

Diana Hume George on: An Overview of Sexton's Canon

Anne Sexton would have been sixty years old in November 1988. When she died in 1974, her reputation as an important member of a misnamed and misapprehended movement in modern American poetry was secured. She had become almost entirely identified with the controversial "confessional school," and she was generally regarded as among that mode's most accomplished practitioners. In company with such poets as Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and W. D. Snodgrass, she had risen to fame well beyond the boundaries of New England. She received the Pulitzer Prize and numerous other awards, including nomination for the National Book Award, and fellowships from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Ford Foundation, and the Guggenheim Foundation. She taught at Radcliffe and Harvard, lectured at Bread Loaf, held the Crashaw Chair at Colgate University, and was a full professor at Boston University by 1972. She was much in demand on the poetry reading circuit, where her flamboyant, dramatic performances were celebrated and criticized.

Yet the confessional label had become a trap that prevented readers and critics from interpreting the range of her achievement. Poetic typecasting did not prevent Sexton from writing poems that reached beyond the personal boundaries that ostensibly formed the confessional territory; it merely kept readers from noticing that she had done so. Robert Lowell escaped confinement because of his established reputation and his stature as a major modern poet before the publication of *Life Studies*, the single volume usually cited to mark the beginning of the confessional movement. Sylvia Plath's early death and the strategic release of her late poetry over a period of years combined to make her a cult poet, but one whose niche in the academy was well carved and well deserved. W. D. Snodgrass has long since moved far away from the style and subject that first brought him renown. Only Sexton seemed identified with and limited by the confines of the moment that had given her poetic birth.

The academic feminist movement has been central to a reconsideration of this misdirected judgment. At first feminism's appropriation of Sexton was superficial and constituted another form of limitation. Anthologies of poetry by women kept her work visible, but the selections were predictable and limited to a few poems that celebrated feminist subjects or reflected feminist concerns. "Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman" and "In Celebration of My Uterus" are examples of good work by Sexton kept before a large public. Recent feminist approaches, such as the ones represented in this collection of essays, have cracked open the critical bell jar to clarify the range of her themes, the territory of her poetics, and the radical nature of her vision.

Sexton's early poetry dealt with her recovery from a mental breakdown, the deaths of her parents, her relationship to her daughters, and her suicidal impulses. *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* documented the breakdown and constituted a poetic declaration of independence. The second part of *Bedlam* begins with "For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further," which asserted her determination to pursue the dangerous poetic path that her mentor had urged her to abandon. The second volume, *All My Pretty Ones*, continued to deal with themes established in *Bedlam*, but its major concern was the loss of the beloved others that gave the speaker her fragile sense of identity.

In the early work the confessional label is useful, if limiting. If Lowell and Snodgrass are the fathers of confessional poetry, it is legitimate to claim for Sexton the role of mother. She served her apprenticeship as a daughter figure to both male poets, but they could not validate, on behalf of the reading public, the excruciatingly female statements she was making on behalf of herself and other women. She repeatedly acknowledged her debts to both Lowell and Snodgrass, specifying that the latter's "Heart's Needle" had given her "permission" to write about loss, neurosis, even madness.

That permission could not extend to writing about such experiences from a female point of view, and early criticism of her work clarifies the strength of the special resistance of the critical and poetic establishments to such revelations. We are accustomed to thinking that Sylvia Plath was the first of the female moderns to break these taboos, but, in fact, Sexton was writing in the personal mode well before Plath, and she probably served as an enabling model for some of Plath's more celebrated work.

Her third book, *Live or Die*, which won the Pulitzer Prize, was concerned with a progress from sickness toward health; she was, after all, only "part way back" from Bedlam. While the poetically successful shape of the collection constituted a fiction--Sexton experienced remission in her emotional difficulties but obviously not "cure"--it was a powerful one that spoke to many readers. *Love Poems*, thematically tight and popular, was organized around the project of building a "love's body" through the mediation and transforming power of the beloved.

Critics have located a shift in theme, subject, and style in Sexton's fifth volume, *Transformations*. This collection of modernized fairy tales uses the Grimm brothers' versions of culturally resonant myths to suggest that their meanings are both different from and darker than the public that consumed them had imagined. The volume's title is an elaborate pun; each of the tales turns on a magical transformation, and Sexton transformed each one further in two respects: she updated their contexts and language to point out their applications to and parallels with modern life, and she exposed the dark psychic core of each tale in ways that inverted or even reversed their normative meanings.

In Sexton's hands a genre that appears radically to reverse the normal social order in which the poor become rich, the ugly become beautiful, and the powerless gain power is exposed as deeply conservative in values and reflective of massive anxieties about gender. This was the first, but not the last, time that Anne Sexton engaged in a radical critique of cultural values. In this case Sexton anticipated (and in some respects bettered) cultural analysts such as Bruno Bettelheim.

While *Transformations* marks a shift in style and approach, it is important to recognize that Sexton is still dealing with the subjects that have concerned her from the start: personal transformations from housewife to poet, from sanity to madness, from love to loss, and from life to death were always her subjects. Sexual anxiety, relationships between parents and children, the ambiguity of role reversals were her firmly established territory. Yet the distinction customarily made between the early work and *Transformations* is useful. Henceforth, Sexton would increasingly become what critics have variously called surreal, mythic, visionary, or prophetic.

The *Book of Folly* contains many poems on Sexton's customary themes, but she also becomes more poetically ambitious in the series of poems on which some of her greatness

rests. In "The Death of the Fathers" sequence, she anatomizes the love affair between father and daughter, which deals with seduction, betrayal, and deaths both symbolic and actual. The "Angels of the Love Affair" invokes a religious rhetoric not new to her work, one she employs in more radical form to critique Christianity's central drama in "The Jesus Papers." Her earlier identifications with Christ as the ragged brother and fellow sufferer are not abandoned, but here she begins a sustained consideration of the distance between the female sufferer and the male deity, as he is embodied in the infant and adult figure of Christ. As in *Transformations*, she performs an elegant, impudent misprision of the parental text, exposing its misogyny and the nature of its sacrificial gesture. The quester here is the doubter, but the quest is genuine, such that it is appropriate to call Sexton one of our most important religious poets, as well as an accomplished deconstructor of patriarchal religion.

The Death Notebooks continues the mythic reach, returning first to personal, early material. In "The Death Baby" Sexton re-creates and transforms the psychoanalytic consideration of the "death instinct" and the "repetition compulsion." The subtle but pervasive subtext penetrated by the poem is Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Her earlier suicide poetry was explanatory, self-justifying, and engaged primarily in a poetic form of translation from the language of the suicide; "The Death Baby" embodies theory in mythopoesis. While she was never psychoanalyzed, years of psychotherapy and of reading allowed her to traverse the boundaries between one system of metaphor (psychoanalytic theory) and another (poetry). Here the pitched battle between Eros and Thanatos is enacted at the personal level but is clearly meant to be read as a cultural drama. While gender is not the poem's only or primary concern, the scenario in "The Death Baby" is resonantly feminine.

"The Furies" sequence is not specifically religious or spiritual, but its rhetoric and stance belong to the visionary tradition. The speaker voices the prophecies given to one who sees with spiritually naked eyes the passionate contraries of joy and despair. "O Ye Tongues" is Sexton's rendering of both Psalms and Genesis, in which she invents herself as the god who gives form to poetic voice.

The final phase of Sexton's work is inaugurated by the last volume that she prepared for publication, *The Awful Rowing Toward God*. While many poems in *Rowing* remain impudent and joyous, or suffused with the longing of the quest, it is generally (though not universally) agreed that here the imagery is less powerful, less imaginative, and less successful than in her earlier work. Sexton wrote these poems at white heat over a period of less than three weeks, and it shows. In thematic and tonal terms the project is less ambitious. The voice is increasingly desperate, ready to settle for less than the demands she made upon the deities or the cosmos in previous volumes. The collection ends with a capitulation to the imaginatively small God of an orthodox religious hope. In feminist terms the female voice of rebirth and transformation turns into the conservative voice of feminine supplication.

It is important not to equate the quality of the poems with their adherence to the voice of power and doubt, need and strength, challenge and acceptance established in the middle period; that voice vibrated in the gap between everlasting certainty and everlasting doubt and traveled swiftly and compellingly between the intricate contraries it found or formed. If the need for certainty softened the strong voice, that is not necessarily equivalent to a loss of poetic power--or it need not be. But in this case the loss of voice and the loss of poetic resonance seem to be simultaneous. It is of course possible that a feminist viewpoint permits its politics to interfere with or to define its poetics. A longer perspective may be necessary to settle the issue. The posthumously published work, consisting of *45 Mercy Street* and *Words for Dr. Y.*, was not prepared by Sexton for publication. It therefore lacks her editorial hand and

her selection process. While little has been written about the very late work, individual poems in the posthumous volumes show Anne Sexton still writing some fine poems that deserve to survive.

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