Power and the powerless in transformations

The Grimm fairy tales have been interpreted in endless ways since they were first written, and probably for good reason—the blood and gore of the original fairy tales do not necessarily make for ideal bedtime stories. However, Anne Sexton's re-imaginings in her poetry collection Transformations are unique—slangy and irreverent, revealing new depths to the stories with which most people are so familiar. Often, Sexton accomplishes these " transformations" by contradicting the stereotypes, traditional roles, and outdated portrayals of femininity featured in the Grimm fairy tales. For instance, she points out how ludicrous it is for a princess to choose a husband based on a contest given for strangers, and then goes on to mock the inaccurate fairy tale image of princesses always demanding more and more difficult tasks to be performed simply to win their favor. Often, these challenges to fairy tale representations of women has the result of giving the poems a feminist slant, especially when one of the main characters in the poem is a young woman. Sexton's versions of Grimm women have depth, intelligence, and a new sense of strength. For instance, in " Hansel and Gretel," Gretel kills the witch to prevent further abuse of herself and her brother. In " Rumpelstiltskin," the miller's daughter (later the queen) escapes a seemingly impossible situation by tricking the men who have previously taken advantage of her, and ends the poem in a position of power without losing her son. Snow White, likewise, exacts revenge on the evil queen who has tried to murder her three times, forcing her to dance on red-hot roller skates until she burns to death. Finally, Briar Rose escapes her father's restrictions and implied abuse and begins to heal from her past on her own terms. In all four of these poems, Sexton depicts a young girl reclaiming power and agency in the face of violence and abuse, and allows

her readers to see that when faced with such a situation, one must do anything in one’s power to get out.

Sexton begins her “ transformation” of “ Hansel and Gretel” in the same manner as the original fairy tale—their family is starving, and the mother decides to prioritize. In lieu of trying to support her entire family with insufficient food, she chooses to allow herself and her husband to eat more comfortably by purposefully leaving her children in the middle of the woods to die. At this point, Gretel is a passive character. Although neither of the children have yet spoken in the poem, Hansel is the one to try and save them. He is the one to overhear the mother’s plan, and he manages to bring them home at first by dropping pebbles to mark their path. However, when he drops bread crumbs that are eaten by birds, the two children are finally lost, “ blind as worms” (102). When they stumble upon the witch’s cottage, and she locks up Hansel in preparation for eating him, he is described as “ the smarter, the bigger, the juicier” child, although here Sexton employs free indirect speech and makes it ambiguous whether that is the opinion of the witch or the narrator (103). Either way, Gretel continues to be underestimated. However, as the witch begins to taunt her about the approaching death of her brother, telling her “ how a thrill would go through her as she smelled him cooking” and other gruesome details, Sexton quietly acknowledges Gretel’s potential, writing, “[s]he who neither dropped pebbles or bread bided her time” (104). Finally, when the witch decides to eat Gretel as well, and tells her to climb into the oven, Gretel speaks for the first time in the poem and tells her, “ Ja, Fraulein, show me how it can be done” (104). By feigning obedience, she tricks the witch into climbing into the oven herself,

then locks the door and lets her burn to death. Not only does Sexton allow Gretel to display ingenuity and strategic thinking, but she also demonstrates a need for a certain kind of bravery—a hardness that allows Gretel to endure not only the abuse and danger she faces from external sources, but also the horror of what she herself must do to escape and return home.

In “ Rumpelstiltskin,” a miller’s daughter is forced to endure imprisonment and the threat of death until she is able to trick both the king and the dwarf, two men who have created her impossible situation. At the opening of the poem, she is abandoned by her father, who tells the king she can spin straw into gold. Although she is unable to do so and her father provides no proof, the king locks her in a room full of straw and tells her to “ spin into gold or she [will] die like a criminal” (18). She is given no opportunity to discredit her father’s claims and no way to escape, save for the dwarf who appears as she cries. To save herself, she is forced to give away first her necklace and then her ring in exchange for him spinning the straw. However, when she finds herself locked in the largest room yet, faced with both the threat of death if she fails and the promise of becoming queen if she succeeds, she has no choice in that moment but to promise the greedy dwarf, who is “ on the scent of something bigger,” her future child, despite how unfair her predicament is (19). At this point in the poem, she has successfully tricked the king, and although one can imagine she doesn’t feel a great deal of affection for him (an inference Sexton doesn’t contradict), at least she has attained a position of power, from which she can begin to regain autonomy. When her son is born, he is “ as ugly as an artichoke, but the queen thought him a pearl” (20). With a son she loves and the threat of death no longer

hanging over her head, she is finally happy. When the dwarf comes to “ claim his prize,” she tries to offer him anything else so he will leave her son alone, but he refuses (20). However, she cries “ two pails of sea water” until he begins to pity her, then sends messengers into the kingdom to find unusual names to escape from this new agreement with the dwarf. When one of them succeeds in discovering Rumpelstiltskin’s name, the queen is able to keep her son, and the dwarf tears himself in half in anger. Finally, Sexton shows the miller’s daughter’s success—although men had placed her in a dangerous and unfair position of what was essentially slavery, she was able to endure long enough to no longer depend on her father, share power with the king, and thwart the dwarf once and for all. Sexton demonstrates that due to the queen’s willingness to barter everything and sacrifice extensively, she is able to emerge unscathed with a child she loves.

Snow White is not portrayed in a particularly flattering manner throughout the poem that tells her story. Sexton refers to her as a “ dumb bunny,” and she seems to be celebrated by both the dwarves and her prince for her beauty alone. However, although not explicitly celebrated, the poem does demonstrate a kind of endurance on her part (8). For instance, when the evil queen’s mirror declares that Snow White is now the fairest in the land, and she vows to kill her, the thirteen year-old girl walks for seven weeks in the woods to reach safety. Although threatened by wolves and snakes and harassed by lewd birds, she manages to escape by skill, force of will, or plain luck, and sleeps for the first time in almost two months at the dwarves’ cottage. She doesn’t demonstrate this kind of survival instinct again for most of the poem, surviving being strangled by lacing, poisoned by a comb, and

killed with a poison apple only because of the dwarves and the prince. At no point in the story does Snow White outsmart the queen, but she does live because her beauty, the most obvious tool she possesses, causes others to protect her. However, after the final attempt on her life, it is implied that she has learned from the experience, and will not allow herself to be put in harm's way again. To ensure her own security, she welcomes her stepmother to her wedding feast by forcing her to dance on red-hot roller skates until she "[fries] upward like a frog," dying gruesomely in front of the other guests as Snow White blithely glances into her mirror (9). Ultimately, the princess isn't saved by intelligence, or even by beauty. Sexton shows that Snow White's real strength lies in her tenacity—the seven-week walk and the ability to stomach burning the queen to death are how she finally is able to guarantee her own safety. Once again, Sexton depicts a young girl forced to escape persecution by whatever means necessary.

" Briar Rose" has a less clear-cut ending than many of the other poems in Transformations, and represents an alternate approach to abuse and misfortune than the three other young women take. Cursed by a fairy at her christening, Briar Rose is fated to prick her finger on a spinning wheel at fifteen and sleep for a hundred years. Terrified, her father tries to protect her with a huge number of rules and restrictions, but only succeeds in being overbearing and creating a claustrophobic environment for his daughter. Sexton tells us that " each night the king bit the hem of her gown to keep her safe," and that the princess " dwelt in his odor, rank as honeysuckle" (109). Despite his efforts, the curse is fulfilled anyway, and Briar Rose's life has been consumed by her father in the meantime. When she finally wakes

up from her hundred-year sleep, it is because the prince kisses her while she lies unconscious, a violation that causes her to cry out. After their marriage, she fears sleep, calling it “ that brutal place,” but tries to deal with her fear by having medicine prescribed and staying away from the prince while she sleeps (111). Here, Briar Rose begins to construct her own boundaries for her life, and regain some semblance of control. Meanwhile, Sexton allows the princess to speak in first person for a large portion of the end of the poem, a privilege characters in other poems aren’t given. Although Briar Rose doesn’t take action against her father and the prince like Gretel or Snow White, she is given a chance to express the difficulty of her past. The second-to-last stanza of the poem, she implies a childhood of abuse as well as rigidity, telling the reader, “[t]here was a theft,” and describing the king “ drunkenly bent over [her] bed, circling the abyss like a shark… thick upon [her] like some sleeping jellyfish” (112). Following this disturbing revelation, the poem ends without a clear resolution—Briar Rose doesn’t triumph like her counterparts, but her voice has been heard clearly. The king is still alive, she is still afraid of sleep, and the prince that kissed her while she lay unconscious is still her husband. The last lines of the poem are questions, expressing her confusion as to where she’s meant to go from here. Asking “ What voyage this, little girl? This coming out of prison? God help—this life after death?” she exhibits a clear desire to move forward and move on, but is unsure how to proceed and achieve real freedom from her past (112). In “ Briar Rose”, Sexton’s “ answer” to the reader is the same—one should do whatever one can to escape abusers and the trauma they cause—but she recognizes as well that sometimes wounds are too raw and victims not yet

strong enough to entirely rid themselves of pain and those who cause it. Sometimes, privately trying to heal against all odds is equally as brave.

In “ Hansel and Gretel,” “ Rumpelstiltskin,” “ Snow White and the Seven Dwarves,” and “ Briar Rose,” Sexton relays the stories of young girls escaping abuse, imprisonment, and attempted murder by relying on their own grit, agency, and emotional strength. She makes it clear to her readers that although they may not be faced with a witch trying to eat them, they may experience analogous situations in the real world, where women often have the most to fear. Her answer to this problem is deceptively simple—sacrifice anything and do whatever you can to save yourself. Even when one isn’t able to escape the people causing one harm immediately, one can still express agency and make one’s story heard in an attempt to begin to heal. Ultimately, Sexton’s answer has less to do with specific actions, and much more to do with reaffirming women’s belief in themselves and their right to agency, love, and respect.