

Helen Vendler on: "Malevolent Flippancy"

It was not the ethical parables of the Bible, or the fertile suggestiveness of Greek myth, but the grim tit-for-tat of fairy tales--where the unsuccessful suitors are murdered, or the witch is burned in her own oven, or the wicked wolf is himself sliced open--that appealed to Sexton's childlike and vengeful mind. The fairy tales and folktales put forth a child's black-and-white ethics, with none of the complexity of the Gospels, and none of the worldliness of the Greeks. It is characteristic of Sexton that she did use the myth of Prometheus--which reads like one of her folktales, with its rebel hero, its avenging father-god, and its grotesque evisceration by a vulture.

Sexton looked, usually in vain, for ways to stabilize her poems outside her increasingly precarious self. She based one sequence on horoscope readings, another on the remarks of her therapist "Doctor Y," another on the life of Jesus, another on the Psalms, another on beasts. The only group that succeeds more often than it falls is the group based on folktales, Transformations. The tales--Snow White, Rapunzel, Cinderella, Red Riding Hood, the Frog Prince, Briar Rose, Hansel and Gretel, and others--gave Sexton a structure of the sort she was usually unable to invent for herself, a beginning, a middle, and an end. Her poems tend, on the whole, to begin well, to repeat themselves, to sag in the middle, and to tail off. She had an instinct for reiteration; she wanted to say something five times instead of once. Her favorite figure of speech is anaphora, where many lines begin with the same phrase, a figure which causes, more often than not, diffuseness and spreading of effect rather than concentration of intensity:

... I will conquer myself. I will dig up the pride. I will take scissors

The tales, as I have said, matched her infantile fantasy; they gave her a clean trajectory; they turned her away from the morass of narcissism. But most of all, they enabled her as a satirist. . . . Sexton's aesthetically most realized tone is precisely a malevolently flippant one, however distasteful it might seem to others.

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