part of

the realm of the abject as they escape meaning and reason in the same way and are therefore pushed to the boundaries (15-17). In Kristeva's words the abject is

> ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there quite close but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. [...] Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself. (1)

Transformations is, as Bowers terms it, "a tour de force of the feminist grotesque" (24). The text is filled to the brim with taboos, abjection and mad grotesqueries. Sexton may have based her poems wholly on the Grimmean versions of each tale but she completely turns the Grimmean project upside down. Where the Brothers Grimm desperately tried to cleanse the tales of their corporeal, grotesque and base imagery to present a more wholesome and pure portrait of the rural folk, Sexton reinserts each and every taboo with double force. Her poems in *Transformations* are full of monsters, sex, violence, incest, insanity or even cannibalism and most often these ideas are coupled with the imagery of women to paint a disturbingly grotesque picture of women as presented in the Grimmean tales and her own time.

Sexton's "tour de force of the feminist grotesque" begins on the very first page with the image of the witch-poet as discussed in the previous chapter. The witch-poet herself is an image of a harrowing monstrous feminine. She is not quite a woman but still not quite a monster either but resides somewhere in between, in the same way Sexton as narrator and writer of her own poems resides both in and outside of the text, never quite leaving either realm. Her presence as poet, witch, narrator, woman, commentator, and character in and of her own tales overshadows each and every poem and is the driving force in the spectacle of the feminist grotesque that is her collection.

The image of the witch-poet is, however, by far not the only grotesque image of women in the hands of patriarchy in *Transformations.* In fact, each and every woman and her relationships to others, be it men or women, take on a disturbingly grotesque shape. All women in *Transformations* are portrayed as farcical and wholly unnatural caricatures of women in patriarchy. A case in point is the image

of the virgin portrayed in “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs”, the second poem in *Transformations.* Let me quote the prologue in full:

> 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. (1-13)

Sexton portrays the virgin as a commodity rather than a human being. Traditionally Snow White is thought of as having skin white as snow, lips red as blood, and hair black as ebony.[28] Sexton’s Snow White, or virgin, is not compared to snow, blood or ebony but instead to purchasable luxury commodities: cigarettes, porcelain of Limoges, and French wine. Being made out of porcelain she appears more doll-like than human and mechanically she shuts and opens “her china-blue doll eyes” (6) to the demands of others. The virgin is only a simulacrum of a human being. Devoid of a soul and a will of her own she is passed on from mother to husband. She is obedient in the hands of her mother, opening her eyes to say “Good Day Mama” (9), and she is equally obedient and passive when shutting her eyes to accept “the thrust / of the unicorn” (10-11), or in other words, sexual intercourse with a man. As a doll-woman the virgin hovers uneasily on the margins of human-ness, which makes her appear eerily grotesque. However, it is precisely her obedience, beauty and lack of will, which makes her such “a lovely number” (2) in a patriarchal society. What Sexton points out in her portrayal of virginity is that the image of virginity in patriarchy simply *is* grotesque. A woman, who exists only as a commodity to be passed from her parents to her husband, is only a shell of a human being. At the end of Sexton’s retelling of “Snow White”, Snow White’s

[28] The Grimmean version reads: “Bald darauf bekam sie ein Töchterlein, das war so weiß wie Schnee, so rot wie Blut und so schwarzhaarig wie Ebenholz, und darum ward es Sneewittchen (Schneeweißchen) genannt” (*KHM* 53, 269).

adventures in the house of the dwarfs and her marriage to the prince have not made her any more human. Even Snow White as queen remains nothing but the same mechanical puppet she was at the start of the story. She has literally turned into her own stepmother. Women's fate in patriarchy is indeed hopeless:

> Meanwhile Snow White held court,
> rolling her china-blue doll eyes open and shut
> and sometimes referring to her mirror
> as women do. (161-164)

In Sexton's "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" the female protagonist, the virgin Snow White, is a helpless, soulless pawn in the cogwheels of patriarchy. Her sole role is to obey and to be passed on from one person to another as if she were a purchasable commodity.

In "The Maiden without Hands" the female protagonist suffers a similar fate. In the Grimmean tale "The Girl without Hands" (*KHM* 31) a miller promises his daughter to a wizard in exchange for riches. In order to escape the wizard's claim on her the daughter keeps weeping on her hands so that they are too clean for the wizard to touch. Therefore the wizard orders her father to chop her clean hands off and the father willingly complies. The girl, however, continues to weep on her stumps, and so the wizard is forced to move off without his desired bride. The girl is left behind crippled.

Marina Warner interprets this part of the story as the attempt of a woman to escape male domination and violation of her virginity by way of making herself crippled. She writes that "(o)nly horribly disfigured in this way can she become inviolable and so resist on her own account" (348). Sexton interprets the story differently and is above all fascinated with the desire of men to possess the crippled. Contrary to what Marina Warner says, the wizard does not back off because the maiden is crippled but because she is too clean. Her tears not her handless stumps save her from male violation. The wizard even continues to desire the maiden without her hands. Sexton, seemingly baffled by this fact, elaborates on it in her retelling of the tale:

> The maiden held up her stumps
> as helpless as dog's paws
> and that made the wizard
> want her. He wanted to lap
> her up like strawberry preserve. (26-30)

The lack of hands signifies the girl's helplessness and this is what intrigues and beguiles the wizard. The girl's attraction increases the more helpless she is. The wizard is not the only man in the Grimmean tale who is attracted to the maiden despite or because of her missing hands. The tale continues with the girl leaving her father's house and seeking her fortune in the woods, where the king finds her eating a pear in his garden and is instantly compelled to marry her. In the Grimmean tale, the king's desire for the girl is mostly a feeling of pity as he exclaims: "Wenn du von aller Welt verlassen bist, so will ich dich nicht verlassen" (*KHM* 31, 179). The maiden, the Grimmean tale reads, was "so beautiful and pious" (179, my translation) that the king loved her deeply. Pity, beauty and piety are what attract the king to the maiden according to the Grimms. Sexton seems deeply troubled by this explanation for the king's love, asking the following question in the prologue to her retelling:

> Is it possible
> he marries a cripple
> out of admiration? (1-3)

According to Sexton the king's and the wizard's admiration have nothing to do with the maiden's beauty or purity but instead reflect their "desire to own the maiming" (4) so that they themselves can feel more powerful in comparison. The poem continues:

> A desire to own the maiming
> so that not one of us butchers
> will come to him with crowbars
> or slim precise tweezers?
> Lady, bring me your wooden leg
> so I may stand on my own
> two pink feet.
> If someone burns out your eye
> I will take your socket
> and use it for an ashtray.
> If they have cut out your uterus

I will give you a laurel wreath
to put in its place.
If you have cut off your ear
I will give you a crow
who will hear just as well.
My apple has no worm in it!
My apple is whole! (4-21)

In Sexton's prologue to the story man revels in the shortcomings of women. The lady's wooden leg serves to show off his own two perfectly pink feet. Not only can he bask himself in the mirror of her imperfections but he can use these imperfections to his own advantage. The empty eye socket becomes an ashtray, the place of the missing uterus can be filled with a laurel wreath, a sign of victory. Women in "The Maiden without Hands" are grotesque, helpless cripples and their body parts, be they missing or not, serve as useful items of man's property. Women in Sexton's poems are only half human because their other half is man's lifeless possession, an object.

In the Grimmean tale, after several plot twists, the maiden's hands are eventually restored "through the grace of God because of her own piety" (181, my translation). This leads to the happy ending of the story which sees the king and maiden re-united after years of separation. However, in her own version, Sexton makes a point of showing the king's disappointment when he sees both his wife's hands restored:

and he realized they were his,
though both now unfortunately whole.
Now the butchers will come to *me*,
he thought, for I have lost my luck.
It put an insidious fear in him
like a tongue depressor held fast
at the back of the throat. (111-117)

The king is quite obviously disappointed at his wife's good fortune and is afraid that he himself may now have to face up to the same ill fortune his wife once suffered. One may say that both partners have reached a sort of equality at last but the king wished it was not so because he cannot handle standing on his own two feet without a woman's wooden leg to rest on. In short, what Sexton emphasizes in

both “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs” and “The Maiden without Hands” is that women in patriarchal society are only half-human. The other half is helpless, maimed or soulless, like both the virgin-doll and the crippled maiden. Women exist at the margins of the symbolic order as grotesque empty shells of themselves in continuous servility to men.

Another women’s role which takes on disturbingly grotesque shapes in *Transformations* is that of the mother. In classical fairy tales the role of the mother is typically represented by either the good but absent mother or the wicked step-mother. “Little Snow-White” (*KHM* 53), for example, includes both a good but absent — that is a dead — mother and a wicked stepmother, who is alive but hell-bent on ruining her stepdaughter’s life. The stepmother’s passionate hatred of Snow White is illustrated in a very grotesque manner in the respective poem in *Transformations* by showing the stepmother’s delight at feasting on what she believes to be Snow White’s heart. The poem reads:

> Bring me her heart, she said to the hunter,
> and I will salt it and eat it.
> ………………………………………
> The queen chewed it up like a cube steak.
> Now I am the fairest, she said,
> lapping her slim white fingers. (44-45, 48-50)

The process of the stepmother eating the boar’s heart is represented in all its gory detail. The heart is prepared as if it were a gourmet meal, salted and enjoyed “like a cube steak” (48). Disgustingly and more like an animal than a human being the queen then licks her witch-like fingers after enjoying her sumptuous meal.

Both absent mothers and wicked step-mothers take center stage in many of Sexton’s fairy-tale poems but Sexton focuses above all on the devouring mother, as the image of Snow White’s stepmother chewing on Snow White’s heart already shows in all its gory detail. While Snow White’s stepmother eats her stepdaughter’s heart out of hatred for her, the devouring mother in *Transformations* is most often a mother whose love for her child is so strong that she suffocates and literally devours her child with her love. Similarly to Sexton’s witch-poet the devouring mother is disturbing, grotesque and frightful because she

is so overpowering. The Grimmean tale "One-Eye, Two-Eyes, Three-Eyes" (*KHM* 130) is a tale about a mother whose love is stronger for her one-eyed and three-eyed children than for her two-eyed child, who is consequently maltreated by both her mother and her sisters. In the Grimmean tale the explanation for the mother's lack of love for her two-eyed child is that she is too common and looks just like other human beings and therefore the sight of her cannot be endured by her mother and sisters. Sexton sees a different explanation for the mother's adoration of the unusual and crippled children as opposed to her normal and healthy child. To Sexton, a mother's heart grows fonder the more helpless her own child is. The end of Sexton's prologue reads:

> When a child stays needy until he is fifty -
> oh mother-eye, oh, mother-eye, crush me in -
> The parent is as strong as a telephone pole. (55-57)

A mother feeds off her children's neediness. An unhealthy and crippled child, like One-eye and Three-eyes, is a mother's delight because they will never be independent but stay with their mother until their death. Sexton's play on the words "mother-eye" (56), homophonous with "mother/I", illustrates the amalgamation of mother and child into one "I", as desired by the mother. At the end of the story Two-eyes, who has successfully traded in her life in her mother's house with that of being the prince's wife at the castle, takes in her sisters to care for them and consequently turns into her own mother:

> Two-eyes was kind to them
> and took them in
> because they were needy.
> They were to become her children,
> her charmed cripples, her hybrids -
> oh mother-eye, oh mother-eye, crush me in.
> So they took root in her heart
> with their religious hunger. (165-172)

Sexton's fairy-tale characters cannot escape their mothers. They are either bound to them in life or transform into them after their mother's death. In either case the mother fully devours her own children. The act of the mother devouring her children out of love is illustrated quite literally in Sexton's rendition of the tale

“Hansel and Gretel” (*KHM* 15). The entire prologue of Sexton’s poem is a love poem from mother to son, in which the mother’s love for her son is illustrated by her desire to eat her son. The prologue begins with the mother likening her son’s various body parts to food. She calls him “Little plum” (1), he is “sweet as fudge” (8) with a “neck as smooth / as a hard-boiled egg” (12-13) and “soft cheeks, my pears” (14). As Bowers notes the poem “moves clearly into the grotesque” when the mother fantasizes about cooking her son in the oven (28):

> I have a pan that will fit you.
> Just pull up your knees like a game hen.
> Let me take your pulse
> and set the oven for 350.
> Come, my pretender, my fritter,
> my bubbler, my chicken biddy!
> Oh succulent one,
> it is but one turn in the road
> and I would be a cannibal! (17-25)

The idea of mother-love as cannibalism is outright grotesque as the “boundaries between self and other merge in a very literal way” (Bowers 28). The mother becomes one with the child by gobbling it up. Hence mother roles in *Transformations* are scarier than they are comforting. Mothers appear as devouring monsters and are just as frightening as the witch-poet of the introductory poem.

However, the juxtapositioning of love with food or eating is not only confined to the love of a mother for her children. In fact, Sexton's use of food imagery and descriptions of eating in *Transformations* is excessive. Body parts or physical appearances are frequently compared to food, particularly vegetables, by way of simile. In "The Maiden without Hands" the maiden's "ten fingers" are "budding like asparagus, / the palms as whole as pancakes" (98-99), in "Briar Rose" Sleeping Beauty's arms are "limp as old carrots" (3) in her sleep and in "Rumpelstiltskin" the queen’s newborn child is "as ugly as an artichoke" (90). Food images also serve as terms of endearment. Rumpelstiltskin is "[n]o bigger than a two-year old / whom you'd call lamb chop" (4-5), and lovers in the prologue to "The Little Peasant" cry to each other "Touch me, / my pancake" (6-7) and in "The Maiden without Hands" the wizard's feelings for the maiden are expressed by him wanting

"to lap / her up like strawberry preserve" (29-30). This obsession with food imagery and eating highlights Sexton's fascination with and use of the grotesque. Treating body parts as food is a juxtapositioning of the animate with the inanimate and therefore a prime site for the grotesque. Detailed descriptions of eating focus on bodily functions and the comparison of the love for someone with the love for food extends love beyond the boundaries of the soul to the body, or corporeal love.

Love, in fact, in *Transformations* is often no more than corporeal love or lust or indeed a social arrangement and never "a marriage of true minds" as other poets might have us believe. Marriage is extremely negatively portrayed in *Transformations*. The poem "The White Snake", for example, modeled after the Grimmean tale by the same name (*KHM* 17) ends, as many fairy tales do, in marriage. Whereas the Grimms present this union of princess and servant as a happy one, ending their tale with the words "da ward ihr Herz mit Liebe erfüllt, und sie erreichten in ungestörtem Glück ein hohes Alter" (*KHM* 17, 117), Sexton views their marriage as "a kind of coffin, / a kind of blue funk" (117-118). Her poem ends with the following lines:

> They played house, little charmers,
> exceptionally well.
> So, of course,
> they were placed in a box
> and painted identically blue
> and thus passed their days
> living happily ever after —
> a kind of coffin,
> a kind of blue funk.
> Is it not? (110-119)

Sexton's view on marriage is grim and dreary in "The White Snake". When married, lovers stop leading active lives and instead participate in a sort of staged play, where they are expected to play house, each acting out their allotted roles to perfection. Since the couple act out their roles so "exceptionally well" (111), they may as well be put in a box, captured at that moment in time for eternity. Their lives have ended, and the rest of their meager existence is lived out in a coffin. Not only has the couple stopped living but they have also turned into one indistinguishable "blue funk" (118), their individuality, their separate lives,

gobbled up by the community of marriage. Sexton's iteration of the fairy-tale refrain "living happily ever after" (116) ironically contrasts with her own view of marriage as death, followed immediately in the next line by the image of the coffin. Yet again, Sexton's poetry becomes effective through her use of irony and unexpected comparisons, in which two opposing ideas are held side by side. Life and death are contrasted to the effect that marriage appears as a grotesque spectacle which dehumanizes both partners and sucks their life force right out of them.

This idea of marriage as an end to a creative, active and fulfilling life is also thematized in her poem "The Twelve Dancing Princesses". This poem is exceptional in that it features active and vivacious female protagonists instead of the passive and apathetic virgin marionettes that take center stage in many of Sexton's poems in *Transformations*. In "The Twelve Dancing Princesses", based on the tale "The Shoes that Were Danced to Pieces" (*KHM* 133) by the Brothers Grimm, twelve princesses secretly escape to a magic underworld every night to dance their shoes to pieces at a magic ball. The king, eager to stop their nightly adventures, promises one of his daughters to the man who can solve the mystery of his daughters' nightly disappearance. One suitor eventually proves victorious, the tale ends in his marriage to one of the king's daughters and the twelve princesses no longer go dancing at night. Although both the Grimmean and Sexton's versions of the tale make it quite clear that the twelve princesses rejoiced at the prospect of the dance,[29] only Sexton imagines what the princesses might feel upon being outwitted and consequently denied their nightly adventure. Sexton's poem ends thus:

> At the wedding the princesses averted their eyes
> and sagged like old sweatshirts.
> Now the runaways would run no more and never
> again would their hair be tangled into diamonds,
> never again their shoes worn down to a laugh,
> never the bed falling down into purgatory

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[29] The Grimmean version reads "[Sie] standen [...] auf, öffneten Schränke, Kisten und Kasten und holten prächtige Kleider heraus; putzten sich vor den Spiegeln, sprangen herum und freuten sich auf den Tanz" (*KHM* 133, 219).

to let them climb in after
with their Lucifer kicking. (146-153)

The princesses are turned from active escapees disobedient of their father's rules into sad, sagging, "old sweatshirts" (147). The princesses seem to be so deeply affected by the prospect of a future without their nightly dances that they "averted their eyes" (146), unable to look the reality of their sister's wedding in the eye. In this passage the word "never" is repeated three times (148, 150, 151), emphasizing the finality of their sister's marriage to the suitor and the stasis that awaits them at the other end. Running away with hair "tangled into diamonds" (149), "shoes worn down to a laugh" (150), "purgatory" (151) and "Lucifer" (153) stand in contrast to what marriage has to offer. Purgatory seems more desirable than marriage, because in purgatory the twelve dancing princesses could enjoy adventures of their own, which are now no longer possible. Again marriage is portrayed in a less than desirable light in *Transformations*.

One of the most poignant examples of Sexton's grim and grotesque view on fairy tales and women's roles within them is her retelling of "Cinderella" (*KHM* 21). This poem epitomizes the bleakness and hopelessness of women's position not only in fairy tales but also in modern American society. In the prologue to "Cinderella" Sexton lists stories of financial success:

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. (1-10)

She continues the prologue with two more examples of a milkman who goes into real estate and a charwoman who collects insurance from an accident before beginning her retelling of "Cinderella". She begins the prologue with the direct address of "You always read about it", which creates intimacy and familiarity and

suggests that this story is a well-known and common story. Each subsequent example of a rags-to-riches story is introduced by the word "Or" (6, 11, 17) suggesting the interchangeability of plotlines, and the final "That story" with which three of her examples end (5, 10, 21) again highlights how this story is typical and well-known. What all of these stories have in common is that they can be read as examples of the American dream. Both the nursemaid and the plumber are immigrants making their way from poverty to prosperity by the possibilities afforded them in the new world, and the milkman works his way up the social ladder by investing in real estate and the charwoman profits from insurance. These are positive stories but through the matter-of-fact and sardonic language used by Sexton, we can see how her view is ironic and not at all positive. In fact, she questions whether this story we hear about all the time is possible at all.

Sexton's "Cinderella" is reminiscent of Hay's poem "The Formula", in which Hay uses similar techniques to poke fun at the impossible goals one can reach in fairy tales. Only in "Cinderella" does Sexton use strong American cultural references and a colloquial and slangy language and extends her disbelief in fairy stories to the idea of the American dream. The nonchalance expressed in the prologue to "Cinderella" continues throughout the poem. As pointed out by Richard Morton"[e]very element of the story is anticipated" (78) in "Cinderella" and therefore assumes familiarity on the part of the reader: "Next came the ball, as you all know" (41), "That's the way with stepmothers" (55) or "So she went. Which is no surprise" (63). At the end of the story Sexton's bleak picture of women's development in fairy tales and her own time comes to a climactic close as marriage is yet again portrayed as a grotesque spectacle:

> 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. (100-109)

Similarly to her portrayal of marriage in “The White Snake” the married couple again stops being alive. Their future is predictable and the “happily ever after” (101) is contrasted with the boring routines the couple will apparently be spared although we know that they will certainly not. Again Sexton uses the image of a doll as she does in “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs” to give the prospect of marriage a mechanical, stale and grotesque image. The married couple’s life is pictured as if they lived “like two dolls in a museum case” (102). In the final two lines Sexton both ends the story with another American cultural reference to the Bobbsey Twins, characters in popular children’s novels, and the final words “That story”, which contrast the story of “Cinderella“ with the stale fantasies of the American dream in the prologue to the story. Both stories seem fictive, no matter how often they may have been told. In as much as women in patriarchy cannot escape their predestined fate and marriage is always a bleak prospect; so the American dream is nothing but an old wives’ tale.

In conclusion, Sexton’s portrayal of women’s roles and relationships in fairy tales and her own time is grim and grotesque in *Transformations*. There are hardly any active and positive female characters but instead her female characters appear to be not quite human. Virgins are doll-like and mechanical, obeying the rules of patriarchy set out for them, mothers are devouring and cannibalistic monsters and the prospect of marriage is nothing but a stale fantasy. However, through the use of the grotesque Sexton can criticize the treatment of and view on women in society. As Bowers writes: “[b]ecause abjection momentarily enforces the dissipation of all meaning — in the face of horror, the subject confronts Nothingness itself — it enables the construction of new meaning” (21). Writing of abjection and the grotesque provides a means of destruction of the status-quo. This can lead to the creation of a new order and this possibility is what gives Sexton’s fairy-tale poems their Utopian quality.

3.4. CONCLUSION

Contrary to *Story Hour* by Sara Henderson Hay Sexton’s fairy-tale collection has

been widely recognized by feminist critics of the Second Wave and beyond. *Transformations,* as well as her other poetry, often stands as an example of a range of women's poetry produced at mid-century and beyond which is characterized by rage and anger at the position afforded to women in patriarchy. Adrienne Rich writes about this type of women's poetry in her 1971 essay "When we Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision":

> Much of woman's poetry has been of the nature of the blues song: a cry of pain, of victimization, or a lyric of seduction. And today, much poetry by women—and prose for that matter—is charged with anger. (48)

Sexton's fairy-tale poetry in *Transformations* is exactly that: "charged with anger". The voice of the witch-poet is sardonic, acerbic and scornful and the stories she tells reveal the basest elements of human society. The women Sexton portrays are freakish caricatures and women's relationships are almost always viewed as negative and destructive.

As I have shown, Susan R. Bowers believes that the use of the grotesque in *Transformations* allows for a way of accessing and expressing the "female wild zone". The laughter and irony expressed in the poems, no matter how sardonic, function as a "subversive weapon [...] at social institutions that oppress women" (31) and ultimately give Sexton's poems a transformative quality that makes change possible.

Other critics have, however, argued that Sexton's fairy-tale poetry is only a chilling example of a woman writing from within oppression and not an expression of her freedom and rebellion. In "*Transformations*'s Silencings" Carol Leventen cites Jane McCabe, who argues that Sexton is "caught in what is a uniquely female trap of simultaneously celebrating herself, exploiting herself, letting herself be exploited, and apologizing for herself" (143). She writes that Sexton's poetry is therefore "the *product* of a society that oppresses women, not a *critique* of it" (143). Leventen also refers to Suzanne Juhasz's concept of the "double bind" of a woman wanting to assert herself and be recognized by a patriarchal society while at the same time trying to articulate her own voice within this society (146; Lucas 73). Leventen, McCabe and also the critic Lucas all see Sexton's poetry in *Transformations* as an

example of a woman caught in this uniquely female trap (Leventen 143, 146; Lucas 73).

Whichever way we may interpret Sexton's "tour de force of the grotesque" in *Transformations,* we can recognize how her fairy-tale poetry has just as much as Hay's in some respects been shaped by the cultural and literary environment during which she was active as a poet or, as Lucas puts it, her poetry is "emblematic of the sociohistorically specific position of women in mid-century America" (73).

Sexton's successor in a similar fairy-tale poetry project is Olga Broumas. She is yet another generation younger and her treatment of the tales equally illustrates this generational gap. Whereas Sexton's world is filled with anger and rage at patriarchal power structures, Broumas's fairy-tale world is a powerfully feminine and feminist world, in which women seem able to escape male oppression.

4. OLGA BROUMAS - *BEGINNING WITH O*

The most contemporary of these three American poets to use fairy tales as a basis for a poetry collection is Olga Broumas. *Beginning with O* is Broumas's first poetry collection published in 1977 and is a collection in three parts. The first part "Twelve Aspects of God" contains poems which are based on Greek myths. The relatively short second part "The Knife and the Bread" contains five poems about topics such as love and marriage and only the last part, "Innocence", contains the poems I will discuss. The last seven poems of this part are all based on a specific fairy tale. Their titles are "Beauty and the Beast", "Cinderella", "Rapunzel", "Sleeping Beauty", "Rumpelstiltskin", "Little Red Riding Hood" and "Snow White". It is these poems which will form the core of my analysis of Broumas's poetry.

In the short biographical introduction of Olga Broumas I will trace her development as a feminist and lesbian poet, who came to poetry within, what I would call, the academic feminism of the 1970s. In the ensuing chapter I will discuss the style and language used in her fairy-tale poetry, which is again strongly influenced by the then emerging feminist movement and its theories about feminine language and poetics. In the final chapter I will take a look at the way women's roles and relationships are dealt with in her fairy-tale poetry before summing up Broumas's legacy as a fairy-tale poet in the conclusion to this chapter.

4.1. OLGA BROUMAS: THE POSTMODERN FEMINIST

Olga Broumas is a Greek-American poet, who was born on the island of Syros, Greece, in 1949. Broumas began her career as a poet at a young age.[30] She wrote her first collection of poetry *ΑΝΗΣΥΧΙΕΣ* (*Restlessness*) in Greek at age seventeen. Only a year later she moved to the United States to pursue a degree in architecture on a Fulbright Scholarship. After graduation Broumas continued further studies in a Creative Writing program at the University of Oregon where she received her M.

[30] All biographical data on Broumas has been taken from Michele Gemelos's article in *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Multiethnic American Literature: A-C.*

F. A. in 1973.

Beginning with O is Broumas's first collection of poetry in English and was published in 1977 and subsequently picked by poet Stanley Kunitz for the Yale Younger Poets Award. Broumas was the first non-native laureate to receive this accolade. Broumas continued her career as a poet from there on and also began to work on translations of Greek poet Odysseus Elias into English. She has since published several collections of poetry, including *Soie Sauvage* (1979) and *Pastoral Jazz* (1983) and in 1999 a collection of her poetic work was published under the title *Rave: Poems 1975-1999.* Since the seventies Broumas has also developed a dedicated career in teaching writing. She currently holds a professorship at Brandeis University where she continues to teach poetry. Today she is known as a well-respected poet, teacher and translator and has won many awards, grants and fellowships throughout her career.[31]

What distinguishes Broumas from her predecessors Hay and Sexton is that she has been openly feminist from the beginning of her career. Broumas was coming of age as a poet during the Women's Movement of the 1960s and 1970s and her awareness of feminist issues is strongly reflected in her development as a poet and teacher. In the seventies Broumas served as poet-in-residence at the Women's Writing Center in Cazenovia, New York, and she later taught at FREEHAND, Inc., "a learning community of women writers and photographers" (Gemelos 326) in Provincetown, Massachusetts, which she had helped establish in 1982. Her involvement with feminist issues is not only reflected in her teaching career but also in her poetry. As Michele Gemelos writes "[t]he social condition of women is at the center of Broumas's poetry" (326). Broumas is not only a feminist but also a lesbian writer and she continually reflects upon the lesbian experience in her poetry. However, Broumas's poetry can not only be characterized as feminist because she incorporates women's political concerns into her poetry but also

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[31] See Olga Broumas's webpage at Brandeis University for a list of her publications, awards and honors:
<http://www.brandeis.edu/facguide/person.html?emplid=99ca745619b7c95028fd58d4cfc40b21d4f16bc4>

because she explores various experimental and free forms of verse in her poetry. This type of experimentation is typical of postmodern feminist writing and shows her awareness of feminist theories of language and expression. As Gemelos writes, "Broumas meshes allusions to Greek mythology and history with contemporary idiom to create verse that explores sensation, emotion, and modes of linguistic and physical expression" (325-326). Broumas's poetry is an attempt to go beyond the written word into the body, which accounts for the rhythmic and free verse nature of her poetry.

In comparison to Hay and Sexton, Broumas's fairy-tale poetry is highly experimental, feminist and postmodern and her fairy-tale versions therefore often appear elusive and enigmatic. However, this is not a flaw of her poetry but the very quality that makes her poetry stand out and communicate her feminist lesbian stance as a poet.

4.2. POETIC METHOD: 'A POLITICS OF TRANSLITERATION'

Beginning with O includes seven fairy-tale inspired poems. These poems are not retellings of fairy tales but instead variations on a theme, motif or element of each fairy tale. Compared to Hay's or Sexton's fairy-tale poems, Broumas's poems seem only very loosely based on each fairy tale. If the title of each poem did not reference the fairy tale in question directly, only a very discerning reader would detect its influence on the poem. Broumas's rewritings are possibly so far removed from traditional story-telling because she aspires to write her poems in a new and of yet barely existing language, a feminine language. She believes that for women to express themselves as women they have to use and find a language of their own.

This yearning for a new language informs her poetry. The poem "Artemis" from the section "Twelve Aspects of God" in *Beginning with O* deals with this need for a language for women to express themselves and illustrates her point well:

I am a woman committed to
a politics
of transliteration, the methodology

of a mind stunned at the suddenly
possible shifts of meaning - for which
like amnesiacs

in a ward on fire, we must
find words
or burn. (26-35)

In this passage Broumas speaks of "a politics / of transliteration" (27-28), which is a concept that pervades her entire poetic work and expresses her commitment as a feminist. In an interview with Karla Hammond Broumas says that the poem "Artemis", from which the above passage is taken, "came out like a manifesto—[…] in articulating my position as a writer" and deals with the issue of "living in a non-articulated context" (34-35). The amnesiacs referred to in the poem do not have words to express themselves hence they live in such a "non-articulated context". This can be compared to women lacking a feminine language to express their own needs in a patriarchal context. Through the methodology of "a politics of transliteration" new words can be created and new connections formed. Without this methodology women cannot continue to live, as is expressed in the final lines: "find words / or burn" (34-35). This idea of amnesiacs frantically searching for words powerfully illustrates Broumas's insistence on the necessity of a feminine language. Patriarchal words are insufficient, or simply forgotten, and new words must be found or else survival is not possible. Broumas's need for a language specifically created for women also strongly reflects her involvement with the feminist politics of her time.

A number of feminist critics of the Second Wave believed that it is necessary to create a language that is specifically female. The language women use is patriarchally charged and not adequate for women. Women who attempt to use patriarchal language to express themselves will inevitably have to adjust their own thoughts to fit the language and thus become women as men rather than women as women. Two French feminist critics of the Second Wave were particularly concerned with the insufficiencies of language for women's needs and were

forerunners in the debate around feminine language: Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous.

Luce Irigaray believed in creating what she calls a 'parler-femme'. This women's speech exists outside the patriarchal linguistic system and instead is an alternative system with different modes of representation. Women's speech, according to Irigaray, is metonymic rather than metaphoric, which means that connections within language are made by juxtaposition rather than by asserting their similarity (Robbins 155). To Irigaray, women's words "are contradictory words, somewhat mad from the standpoint of reason, inaudible, for whoever listens with ready-made grids, with a fully elaborated code in hand" (qtd. in Robbins 156). Irigaray also stresses that language for women is multiple, never linear and always charged with the body. The body is a necessary instrument in expressing yourself. Without the body we cannot speak and therefore the body plays an important role in communication (Robbins 156).

The French feminist Helene Cixous is particularly interested in exposing and breaking up gender biases within language. Language, according to Cixous, is a central element of who we are and how we can express ourselves and therefore has an effect on our subjectivity and formation of identity. Cixous proposes a feminine language called "écriture féminine". To Cixous language is full of ambiguities which can pose both a threat to and a liberation of expression, because ambiguity can both create misunderstandings as well as it can create space for new meanings to form (Robbins 169). Cixous believes that Western culture is built upon the premises of the Enlightenment, which favors reason and logic in language through a system of binary oppositions. In a system of binary oppositions, i.e. sun/moon, good/bad, one side is always better than the other, which creates a world of master and slave, man and woman. To Cixous, binary oppositions are destructive, and she therefore seeks to replace this system by a language which is poetic, rhetorical, excessive and defies logic (Robbins 169-171). This kind of language builds on the idea of "différance" developed by Jacques Derrida. Différance means both difference and deferral and thus expresses the idea that meaning in language is always multiple, deferred and never closed or fixed. This is what Cixous means when she speaks of "écriture féminine". However, Cixous never

provides a clear definition of “écriture féminine”, a manifesto, or rule book, because this would defy the purpose of “écriture féminine” itself. Cixous writes: “It is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, encoded - which doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist” (883).

As will become clear Broumas’s poetry and feminist thinking are strongly influenced by both Irigaray’s and Cixous’s concepts of a feminine language. Broumas’s concept of transliteration also seeks to break up binary oppositions to include multiple meanings in language and incorporates the body as essential fuel and tool for women’s writing. Just like Irigaray and Cixous, Broumas does not provide a clear definition for her concept of a feminine language but instead explores its multiple possibilities in her poetry.

The concept of transliteration thus finds many possible interpretations. At its most basic level, transliteration can be representative of Broumas’s identity as a Greek-American poet, who writes in a language which is not her native tongue. Broumas’s poetry as such can be read as a “multilingual politics”, in which, as Karen van Dyck argues, “Greek American is not a fixed identity, but rather the possibility and politics of haunting and inhabiting more than one language at the same time” (”Olga Broumas’s poetry and translations”). Van Dyck’s definition makes clear how diversely the idea of transliteration as defined by Broumas can be interpreted. Van Dyck ignores the feminist subtext of the “Artemis” poem and uses it strictly to illustrate the multilingual context within which Broumas is writing.

The critic Ruth Salvaggio, however, defines transliteration more closely to an expression of a feminine language. Salvaggio sees transliteration as a strong characteristic inherent in lesbian writing:

> For me, this “transliteration” happens through a crucial intervention in language that I continue to find so characteristic of lesbian writers—and their varied efforts to transpose, transmutate, connect “thing to thing”. (”Skin Deep” 59).

Salvaggio, as I understand, speaks about an effort to shift meaning in language and

to reconnect meanings in a new way, a way acceptable and useful to the lesbian experience. Salvaggio's interpretation points to the idea of language as having multiple meanings and as being constantly deferred, as in Derrida's concept of "différance", which Salvaggio here refers to as "efforts to transpose, transmutate, connect 'thing to thing'". Salvaggio also points out Broumas's emphasis on the sound "O" in her poetry, as in the title of her collection *Beginning with O* and prominent in her poem "Artemis", in which she speaks of a language

> like a curviform alphabet
> that defies
>
> decoding, appears
> to consist of vowels, beginning with O, the O-
> mega, horseshoe, the cave of sound. (19-23)

Again Broumas speaks of a language that cannot be grasped with the linguistic codes available to us, but "that defies decoding" (20-21). This language is circular and signifies both beginning and end in a permanently spiraling motion. Salvaggio includes the importance of the body to Broumas's poetics in her interpretation of the meaning of the sound and letter "O", when she writes that this sound expresses "the power to circle and spiral around the body" ("Skin Deep" 59)[32] The idea of transliteration and the meaning of the sound "O" as interpreted by Salvaggio is certainly more in line with Broumas's urgency to "find words / or burn". Without words the female or lesbian identity cannot be expressed and is therefore non-existent.

However, the idea of transliteration spawns yet another facet of interpretation. *Beginning with O* is written in a mythological and fairy-tale context and can therefore also relate to the transliteration or transmutation of canonical texts into a feminine language and context. Harries points out that transliteration not only refers to the creation of a new language but also to the creation of new stories. She insists that "[Broumas] 'transliterates' or re-forms the old stories, omitting some

[32] Ruth Salvaggio includes an excellent and expansive analysis of the meaning of the sound "O" both for Broumas and herself in her introduction to *The Sounds of Feminist Theory: "*Preface: Hearing the O: Is the Motion of Words like Sound?"

elements, emphasizing others, to make them part of her new and dangerous vision of the world" (136). In this sense, Broumas's re-writings of the tales are new stories which try to explore the traditional tales from the standpoint of a different identity and need for language.

Broumas's belief in the need for a feminine language and her urgency to "find words / or burn" also finds ample mention in her fairy-tale poetry in *Beginning with O* and is the main topic of Broumas's poem "Rumpelstiltskin". This poem is based on the traditional tale by the same name by the Brothers Grimm (*KHM* 55). In the Brothers Grimm's version of this tale, a young girl is locked into a room and forced to spin straw into gold or else she must die. Rumpelstiltskin, a sort of fairy dwarf, comes to her rescue and transforms straw into gold for her but every time he does so, he makes the girl give him a promise. The last and fatal promise the girl makes is to give Rumpelstiltskin her first-born child. Sure enough, the girl soon marries the king and has a child and Rumpelstiltskin comes to claim it. The queen, however, loves her child and does not want to give it to the creature. Eventually, the imp agrees that the queen may keep her child if she can guess his name in three days. After failing to guess the correct name two nights in a row, the queen sends out a messenger who by chance happens upon the imp's cottage in the woods and overhears him sing:

> Heute back ich, morgen brau ich,
> übermorgen hol ich der Königin ihr Kind;
> ach, wie gut ist, daß niemand weiß,
> daß ich Rumpelstilzchen heiß! (*KHM* 55, 287)

So the next night the queen guesses his name correctly and the imp becomes so angry that he tears himself in two, swearing at her: „Das hat dir der Teufel gesagt, das hat dir der Teufel gesagt" (*KHM* 55, 288).

One of the central concerns in the story is the naming of the imp. The queen must find the right word, the right name, or else her offspring has to be sacrificed. The queen quite literally must "find words / or burn". The queen succeeds and is powerful only through her speech, her knowledge of a language, a name not her own. Upon guessing correctly, Rumpelstiltskin accuses her of having conversed

with the devil. There is seemingly something very powerful and dangerous connected to the knowledge of the right words, of how to name things.

Broumas's poem on Rumpelstiltskin homes in on exactly this theme of the fairy tale as her variation is deeply concerned with the insufficiencies of language and the need to find names for new experiences. Her poem is written in free verse and opens with a twenty-line stanza on the experience of lesbian love. Lesbian love is described as an intense sensation, where pain and pleasure converge to become indistinguishable:

> You
> saying
> I don't know
> if I'm hurting or loving
> you. I
> didn't either. (8-13)

Pain and love cannot be distinguished by the lovers, the same way "you" and "I" visually converge on the page into one, sharing a line, the same space (12). After a stanza break the speaker asserts

> I have to write of these thing. We were grown
> women, well
> traveled in our time. (21-23)

The speaker expresses a need to relate the experience of lesbian love in writing. There is an urgency in this desire reflected in the "have to" as well as the fact that the women are already "grown" (21). This suggests that the need to express and put into writing this feeling between women is long overdue.

This stanza is followed by a four stanza passage of a conversation between the two lovers, in which they try to find a new language for themselves and their feelings towards each other. The passage deals with the importance of naming, of finding new words for each other — a habit which the women have to learn rather than are confident and experienced in. This passage illustrates their effort of putting their feelings towards each other into words:

To name
yourself beautiful makes you as vulnerable
as feeling
pleasure and claiming it
makes me. I call you lovely. Over

and over, cradling
your ugly memories as they burst
their banks, tears and tears, I call
you lovely. Your face
will come to trust that judgment, to bask
in its own clarity like sun. Grown women. Turning

heliotropes to our own, to our lovers' eyes. (31-42)

The emphasis in these lines is on the act of finding words for each other. "To name" has a prominent place at the end of the line (31) and "I call you lovely" is repeated twice as if it had to be drilled to make sense (35 and 38-39). Only over time can trust be established between the two lovers and can the experience become natural and achieve a "clarity like sun" (41). The image of heliotropic plants used in the last line is powerful as it suggests a natural, repeated pattern, which the lovers have to acquire like second nature to always turn to themselves or other women, instead, as they have been taught by a patriarchal society, towards men. The passage also illustrates the pain and struggle connected to discovering and accepting lesbianism. Past memories (”ugly memories”, 37) are painful (”tears and tears”, 38) and have to be comforted and overcome before embracing lesbianism with the natural rhythm of heliotropes.

The following three-stanza passage elaborates on these "ugly memories" of the previous passage, likening the act of denying lesbianism and living in an unarticulated context to that of biting fingernails:

Fingernails
growing back
over decades of scar and habit, bottles
of bitter quinine rubbed into them, and chewed
on just the same. (44-48)

Using the language of patriarchy and living by its rules has created "decades of scar and habit" (46) and all efforts to conform, to stop biting fingernails, have failed.

Now the fingernails are finally growing back and new feelings of joy emerge:

> Laughter. New in my lungs still, awkward
> on my face.
> ……………………………………………………….
>   Two
> women, laughing
> in the streets, loose-limbed
> with other women. (43-44, 48-51)

Released from the denial of their lesbian feelings, the women celebrate with laughter outside in the streets. This laughter still feels new and unknown and requires getting used to. The compulsive habit of fingernail biting has been overcome and is instead replaced by a new feeling of freedom, a loose-limbedness. Broumas's idea of laughter as a reaction to oppression is reminiscent of Cixous's call to women "to break up the 'truth' with laughter" (888). In her seminal essay "Laugh of the Medusa" Cixous sees laughter as a way of escaping and rebelling in the face of oppression. Laughter is a way of incorporating the body into speech and of expressing feminine language, which is per se a language that extends beyond language itself into the body. Therefore Cixous urges that "[y]our body must be heard" (880). In Broumas's "Rumpelstiltskin", the women's bodies are heard through their laughter in the streets, which they can feel in their "lungs" (43), their faces (44) and their limbs (”loose-limbed", 50).

The three passages of the poem so far have dealt with the experience and feeling of lesbian love, the effort of finding words to describe and accept this love and eventually with the liberation, a feeling of joy, when lesbianism can be expressed freely. However, this new-found freedom can still only be expressed through laughter, since language is lacking the words to express it. The next passage expresses this lack of an appropriate language for lesbian experience:

> How to describe
> what we didn't know
> exists: a mutant organ, its function to feel
> intensely, to heal by immersion, a fluid
> element, crucial
> as amnion, sweet milk
> in the suckling months.

Approximations.
The words we need are extinct.

Or if not extinct
badly damaged (54-64)

Lesbianism is likened to a “mutant organ” (56). The word “mutant” suggests that lesbianism is abnormal, deviant and even monstrous, whereas the metaphor “organ” underlines the importance of the body to Broumas’s construction of lesbian identity. Feelings and thoughts run through the body, through the “mutant organ”, whose function it is to feel intensely. Lesbianism also has powers of healing. This “mutant organ” can, however, not be described adequately. Lesbianism is at a loss for words. To Broumas, language for the lesbian experience does not exist. The words to describe it with are “extinct” (62), “badly damaged” (64) or only “[a]pproximations” (61). The search for words continues in the final passage of this poem, which begins and ends with the crucial word “tongue”:

Tongues
sleepwalking in caves. Pink shells. Sturdy
diggers. Archaeologists of the right
the speechless zones
of the brain.

……………………………………………………

We both know, well
in our prime, which is cleaner: the cave-
dwelling womb, or the colonized
midwife:

the tongue. (76-80, 90-94)

The tongue is personified in the first stanza and turned archaeologist. This personification of a body part yet again highlights Broumas’s incorporation of the body into language. The tongue is not quite awake yet (”sleepwalking”, 77), perhaps disorientated in its dark cave, the mouth. Its digging ground is the right half of the brain, which is generally associated with the imagination and artistic abilities but is “speechless” (79) since the left hemisphere of the brain is commonly known to be responsible for articulating language. The tongue is therefore digging

for a new kind of language in the more imaginative zone of the brain, the zone which is not reigned by logic and reason. In the final lines of the poem Broumas calls the tongue "the colonized / midwife" (92-93). The tongue is not clean or pure like "the cave-dwelling womb" (91-92) but colonized or sullied with patriarchal speech, the law of the father. The tongue has been infiltrated with words and rhythms which are not fit to speak about oneself from a lesbian standpoint.

In conclusion, Broumas uses the traditional tale of "Rumpelstiltskin" as inspiration for a poem on lesbian identity and the need for a feminine language. She homes in on the theme of "naming" or finding the right words, which is crucial in the traditional tale, and likens this with the experience of lesbianism, where finding the right words is just as important for survival. Whereas the queen in the traditional tale sends a messenger to find out Rumpelstiltskin's name, Broumas sends the tongue on archaeological diggings in the imaginative side of the brain. Broumas's project is, however, open-ended and devoid of the happy ending found in "Rumpelstiltskin". Her "politics of transliteration" defy clear definition and the language she seeks to find is elusive and cannot be pinned down. Her explorations into feminine language are, however, a constant in Broumas's fairy-tale poetry and her efforts to translate traditional tales into a lesbian and feminist context feature in every one of her poems.

4.3. WOMEN'S ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS: THE LESBIAN CONTINUUM

Women's roles and relationships are a major topic in Broumas's fairy-tale poetry in *Beginning with O*. Broumas is particularly interested in exploring lesbian relationships and various concepts of sisterhood, be it between lovers, friends or relatives. The experience of being a lesbian but living in a world in which heterosexuality is the norm and patriarchal ideas on gender push women to the margins of society is particularly addressed in Broumas's strongly feminist revisions of fairy tales.

In many of her fairy-tale poems Broumas repeatedly thematizes the act of openly

asserting one's homosexuality in public, also known as "coming out (of the closet)" in the homosexual community. Generally, the act of "coming out" is positively connoted because it means that a person who is "coming out" is true to their sexual identity and has the courage to live it openly. As the metaphor suggests, the closet is a dark and hidden place and the "coming out" is therefore a step towards and into the light. To Broumas "coming out", or being a lesbian, is a positive but challenging act. As she states in an interview with Karla Hammond:

> To be a lesbian is an act of courage. It goes against everything you've ever been taught. Once you take that step - affirming what you want, you have taken a step towards asserting other desires. (36)

To Broumas lesbianism has freed her into openly pursuing and attesting to other desires in her life and is therefore positively connoted. However, within lesbian theory the very idea of being either "in" or "out" of the closet has also produced negative connotations. Judith Butler believes that the discourse of "coming out" produces an either/or dichotomy: one is either "in" or "out" of the closet. The "coming out" is only meaningful because of its binary opposite of being inside the closet. Therefore the same act of being "out" produces the being "in", or the closet, over and over again because it can only derive its meaning from its opposite. As Butler writes, "[i]n this sense, *outness* can only produce a new opacity; and *the closet* produces the promise of a disclosure that can, by definition, never come" (309). To Butler, the discourse of "coming out" only exists within heterosexual norms and the act of "coming out" therefore reinforces these norms. A lesbian cannot express her sexuality by the act of "coming out of the closet" if she did not act within heterosexual norms. The closet therefore is only a reinforcement of the heterosexual matrix, into which one is persistently pushed back by leaving the closet, or as Butler writes, it is a "'coming out' into the avowal of disavowal, that is, a return to the closet under the guise of an escape" (310).

Despite Broumas's positive attitude towards her lesbianism she also shares Butler's view, when she attests that lesbianism "has created problems in my life" and sees that courage is necessary "once you've asserted that you are put outside the norms of society" (36). To Broumas, too, "coming out" into the light, into freedom, as the metaphor suggests, at the same time marks you as an outsider

within heterosexual norms. The "coming out" functions as a double bind or as Butler states, the closet constantly reproduces and reinforces itself.

This act of becoming a lesbian or coming out of the closet and the problems associated with this are a recurring theme in Broumas's fairy-tale poems in *Beginning with O*. She uses fairy-tale imagery and themes to illustrate what it means to live life as a lesbian, to assert one's desire openly.

In the short poem "Beauty and the Beast" Broumas focuses on the act of transformation. This is also the central theme of various versions of this traditional tale, like the very first written version of the tale by Madame de Villeneuve entitled *La Belle et la Bete* or modern popular versions of the fairy tale as, for example, the Disney film version. In this tale a spell has been cast on a handsome prince which transformed him into a beast and he can only be transformed back into a prince if he finds someone who loves him despite his ugliness.

In Broumas's poem the transformation that takes place is a transformation from pain to pleasure, or, as I would argue, from living within heterosexual norms to openly expressing one's homosexuality. In the first stanza of the poem years of pain turn into joy:

> For years I fantasized pain
> driving, driving
> me over each threshold
> I thought I had, till finally
> the joy in my flesh would break
> loose with the terrible
> strain, and undulate
> in great spasmic circles, centered
> in cunt and heart. I clung to pain (1-9)

By letting go of pain the woman-speaker can let out a feeling of joy, which is felt intensely both emotionally, in the "heart" (9), and bodily or specifically sexually, in the "cunt" (9). The experience of pain, related in the above passage in both line 1 ("For years I fanatsized pain") and line 9 (”I clung to pain"), is repeated twice more in the poem: "Pain / is the only reality" (13-14) and "Pain the link / to existence" (18-19). Pain transpires as an inevitable emotion, the speaker has to suffer when

living within the heterosexual matrix. However, embedded within repetitions of pain is Broumas's description of heterosexual sex, in which the feelings of both happiness and desperation converge into one:

> I rolled
> on the linoleum with mirth, too close
> to his desperation to understand, much less
> to help. Years
>
> of that reality. (14-18)

Interestingly, it is the woman-speaker who experiences "mirth", whereas the male lover experiences the "desperation" to which the woman-speaker is "too close". Pain and pleasure seem indistinguishable. The woman-speaker is drawn to both desperation and laughter, being so close to her male lover that she seems to identify with his feelings of desperation. Eventually, the woman-speaker finds herself alive with passion for another woman and literally scares her male lover away with laughter. The pain seems to have vanished and been replaced with a powerful feeling of passion:

> The boy
> fled from my laughter
> painfully, and I
> leaned and touched, leaned
> and touched you, mesmerized, woman, stunned
>
> by the tangible
> pleasure that gripped my ribs, every time
> like a caged beast, bewildered
> by this late, this essential heat. (22-30)

The verbs "mesmerized" (26), "stunned" (26), "gripped" (28) and "bewildered" (29) emphasize the force of her passion and the awe with which the speaker experiences her final transformation, in which she has turned away from her male lover to experiencing female flesh. The speaker herself is overcome by this passion without actively being able to steer her passions, which is made visible by the use of the passive voice in this passage. In the last lines there is the only direct reference to the traditional tale "Beauty and the Beast". The speaker feels like "a caged beast" (29) whenever her passions or sexual heat overcome her. The image

of the beast is powerful and again emphasizes the strength of her feelings. The image of the beast can further be read as suggesting that lesbianism is being viewed as a monstrous or deviant form of sexuality. However, the beast is also caged, which emphasizes that lesbianism is not free but forbidden or restricted. The beast if read as lesbianism reverses the transformation of the traditional tale. In the traditional tale the beast transforms back into the handsome prince. The prince is handsome, whereas the beast is ugly and monstrous and therefore not desirable. In Broumas's poem the woman-speaker figuratively turns into a beast and experiences incontrollable and mesmerizing passion. The transformation from woman into lesbian is like that of prince into beast but contrary to the traditional tale it is a desirable though violent transformation. The metaphor of "the caged beast" also reiterates the idea of the closet, as discussed by Butler. The cage itself, the holding back and being kept within are what ultimately produce the beast and make it so powerful. The woman-speaker first has to be stuck inside the closet to experience what it means to come out of the closet and thus the binary opposition is kept alive. However, the woman is still "a caged beast" even when outside the closet because the closet simply reproduces itself by the very act of "coming out".

Broumas's poem "Sleeping Beauty" also thematizes the act of becoming a lesbian. In this poem sleep is a metaphor for not having become a lesbian yet, or being inside the closet. The lesbian is only really awake when she stands by her convictions and openly asserts her lesbianism. The speaker awakes properly in the third and final passage of the poem upon her lover's kiss:

> City-center, mid-
> traffic, I
> wake to your public kiss. Your name
> is Judith, your kiss a sign
>
> to the shocked pedestrians, gathered
> beneath the light that means
> stop
> in our culture where red is a warning, and men
> threaten each other with final violence: *I will drink*
> *your blood.* Your kiss
> is for them
>
> a sign of betrayal, your red

lips suspect, unspeakable
liberties as we cross the street, kissing
against the light, singing, *This*
is the woman I woke
from sleep, the woman that woke
me sleeping. (35-54)

In the traditional tale of "Sleeping Beauty"[33] a prince kisses a sleeping princess awake from her one-hundred-years' sleep after heroically fighting his way through the brambles that kept her safe and encloistered from the outside world. In Broumas's poem the prince is a woman named Judith. Judith is the rebellious heroine of the Book of Judith of the Old Testament, who in order to save her countrymen beheads the enemy general Holofernes in his sleep. The use of the name Judith in Broumas's poem can therefore be considered as a way of showing the courage and sense of rebellion necessary to openly kiss another woman in public. The Judith in Broumas's poem does not have to fight her way through the brambles as in the traditional story of "Sleeping Beauty" or behead the enemy general, but stand up against prejudice. The most heroic act of Judith is that of kissing in public, which illustrates that becoming a lesbian is, as Broumas says, "an act of courage" ("Interview" 36). The pedestrians represent the heterosexual norm, which Judith's kiss has betrayed. In this culture red stands as "a warning" (42), whereas in contrast, within the lesbian experience the color red is both sensual as well as it suggests freedom ("your red / lips suspect, unspeakable / liberties", 48-50). Liberated the two women break out into singing and merrily rejoice in their newfound freedom. Contrary to the poem "Beauty and the Beast" the experience of coming out of the closet is a wholly positive, if courageous, act in this poem. Relationships among women, or lesbianism, are also positively portrayed whereas relationships between men and with men are shown in a negative light. As the poem suggests, whereas women kiss, men fight and drink each other's blood.

This negative portrayal of relationships with men is another recurring theme in the fairy-tale poems in *Beginning with O.* Men rarely feature in Broumas's fairy-tale poetry except at the sidelines and are always an oppressive and negative force.

[33] See, for example, Charles Perrault's "La Belle au bois dormant" or the Brothers Grimm's "Dornröschen" (*KHM* 50).

Women in a world of men suffer only abuse and loneliness and are therefore encouraged to seek companionship in other women rather than in men. Out of Broumas's fairy-tale poems "Cinderella" is the poem that deals most urgently with patriarchy as an oppressive force hampering women's development and their relationships to other women. The traditional tale "Cinderella"[34] and even more prominently its 1950 Disney animated version has spawned a slew of feminist criticism in its wake. I have already discussed some points of criticism with the tale in connection with Sexton's version of "Cinderella".[35] Particular points within the tale that are addressed by Broumas are the oppressive force of patriarchy on women and its destruction of relationships among women. The poem is written in the first person and begins:

> Apart from my sisters, estranged
> from my mother, I am a woman alone
> in a house of men
> who secretly
> call themselves princes, alone
> with me usually, under the cover of dark. I am the one allowed in
>
> to the royal chambers, whose small foot conveniently
> fills the slipper of glass. (1-8)

The speaker is alone in a man's world surrounded only by men. As a consequence the speaker is separated from women in her life. She is without mother or sister, as pointed out in the very first two lines of the poem. The emphasis in the first stanza is on the feeling of alienation and loneliness of the speaker. The words "estranged" (1) and "alone" (2, 5) are placed prominently at line endings, together with "men" (3), "secretly" (4) and "allowed in" (6), which suggest that "the house of men" (3) is a secret and closed off society, hard to get access to. The speaker, however, has successfully made it into "the royal chambers" (7) by literally making herself fit in, the way her "foot conveniently / fills the slipper of glass" (7-8). This suggests that living as a woman in a patriarchal society requires women to adjust and bend to the rules of patriarchy. If the slipper fits, you are in, if it doesn't, you are out and consequently excluded from society and its riches, represented by the royal

[34] See, for example, the Brothers Grimm's version "Aschenputtel" (*KHM* 21).

[35] See chapter 3.3.

chambers and their princes. However, the speaker in "Cinderella" bemoans her life at the princes' palace. Despite its riches, the speaker feels that she has been lured by the promises made by men into their royal world:

> The princes spoke
> in their fathers' language, were eager to praise me
> my nimble tongue. I am a woman in a state of siege, alone
>
> as one piece of laundry, strung on a windy clothesline a
> mile long. A woman co-opted by promises: the lure
> of a job, the ruse of a choice, a woman forced
> to bear witness, falsely
> against my kind, as each
> other sister was judged inadequate, bitchy, incompetent,
> jealous, too thin, too fat. I know what I know. (14-23)

The speaker calls herself "a woman in a state of siege" (16), which conjures up images of war. The besieging of women by men is as forceful and brutal as an act of war. The poem continues with a similar type of violent language. The speaker is "co-opted" (18), "lure[d]" (18), "ruse[d]" (19), "forced" (19) and "judged" (22) by the princes, by men. The issue Broumas addresses here is that of women being fooled and lured into the world of men by the success and respect they can achieve through it. If women choose not to participate in this world they remain outcasts and are consequently not praised or allowed into the royal chambers. This passage also addresses patriarchal language, or a language not her own. The princes in her poem use "their fathers' language" (15), a language the speaker is unfamiliar with. However, the speaker has learned the language and adapted to their ways of speaking and is consequently praised for her "nimble tongue" (16). From the princes' point of view, the male point of view, her ability to learn and speak their language is positively noted and deserves praise. However, from the speaker's point of view, a female or lesbian point of view, learning the fathers' language is a sign of corruption and deceit.

The speaker in "Cinderella" appears as a male-identified woman, because she lives in a world of men, where she is judged by, praised by and dependent on men. The dangers and consequences of male identification for women is widely discussed in lesbian theory. Some lesbian theorists believe that women have to identify

themselves through women instead of men to become truly emancipated. The lesbian activist group the Radicalesbians, formed in 1970, argued that all women who are not lesbian are male-defined. The Radicalesbians held that women can only be independent if they are lesbian, because only lesbians exist outside the boundaries of male identification. As long as women are within the boundaries of patriarchy, part of what society defines as "woman", they cannot be free. The only way a woman is no longer a woman but thwarts the system is by way of sexual orientation, because sexual orientation is what keeps women in check. In the 1970 manifesto "The Woman-Identified Woman" by the Radicalesbians they wrote the following on male identification by women:

> Lesbian is a word, the label, the condition that holds women in line. When a woman hears this word tossed her way, she knows she is stepping out of line. She knows that she has crossed the terrible boundary of her sex role. [...]For in this sexist society, for a woman to be independent means she can't be a woman - she must be a dyke. That in itself should tell us where women are at. It says as clearly as can be said: women and person are contradictory terms. For a lesbian is not considered a "real woman. " And yet, in popular thinking, there is really only one essential difference between a lesbian and other women: that of sexual orientation - which is to say, when you strip off all the packaging, you must finally realize that the essence of being a "woman" is to get fucked by men. (Paragraph 3)

To the Radicalesbians, sexual orientation is the only difference between lesbians and non-lesbians, or women. Heterosexual women are consequently always male-defined. In order to escape male identification women must become free of heterosexuality. Monique Wittig holds a similar attitude to the Radicalesbians. She also believes that only lesbianism can truly liberate women. In her influential essay "One Is Not Born A Woman", she writes:

> Lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is not a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically. (108)

According to Wittig only the lesbian can escape the limitations of patriarchy. Economically or politically, lesbians are not dependent on men, because they do not participate in the roles reserved for them in society, such as being tied to men in marriage, and consequently being dependent financially, or bearing children.

Ideologically lesbians are not women because they escape the identification through the female myth of “woman is wonderful”, or the feminine mystique. In Broumas’s “Cinderella” the speaker is identified by and dependent on men economically, politically as well as ideologically. She is praised for being a woman (”eager to praise me / my nimble tongue”, 15-16) and is economically dependent on the riches provided. The same is true for the traditional tale of “Cinderella”. The women in Cinderella - the stepmother, the stepsisters and Cinderella herself - all vie for male acceptance. True liberation and success in their lives is the marriage with the prince, which is their ultimate goal. Through the prince they can achieve economic, political and ideological success as full members of society.

As a further consequence of male identification the woman-speaker in Broumas’s “Cinderella” has to betray other women to enjoy the inclusion in patriarchy. She has betrayed her kind in order to be part of what she believed is a better world. As the poem continues the speaker notices her mistake and the unhappiness that ensued when living in a house of men:

> What sweat bread I make
>
> for myself in this prosperous house
> is dirty, what good soup I boil turns
> in my mouth to mud. Give
> me my ashes. A cold stove, a cinder-block pillow, wet
> canvas shoes in my sisters’, my sisters’ hut. Or I swear
>
> I’ll die young
> like those favored before me, hand-picked each one
> for her joyful heart. (24-32)

The woman-speaker would rather live in poverty if it meant to live in her “sisters’ hut” (29) than to live in prosperity in a patriarchally defined world. She would happily trade the riches of “sweat bread” (24) and “good soup” (26) in for “ashes”, “[a]cold stove, a cinder-block pillow, wet / canvas shoes” (28-29). As a central theme of the poem “Cinderella”, Broumas bemoans the lack of sisterhood in a patriarchal world. For Broumas, the participation of women in patriarchy may grant them more prosperity but as a consequence will leave women feeling lonely, estranged and wishing for death. The “joyful heart” (32) for which women are

selected and integrated into male society turns black when the joy within her heart is not shared with her sisters. The importance of sisterhood for the wellbeing and survival of women is a central theme in lesbian theory. In the same pamphlet as quoted above the Radicalesbians write that they believe that "[o]nly women can give to each other a new sense of self" (Paragraph 8). Women's identity has to be shaped in relation and with reference to other women rather than to men. Therefore it is important for women to band together and support each other in their struggles for a world not defined by patriarchy. Traditional (e.g. Brothers Grimm) and pop-culture (e.g. Disney) retellings of "Cinderella" stand in stark contrast to the beliefs in the value of sisterhood as proposed both by lesbian and non-lesbian feminist theorists. At the heart of these tales lies the betrayal and abuse of "Cinderella" by her very own stepsisters and stepmother. The tale shows a gruesome relationship of women to each other as Cinderella is alone in a world of women. The tale would and could take a completely different turn if the house of women, in which Cinderella finds herself, gave support and love to each other rather than be judgmental of and abusive to each other. The only salvation for Cinderella lies in the union with the prince, which her step family is trying to prevent as best as possible. Again, a heterosexual union is seen as the ultimate goal and salvation for Cinderella. A heterosexual union is preferable to a relationship to other women. As I have shown Broumas's poem paints an entirely different picture. To Broumas sisterhood brings the desired salvation for women whereas patriarchal identification and relationships with men bring only death, as the poem concludes in its last stanza: it is either a life among women or "I'll die young" (32).

The importance of relationships among women are stressed throughout Broumas's fairy-tale poems. Positive relationships among women are not only realized in sexual lesbian relationships but as any kind of bond between women. This includes friendships among women, mother-daughter relationships, as well as sexual relationships. As Broumas stated in an interview: "I see lesbianism as primarily an affectional rather than a sexual preference" ("Interview" 36). This affectional preference can be understood as any meaningful relationship women share with each other. Broumas understands lesbianism in the same way as Adrienne Rich, who prefers the terms "lesbian existence" or "lesbian continuum", because lesbianism has a "clinical and limiting ring" ("Compulsory" 239). To Rich, "lesbian

existence" or the "lesbian continuum" encompasses many different forms of relationships or experiences among women and shared by women throughout women's lives and their shared history ("Compulsory" 240). Actual sexual experience or the desire to have sexual relationships with women is not a sufficient definition for "lesbian existence". Rich believes that because patriarchy has limited "lesbian existence" to its clinical definition of lesbianism, i.e. its erotic and sexual definition only, it has also removed the erotic from other female bonds, like friendship, comradeship or mother-daughter relationships. Rich does not understand the erotic as simply confined to the body itself but as an omnipresent energy shared by women ("Compulsory" 240). In this context Rich quotes Audre Lorde, who in her essay "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" also outlines the erotic as an omnipresent energy when she writes that the erotic is "(t)he sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual" (341). Therefore Rich encourages relationships of all forms between women and considers all these relationships to be part of the "lesbian continuum", where women can experience joy, or the erotic, together, be it physical, emotional or any other form of joy. As Rich writes:

> If we consider the possibility that all women [...] exist on a lesbian continuum, we can see ourselves as moving in and out of this continuum, whether we identify ourselves as lesbian or not. ("Compulsory" 240)

This understanding of lesbianism is strongly echoed in Broumas's fairy-tale poetry. When Broumas speaks of lesbian experience she not only refers to the sexual component of the patriarchal definition of lesbianism but to the full range of lesbian experience centered around the idea of shared joy.

The poem "Cinderella" does not see female bonds as erotic lesbianism but as a form of sisterhood, essential for women's survival. The traditional tale denies the need of women to form bonds with each other but instead women are pitted against each other in a continual struggle for male acceptance. Broumas's poem "Snow White" traces a woman's journey from having close bonds with her mother, to denying her mother when seeking fulfillment in a heterosexual relationship, to finding her way back to her mother's bosom. The poem begins with a powerful image of three generations of women in a close and essential relationship to each

other:

> Three women
> on a marriage bed, two
> mothers and two daughters.
> All through the war we slept
> like this, grand-
> mother, mother, daughter. Each night
> between you, you pushed and pulled
> me, willing
> from warmth to warmth. (1-9)

Three women share a marriage bed and also seem bound to each other as if by marriage. Their relationship to each other is close and they turn to each other for warmth in difficult times of war. The image painted here by Broumas is warm, soft and tender and perfectly illustrates the deep bond that connects women across generations. In the course of the poem, however, the speaker grows apart from her mother and instead turns to find fulfillment in a heterosexual union, in which the speaker ends up "repelling / [her] husband's flesh" (32-33), and wanting to re-unite with her mother. The final lines of the poem read like a love poem to the speaker's mother:

> Defenseless
> and naked as the day
> I slid from you
> twin voices keening and the cord
> pulsing our common protest, I'm coming back
> back to you
> woman, flesh
> of your woman's flesh, your fairest, most
> faithful mirror,
>   my love
> transversing me like a filament
> wired to the noonday sun.
>
> Receive
> me, Mother. (68-81)

Not having found the fulfillment the speaker sought in a heterosexual union, she turns back to her own mother. Unavoidably the speaker is drawn to her mother; she is "[d]efenseless" (68) and "naked" (69), pierced by her intense love. Again, the speaker finds ultimate companionship and love in the relationship to another

woman, her own mother. The journey in "Snow White" is circular, from mother to male lover and back to mother. In the traditional tale of "Snow White" the relationship between women, that of stepmother and daughter, is the destructive force in the tale. Both stepmother and daughter vie for the role of most beautiful woman in a patriarchal world and can therefore not find companionship and support in each other but are pitted against each other. In Broumas's version, women are each other's reflection and find beauty in their relationship to each other ("flesh / of your woman's flesh, your fairest, most / faithful mirror", 74-76). In the traditional "Snow White" the mirror is a reflection of women as they appear in a patriarchal world. The mirror allows for only one woman to be the most beautiful in the world and therefore women must battle against each other. In Broumas's poem women are each other's mirror and therefore women can be each other's companion and relationships among women can be multiple. These relationships do not have to be lesbian in the clinical definition of the term but exist along the "lesbian continuum", the experience of shared joy among women.

In conclusion, in her fairy-tale poems Broumas breaks up the supposedly 'natural' heterosexual bond between man and woman, which always defines women as other, and instead creates a world in which women form powerful and essential relationships with each other. These relationships are not necessarily lesbian in the clinical sense of the word, but are relationships between women along the "lesbian continuum" of shared joy. In Broumas's fairy-tale worlds women can reconnect with their own selves and bodies through the creation of powerful female bonds. Whereas traditional fairy tales often insert a wedge between women, which stop them from forming meaningful relationships, Broumas removes these obstacles and lets women roam freely in a world not governed by patriarchal norms.

4.4. CONCLUSION

In comparison to Hay and Sexton, Broumas certainly appears to be the most experimental and consciously feminist revisionary poet of fairy tales in this triad. This is not surprising, considering that Broumas is the youngest of these three

poets and was therefore coming of age at a time when Second Wave feminism was beginning to take roots in the United States and Europe, and continued to develop as a poet and feminist when feminism was in full swing on both sides of the Atlantic. Developing as a poet within a community of feminist thinkers, such as the Women's Writing Center in Cazenovia, New York, or FREEHAND, Inc. would have provided, Broumas shows a much stronger awareness of feminist issues. The same active and conscious engagement with feminist issues would not have been possible for the earlier poets Hay and Sexton because they were not and could not have been educated in and exposed to a similarly feminist culture. Hay's poetry was written before the feminist movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s and therefore lacks the type of feminist awareness Broumas and so many of the women poets of the 1970s and onward show. Sexton's poetry, in turn, may have been received and interpreted as outright feminist by some later feminist critics but Sexton herself was not and could not possibly have been as consciously feminist as critics might perceive her to be. As her biographer Middlebrook observes, Sexton was, in fact, somewhat ambiguous about her role as a feminist writer (*Biography* 365). This is only natural since Sexton began writing poetry at a time when the type of academic feminism of later years had not yet developed and could therefore not have had an impact on her socialization as a writer.

Within this feminist awareness, Broumas is also able to openly acknowledge and relate to a female lineage of writers. She quotes a number of female artists and writers in her poetry, such a Sappho ("Bitterness") or the feminist poet Sue Silvermarie ("Snow White") and in two of her fairy-tale poems Broumas also quotes Anne Sexton directly ("Cinderella", "Rapunzel"). This shows her awareness and engagement with a tradition of female writers who rewrote myths or fairy tales in their poetry. Hay does not display such an awareness, but rather tries to connect with traditional male forms, hiding her female approach behind her use of conservative forms and personae. Sexton, in turn, shows equally little awareness, possibly out of a disregard for certain female writers in her time. As Smith argues, many poets in Sexton's time "chose to distance themselves from female precursors and even contemporaries whose work risked dismissal by postwar arbiters of greatness" (44). This collective ignorance perhaps made it impossible for her to acknowledge other women writers in her work. Broumas, seeking and finding

acceptance within feminist communities, would not have had such problems but could openly place herself within a tradition of female writers.

And lastly, an important characteristic of Broumas's fairy-tale poetry is that she has a more positive view on women's roles and relationships, which is not shared in the bitterness and sarcasm of some of Hay's and certainly Sexton's work. Broumas makes us believe that a world in which women can live unhampered by discrimination and sexual stereotyping is indeed possible.

5. CONCLUSION: A COMPARATIVE READING OF "RAPUNZEL"

Each poet's version of the fairy tale "Rapunzel" will now be analyzed side by side to provide a comparison of the three poets, highlighting both their similarities and differences. The fairy tale "Rapunzel" (*KHM* 12) is one of only six fairy tales all three poets have chosen for their poetic revisions. Through this analysis it will become clear how Hay, Sexton and Broumas show a female fairy-tale lineage that goes from a more formal conservatism (Hay) to an expression of rage and anger through the use of the grotesque (Sexton) to a conscious feminist postmodernism (Broumas). While each poet may have her own style and viewpoint, all three poets nevertheless are above all concerned with women's roles and relationships in their fairy-tale revisions.

Sara Henderson Hay's version of the fairy tale "Rapunzel" is, as all of her poems in *Story Hour,* written in the sonnet form. Within this short fourteen-line poem Hay does not retell the entire plot of the traditional fairy tale but homes in on only one plot element of the tale for her revision. Interestingly, Hay's version suggests a change of plot to the traditional tale. In the Brother's Grimm version a young woman is imprisoned in a tower by an old witch and is eventually rescued by a prince, with whom, after some twists of plot, she ends up living happily ever after. In Hay's version there is no witch but only a young woman who has fallen in love with a man who does not return her love. Although the man had promised himself to her, he does not keep his promises. The poem is spoken in the woman's voice and illustrates feelings of heartbreak and unrequited love:

> Oh God, let me forget the things he said.
> Let me not lie another night awake
> Repeating all the promises he made,
> Freezing and burning for his faithless sake;
> …………………………………………………………..
> I knew that other girls, in Aprils past,
> Had leaned, like me, from some old tower's room
> And watched him clamber up, hand over fist. . . .
> (1-4, 9-11)

Typical of Hay's fairy-tale poems "Rapunzel", too, is turned from fairy tale into a

realistic story. The tower, in which Rapunzel is imprisoned in the traditional tale, is no longer her actual prison but more like a metaphorical prison of her heart and not unique or magical but common, as many girls just like her lean from "some old tower's room" (10) to await their lovers. In Hay's version there is no witch and no one actually climbs up braided strands of hair. Nevertheless the image of hair is repeated twice in the poem. However, both uses of hair are metaphorical:

> Seeing his face, feeling his hand once more
> Loosen my braided hair until it fell
> Shining and free; remembering how he swore
> A single strand might lift a man from Hell. . . .
> ……………………………………………………………..
> I knew that I was not the first to twist
> Her heartstrings to a rope for him to climb.
> (5-8, 12-13)

In the first example hair is a sign for Rapunzel's beauty. Her lover praises her hair, telling her that a "single strand" of her hair is enough to make a man happy, "to lift a man from Hell" (8). In the second example our association of hair with the word "heartstrings" (13) comes from the knowledge of the traditional tale, in which not heartstrings but hair is fashioned into a rope for the prince to climb up into Rapunzel's tower. In Hay's version the lover does not pull at Rapunzel's hair but at her heartstrings, twisting and pulling them to make a place for himself inside her heart, her tower.

Contrary to the traditional tale, Hay's version has no happy ending but ends with the sad but necessary realization that the girl should have known all along that she was not going to be the last one her lover would woo: "I might have known I would not be the last" (14). Hence Hay's version is a realistic wake-up call that a woman should not believe all the promises made to her by a man but that she may be fooled and lose her heart. Hay's "Rapunzel" is an excellent illustration of Hay's key techniques in revising fairy tales into lyric poems: she uses the sonnet form, focuses only on one element of the story and lets an often silenced character of the traditional tale speak from her point of view, which is all too often a lot more realistic and down-to-earth than the traditional tales.

In comparison, Sexton's version of "Rapunzel" is completely different in the kind of techniques used to fashion fairy tales into poems of her own. Hay's version appears very compact and innocent compared to Sexton's much longer, sprawled out, embellished and outspoken version of the same tale. However, both strongly consider the role of women in the traditional tale. Sexton's version is focused mainly around the relationship of the witch and the girl in the tale and is prefaced by a lengthy prologue centered around a sexual relationship between two women of different ages. The poem's prologue is full of references to this relationship between an older and a younger woman:

> A woman
> who loves a woman
> is forever young.
> ……………………………
> 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
> ……………………………………..
> hold me, my young dear,
> hold me . . .
> (1-3, 7-16, 23-24)

The prologue considers an incestuous lesbian relationship between an aunt and her niece. In a desire to stay "forever young" as expressed in the first three lines of the poem, an old aunt seeks to find a reflection of herself in a younger copy of herself. In line 14 the old and young bodies are brought into contact, reflecting each other: "Old breast against young breast"; and in line 16 the aunt urges her niece to touch a copy of herself. The need of the older woman to find reflection in the younger is expressed by her desperate cry to "hold me, my young dear, / hold me" (23-24) as if the old aunt would literally break into pieces without her niece's support. The cry of the aunt to be held by her niece is repeated two more times in the prologue (27-28, 50), which only emphasizes the aunt's dependence on the

affection of her niece. The aunt continues to romanticize her niece's much younger and fresher body and urges her to give it over to her:

> Put your pale arms around my neck.
> …………………………………………………
> Give me your skin
> as sheer as cobweb,
> ………………………………………………..
> Give me your nether lips
> all puffy with their art (29, 32-33, 36-37)

The niece's arms are "pale" (29) and not discolored or scattered with liver spots, her skin is "as sheer as cobweb" (33), and even her labia are still full of the "puffy" collagen of youth (37). In their union the aunt fantasizes that the two of them can keep out of society, living a life of their own and to themselves:

> 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. (43-49)

In having each other, the two women need not confront anybody else. They can keep out of "the cesspool" (44) reserved for other women. They are both stronger and better than other women and they do not require men. The prologue ends with a repetition of the first three lines of the poem, but this time Sexton's neologism "mother-me-do" in the preceding lines gives these first three lines a new meaning:

> They play mother-me-do
> all day.
> A woman
> who loves a woman
> is forever young. (56-60)

Sexton refers to the aunt's and niece's sexual play as "mother-me-do" (56), which sounds like baby talk and thus infantilizes their relationship to each other. "A woman / who loves a woman / is forever young" is therefore not necessarily a

woman who keeps young and attractive but one who remains forever a child. The two women never leave their mother-child relationship.

In Sexton's prologue of "Rapunzel" we can recognize Sexton's characteristic style of her fairy-tale poetry in *Transformations* and can see how it differs wildly from Hay's more conservative and perhaps pleasant or tame revisionary poetry in *Story Hour.* The tale of "Rapunzel" is rendered uncomfortable by Sexton because she reads a sexual relationship into the relationship of the witch and the girl of the traditional tale. Sexton also addresses the taboo of incest by creating a prologue in which an aunt fondles her much younger niece. This creates unrest and a dark and dismal setting for the subsequent retelling of the tale proper. Another typical characteristic of Sexton's fairy-tale poetry visible in her version of "Rapunzel" is the strong presence of the narrator. In "The Gold Key" Sexton presents herself as the "middle-aged witch, me"[36], making herself a witch-poet for her collection and thus creating an eerie bridge between fiction and reality. This bridge is upheld in "Rapunzel", too. The aunt speaks in the first person in the prologue as if she were both narrator and protagonist. The aunt can also be read as being synonymous with the witch, or "Mother Gothel", in the story proper: "Ah ha, cried the witch, / whose proper name was Mother Gothel" (80-81), since she, too, imprisons a girl in a secret tower crying "Hold me, my young dear, hold me" (106). The witch, or Mother Gothel, in turn is not only synonymous with the aunt of the prologue but can similarly be read as the same person as "the middle-aged witch" — a witch who tells stories, just like the traditional Mother Gothel does. In short, aunt, witch, Mother Gothel, narrator, poet or "middle-aged witch" all appear to be one. The borders between teller and protagonists and reality and fiction are elusive.

Eventually, Rapunzel imprisoned in her tower is discovered by a young prince, just like in the traditional tale. At first Sexton's Rapunzel is "dazzled" (123, 124) by this man, as she has never before seen such a creature. Their union is unavoidable just as it is scripted in the Brothers Grimm, to whose plots Sexton firmly sticks. With Sexton's characteristic worldly-wise, nonchalant and matter-of-fact voice their happily-ever-after is sealed:

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[36] See chapter 3.2.

> 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. (145-152)

The marriage to the prince is contrasted with the witch's and Rapunzel's game of "mother-me-do" (146). Whereas the aunt-witch of the prologue was hoping to escape "the cesspool" (44), creating a world of their own for herself and her niece, the ending of the poem shows that this is not possible. Marriage to a man is an inescapable fate, no matter how hard the witch tried to conceal Rapunzel from the outside world. There is no hope or alternative, because the world must be "made up of couples" just the way "[a] rose must have a stem" (151-152). "Rapunzel" again shows how Sexton cannot see a new vision for her fairy-tale characters but finds women trapped in patriarchal society with no way of escaping. Her worldview is bleak, dark, and full of anger at the *status quo*, which is reflected in her dismal and grotesque depiction of women's roles and relationships in the Grimm's and her own time. As I have outlined previously many critics have commented that Sexton's fairy-tale poetry does not create an alternative and more positively connoted image of women but, in fact, perpetuates and regurgitates the helpless and dismal position of women in patriarchal society.[37] In the words of critic Karen Michalson Sexton "does not use fantasy to critique, challenge, or depart from consensus reality. Sexton's fairy tales are instead what I call an 'anti-critique' of the real world, meaning that Sexton uses fantasy to confirm rather than question 'the order of things' (100). No matter whether we choose to agree with Michalson's assessment of Sexton's use of fantastical and grotesque language as an "anti-critique" or with Susan R. Bowers's more positive view on the subversive function of Sexton's grotesque fairy-tale poetry[38], it is certain that Sexton's view on women's roles and relationships is bleak and affords little to no way of escape.

[37] See chapter 3.4.

[38] See chapter 3.3. on "the feminist grotesque" by Susan R. Bowers.

Olga Broumas's poetry is much more positive than Sexton's and certainly creates the idea that women can have fruitful and empowering relationships with each other. Interestingly, Broumas's "Rapunzel" poem is prefaced with a direct quotation from Anne Sexton: "A woman / who loves a woman / is forever young" (71). Broumas's use of a quotation by Sexton shows that she is aware of a female genealogy of writers and puts herself squarely within this history of female writers. Broumas's poem also deals with the relationship between women. Her poem, however, gives Sexton's quotation a new meaning because love and sexual relationships between women are more positively connoted.

Broumas's poem is fragmented and elusive. The poem is not a retelling of the tale but only hints at the tale in the imagery used. The poem begins with the speaker urging her lover to get closer to her:

> Climb
> through my hair, climb in
> to me, love
>
> hovers here like a mother's wish.
> You might have been, though you are not
> my mother. (1-6)

The imagery of hair is taken from the traditional tale but in Broumas's poem the lover has to climb through the hair to get inside her lover. As Broumas writes in lines 5 and 6 this lover, presumably female, is not her mother but could have been. The idea of love, possibly erotic love, between mother and daughter echoes Sexton's focus in her version of the tale of an incestuous relationship between an older and a younger woman. Only in Broumas's poem this incestuous love is not negatively connoted, because Broumas's idea of lesbian love exists on a spectrum where the erotic encompasses a much wider definition. In Sexton's poem the erotic relationship between aunt and niece includes the uncomfortable dependency of the aunt on the niece and the aunt's exertion of power over the niece by locking her up in a tower to be enjoyed only by herself. Broumas's poem does not feature a locked tower or chamber. Instead the love between two female lovers is shared equally in "our cloistered garden, our harvest continuous" (28) and is contrasted with the confinements of patriarchy:

> How many women
> have yearned
> for our lush perennial, found
>
> themselves pregnant, and had
> to subdue their heat, drown out their appetite
> with pickles and harsh weeds. (12-17)

In Broumas's poem women crave the shared never-ending abundance of lesbian love and fear a heterosexual life which stumps their passion and starves their spirits. The imagery of "pickles" and "weeds" to dampen one's appetite is taken directly from the traditional tale, in which the consumption of the witch's rampion appeases the mother's appetite but consequently forces the mother to give her newborn child over to the witch. Another direct reference to the traditional tale, is the imagery of hair, which is used in the first few lines of the poem ("Climb / through my hair", 1-2) and is repeated twice more in the poem. In both these instances the image of hair connects the emotional feeling of love with physical love, ultimately involving bodily sensations:

> You let loose like hair, like static
> her stilled wish, relentless
> in me and constant as
> tropical growth. Every hair
>
> on my skin curled up, my spine
> an enraptured circuit, a loop of memory, your first
> private touch. (6-12)

The first use of the image of hair in line 6 contrasts looseness and freedom with the motionless and stationary. The words "static" (6), "relentless" (7) and "constant" (8) are contrasted with the words "loose" (6) and "growth" (9). Freedom and growth appear as immutable and inherent in the love between women. The hair imagery and the collocation of hair with "loose" and "static" in line 6, which both encircle the word hair on the page, add the bodily sensation to both feelings. The poem continues with the bodily sensation of goose pimples expressed by the hair that is "curled up" (10). The image of a circle is repeated in the idea of the spine as "an enraptured circuit" and the "loop of memory" (11). This open and elusive style of Broumas's poetics, which can be felt more readily than expressed in words, is typical of her poetry and reflects her interest and desire in creating a specifically

female language, which in and of itself defies definition. However slippery and difficult to grasp her poetry may be, it does leave the reader with a positive and hopeful image of women's relationships. Contrary to Hay's and Sexton's sinister and disheartening endings to their "Rapunzel" poems, Broumas finishes her version with an upbeat tone and positive imagery:

> I'll break the hush
> of our cloistered garden, our harvest continuous
> as a moan, the tilled bed luminous
> with the future
> yield. Red
>
> vows like tulips. Rows
> upon rows of kisses from all lips.
> (27-33)

The last lines of her poems look to the future, in which the "future / yield" (30-31), the harvest, are not the "pickles and harsh weeds" (17) other generations have fed upon but "tulips" (32). Typical of her poetry, "tulips" is multiple in its meaning as these flowers will both illuminate "the tilled bed" ("bed" as in flowerbed) and represent kisses as in the homophonous "two lips" on "the tilled bed" of lovers.

* * *

As I have shown, Hay's, Sexton's and Broumas's fairy-tale poetry share similarities in that all three of them experiment with form and reconsider women's roles and relationships in fairy tales and their own time. However, each poet does so in a unique and distinctive way, which betrays the generational gap between each poet. Together they present a varied picture of feminist fairy-tale poetry in the latter half of the twentieth century.

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INDEX

"Beauty and the Beast"

Broumas, "Beauty and the Beast"................106–8

Hay, "Sequel"...36, 50-51

"Bluebeard"

Grimm, "Fitchers Vogel" 39

Hay, "Syndicated Column"......................39-42, 44

Perrault, "La Barbe Bleue" 39-40

"Cinderella"

Broumas, "Cinderella" 110-14

Hay, "Interview"..36, 44

Sexton, "Cinderella".....................................87-89

"Godfather Death"

Sexton, "Godfather Death"................................69

"Hansel and Gretel"

Hay, "Juvenile Court"....................................42-43

Sexton, "Hansel and Gretel" 84

"Iron Hans"

Sexton, "Iron Hans"......................................68, 69

"Jack and the Beanstalk"

Hay, "Story Hour"..36-37

"Little Red Riding Hood"

Block, "Wolf"...23

Grimm, "Rotkäppchen".......................................47

Hay, "The Grandmother" 46-49

Perrault, "Le Petite Chaperon" 47

Sexton, "Red Riding Hood" 68, 70

"One-Eye, Two-Eyes, Three-Eyes"

Grimm, "One-Eye, Two-Eye, Three-Eyes" 83

Sexton, "One-Eye, Two-Eyes, Three-Eyes"70, 83-84

"Rapunzel"

Broumas, "Rapunzel"..................................126-28

Hay, "Rapunzel" 120-21

Sexton, "Rapunzel" 70, 122-26

"Rumpelstiltskin"

Broumas, "Rumpelstiltskin"........................99-104

Grimm, "Rumpelstiltskin" 99-100

Sexton, "Rumpelstiltskin" 72, 85

"Sleeping Beauty"

Broumas, "Sleeping Beauty".......................108-10

Hay, "The Sleeper".................................51-53, 54

Sexton, "Briar Rose"...85

"Snow White"

Broumas, "Snow White".......................82, 116-17

Grimm, "Little Snow-White"........................18, 80

Hay, "One of the Seven Has Somewhat to Say". 36

Sexton, "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs".. 70, 72, 78-79, 82-83, 89

"The Frog Prince"

Grimm, "The Frog Prince"..................................55

Hay, "The Marriage" 54-56

"The Girl Without Hands"

Grimm, "The Girl Without Hands" 79-82

Sexton, "The Maiden Without Hands"....79-82, 85

"The Gold Key"

Grimm, "The Gold Key"......................................63

Sexton, "The Gold Key".........................63-72, 124

"The Little Peasant"

Sexton, "The Little Peasant" 70, 72, 85

"The Shoes That Were Danced to Pieces"

Grimm, "The Shoes That Were Danced to Pieces" 86-87

Sexton, "The Twelve Dancing Princesses" 86-87

"The White Snake"

Sexton, "The White Snake"...........................67-86

"The Wonderful Musician"

Sexton, "The Wonderful Musician" 69

Atwood, Margaret...40

Aulnoy, Marie-Catherine de.......................20

Bakhtin, Mikhail 74

Barthes, Roland 25

Beauvoir, Simone de...............16, 22, 75-76

Bechtolsheim, Barbara 69

Bettelheim, Bruno................................6-7, 17
Block, Francesca Lia....................................23
"Wolf" 23
Bowers, Susan R. 76-77, 84, 90, 125-26
on "the feminist grotesque" 76
Broumas, Olga
"Artemis" 98
"Beauty and the Beast"................................106-8
"Cinderella"..110-14
"Rapunzel" 126-28
"Rumpelstiltskin" 99-104
"Sleeping Beauty" 108-10
"Snow White" 82, 116-17
on "coming out".. 105
on sisterhood 114-15
Butler, Judith.................................105-6, 108
Carter, Angela...........................23-24, 40, 64
on old wives' tales.. 65
Cixous, Helene...............................96-97, 102
conteuses............................ 19-22, 29, 65–66
style of 20
Daly, Mary..16
Darnton, Robert.......................................7, 10
Derrida, Jacques.....................................96-98
Desy, Jeanne 23-24
Dickens, Charles 4- 6
Disney, Walt 14-15
Beauty and the Beast...................................... 106
Cinderella 110, 114
Snow White... 15
DuPlessis, Rachel.................................. 24, 27
Dyck, Karen van..97
Einstein, Albert 4-6
fairy tales
as a literary genre 8–9
canon formation 19
history of.. 10–15
Freud, Sigmund...75
Friedan, Betty 59-60
Gemelos, Michele 92, 93, 94
Gilbert, Sandra and Susan Gubar............18
Grimm, Brothers5, 11-14, 16, 18-21, 24, 28-29, 43, 58, 62-64, 71-73, 77, 85, 114, 120, 125
"Fitchers Vogel" 39
"Little Snow-White" 18, 80
"One-Eye, Two-Eye, Three-Eyes" 83
"Rotkäppchen"... 47
"Rumpelstiltskin" 99-100
"The Frog Prince".. 55
"The Girl Without Hands" 79-82
"The Gold Key"... 63
"The Shoes That Were Danced to Pieces" 86-87
characteristics of Grimm fairy tales 14
Kinder- und Hausmärchen 12, 14, 18, 20
Haase, Donald..17
Hall, Caroline 67
Hammond, Karla 95, 105
Harpham, Geoffrey Galt..............................74
Harries, Elizabeth3, 11-13, 19-22, 64-66, 98
compact vs. complex tales............................... 21
on *conteuses*............................. 19-22, 29, 65–66
Hay, Sara Henderson
"Death of H.D., a Prominent Citizen"................ 44
"Dr. S — Advises a Worried Mother"................ 44
"Juvenile Court" 42–43
"Letter to the Town Council" 44
"Local Boy Makes Good" 44
"Message to the Vigilantes" 44
"One of the Seven Has Somewhat to Say"......... 36
"Only Son" 36
"Photograph Album" 36
"Sequel" 36, 50-51
"Story Hour" 36-37
"Syndicated Column"............................ 39-42, 44
"The Benefactors"... 36
"The Dragon" 53
"The Fairy Godmother"............................... 36, 53
"The Formula"....................................... 37-38, 88

"The Grandmother" 46–49
"The Interview" 36, 44
"The Marriage" 54-56
"The Princess" 36, 53-54
"The Sleeper" 51-53, 54
"The Witch" 36, 53
dislike for free verse 34
on marriage 50-56
on sentimentality 49
use of the sonnet form 34, 35
Heiner, Heidi Anne 27
Herrmann, Claudine 27
Holmes, John 61-62
Irigaray, Luce 96
Joyce, Christa Mastangelo 53
Juhasz, Suzanne 91
Kinard, Agnes Dodds 31, 32, 33, 34, 45
Kristeva, Julia 76-77
Leventen, Carol 91
Lieberman, Marcia 17
Lorde, Audre 115
Lucas, Rose 91
Lurie, Alison 23
Lüthi, Max 6-7
Lyotard, Jean-François 25-26
on metanarratives 26
Matthews, Jean V. 33
Mayer, Mathias 9-10
McCabe, Jane 91
Michalson, Karen 125
Middlebrook, Diane Wood .. 59, 60, 61, 62
Minard, Rosemary 23
Morton, Richard Everett 88
Murat, Henriette Julie de 20
Ostriker, Alicia 27-28, 49, 68
Perrault, Charles5, 11-14, 16, 19-21, 24, 28-29, 39-42, 45-48, 62, 64, 66
Histoires ou contes du temps passé 11, 19
"La Barbe Bleue" 39-40
"Le Petite Chaperon" 47
Propp, Vladimir 6-7
Puhvel, Jaan 25
Radicalesbians 112, 114
Rich, Adrienne 28, 35, 50, 115
on mid-century women's poetry 90
on the "lesbian continuum" 116
Robbins, Ruth 96
Rowe, Karen E. 17, 65
Salvaggio, Ruth 97-98
Schiller, Friedrich 4-6
Sexton, Anne
"Briar Rose" 85
"Cinderella" 87-89
"Godfather Death" 69
"Hansel and Gretel" 84
"Iron Hans" 68, 69
"One-Eye, Two-Eyes, Three-Eyes" 70, 83-84
Sexton, "Rapunzel" 70, 122-26
"Red Riding Hood" 68, 70
"Rumpelstiltskin" 72, 85
"Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs"70, 72, 78-79, 82-83, 89
"The Gold Key" 63-72, 124
"The Little Peasant" 70, 72, 85
"The Maiden Without Hands" 79-82, 85
"The Twelve Dancing Princesses" 86-87
"The White Snake" 67-86
"The Wonderful Musician" 69
on feminism 118
and pop art 72
on marriage 89
on mothers 84
on the image of the virgin 79
Sexton, Linda 62
Smith, Ellen McGrath1-2, 33-37, 39, 43, 45, 49-50, 53, 55-56, 58, 119, 135
Tatar, Maria 14, 18
The Book of Judith 105, 109
Tismar, Jens 9-10

Villeneuve, Madame de............................106
Wagner-Martin, Linda.................................62
Walker, Nancy..27-28
Warner, Marina..79-80
Wilde, Oscar...24
Wittig, Monique................................ 112-113
Zipes, Jack................7-12, 14-15, 22, 26, 28
on the distinction of folk and fairy tales 8–9

APPENDIX

DEUTSCHE ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die vorliegende Diplomarbeit beschäftigt sich mit der Analyse von Märchengedichten dreier amerikanischer Dichterinnen des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts: Sara Henderson Hay, Anne Sexton und Olga Broumas. Jede dieser Dichterinnen hat in den Jahren 1963 bis 1977 jeweils einen Gedichtband verfasst, der sich vorwiegend mit der Behandlung von Märchenstoff beschäftigt und versucht diesen für das zwanzigste Jahrhundert neu zu bearbeiten. Diese drei Bände sind Sara Henderson Hays *Story Hour* (1963)*,* Anne Sextons *Transformations* (1971) und Olga Broumas' *Beginning with O* (1977).

Im Mittelpunkt meiner Analyse stehen die feministischen Aspekte in den Märchengedichten dieser dreier Dichterinnen. Diese Aspekte sind in den Märchengedichten sowohl auf stilistisch-formaler Ebene sowie auch auf inhaltlicher Ebene zu finden. Obwohl jede Dichterin sich dem Märchenstoff auf eine neue und experimentelle Art nähert und sich dabei besonders auf die weiblichen Rollen in den Märchen konzentriert, unterscheiden sich Stil und Inhalt der Gedichte wesentlich voneinander, da jede Dichterin einer anderen Generation angehört und sich die literarischen und historischen Einflüsse ihrer Zeit auf ihr Schreiben niederlegen.

Dem Hauptteil der Textanalyse der Märchenbände ist eine theoretische Einleitung vorangestellt, die einen kurzen Abriss zur Beschaffenheit und Geschichte des Märchengenres darstellt, sowie einen Überblick über die Bedeutung und Relevanz feministischer Adaptionen von traditionellen Märchen gibt. Abschließend soll ein Vergleich der dichterischen Bearbeitung von "Rapunzel" in Hays, Sextons und Broumas' Werk noch einmal die wichtigsten Merkmale ihrer Märchengedichte unterstreichen.

ABSTRACT IN ENGLISH

This thesis provides an analysis of the fairy-tale poetry of three American poets of the twentieth century: Sara Henderson Hay, Anne Sexton and Olga Broumas. Between the years 1963 and 1977 each of these poets pubished a collection of poetry dedicated mainly to the rewriting of fairy tales for the twentieth century. These three collections are Sara Henderson Hay's *Story Hour* (1963), Anne Sexton's *Transformations* (1971) and Olga Broumas's *Beginning with O* (1977).

As indicated in the title of my thesis, the feminist aspects of these fairy-tale poems lie at the heart of my analysis. These aspects are visible both in form and content of Hay's, Sexton's and Broumas's poetry. Whereas each writer approaches the fairy tale in a new and experimental way and concentrates on the female roles in fairy tales, their poetry differs greatly from each other. This is because each writer belongs to a different generation and the literary and historical context of their time has great bearing on their writing.

My analysis is prefaced by a theoretical introduction, which provides a short outline of the nature and history of the fairy-tale genre, as well as an overview on the importance and relevance of feminist adaptations of classic fairy tales. In closing, a comparative reading of each poet's rewriting of "Rapunzel" once again highlights the main characteristics of their fairy-tale poetry.

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