

Diane Wood Middlebrook on: "Her Kind"

Sexton stayed in the Boston suburbs, where she and Maxine Kumin provided each other with unflagging support as they built what Kumin called their "cottage industry" into successful careers. Of the four, Sexton was the first to tap the constraints women felt in conforming to prevailing feminine stereotypes, perhaps because she was developing her art under the psychological influence of a mother identified not with self-sacrifice but with writing. The last poem Sexton wrote for the manuscript of *Bedlam*, "Her Kind," shows her trying to do just that.

Bedlam was due at the printers on 1 August. At the eleventh hour Sexton was still frantically shuffling poems in and out and worrying about Lowell's advice to supply fifteen or so new ones. In arriving at the final manuscript, she shrewdly discarded work that she had been proud to send out for serial publication just a few months earlier. She also made a policy decision: "not a love lyric in the lot," she wrote to Snodgrass cheerfully. She divided the book into two parts, roughly of early and recent work. That first section worried her, because it lacked a keynote, a dominant image, a theme. Riffing through what she called her "bone pile" of discarded efforts, she picked up a piece of sentimental verse that had started life in December 1957 as "Night Voice on a Broomstick" and that she had sent to literary journals without success. In July 1959 she retitled it "Witch" and reworked it into a sixteen-line quasi-sonnet form. Then she broke those lines up into very short pieces with irregular but striking rhymes; in that thirty-eight-line version, "Witch" ended

Who see me here this ragged apparition in their own air see a wicked
appetite, if they dare.

This is the sort of poem Sexton had been writing for workshops throughout her apprenticeship. Like "The Farmer's Wife," "Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward," "For Johnny Pole on the Forgotten Beach," and "The Moss of His Skin," "Witch" is spoken through a mask by a dramatic persona and offers a psychological portrait of a social type. Sexton polished the poem through several revisions, but something about the short lines bothered her. She lengthened them again, this time trying another structuring principle, punctuating the stanza breaks with a refrain: "I have been her kind." The poem now began this way:

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

Through the use of an undifferentiated but double "I," the poem sets up a single persona identified with madness but separated from it through insight. Two points of view are designated "I" in each stanza. The witch (stanza one), the housewife (stanza two), and the adulteress (stanza three) are those who act, or act out; in the refrain, an "I" steps through the frame of "like that" to witness, interpret, and affirm her alter ego in the same line. The double

subjectivity of "Her Kind," as Sexton now called the poem, cleverly finds a way to represent a condition symbolized not in words but in symptoms that yearn to be comprehended. "Her Kind" contains its own perfect reader, its own namesake, "I."

Sexton liked this version. The poem had been through nineteen pages of drafting; as she noted on the final manuscript, "took one week to complete." From that time on, "Her Kind" served as the poem with which she began her readings, telling the audience that it

would show them what kind of woman she was, and what kind of poet. It was a most dramatic gesture, and one that Maxine Kumin disliked (she thought Sexton's readings were hammy), but it was the way Sexton stepped from person to persona. The subjectivity in the poem insists on a separation between a kind of woman (mad) and a kind of poet (a woman with magic craft): a doubleness that expressed the paradox of Sexton's creativity. "Her Kind" is not spoken through a mask, nor is it a first-person narrative like "The Double Image." It calls attention to the difference between pain and the representation of pain, between the poet onstage in print--flippant, glamorous, crafty-- and the woman whose anguish she knew firsthand. "Her Kind" was Sexton's debut as witch; it made the ideal keynote poem for To Bedlam and Part Way Back.

From Anne Sexton: A Biography. Copyright © 1991 by Diane Wood Middlebrook.

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism [1]

Publication:

- Private group -

Criticism Target:

Anne Sexton [2]

Author:

Diane Wood Middlebrook [3]

Poem:

Her Kind [4]

Source URL: <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/diane-wood-middlebrook-her-kind>

Links

[1] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/publication-status/excerpted-criticism>

[2] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/poet/anne-sexton>

[3] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/creator/diane-wood-middlebrook>

[4] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/poem/her-kind>