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**“Old Tales in New Skins”: Three Authors Reinvent the Fairy Tales**

„Staré příběhy v novou tváří“: klasické pohádky v převyprávění tří autorek

**DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE**

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## **Abstract**

Key words: Fairy tales, Revisionism, Transformation, Feminism, Poetry, Anne Sexton, Olga Broumas, Emma Donoghue

This thesis focuses on the diverse ways in which three authors and foremost representatives of their respective literary generations – Anne Sexton (1928-1974), Olga Broumas (b. 1949) and Emma Donoghue (b. 1969) – reimagine classic fairy tales. Traceable to the versions of traditional tales as told and collected by the Brothers Grimm, the poetic and prosaic revisions explored in the thesis test the boundaries of literary forms, genres, and narrative structures. As they insist on recasting the well-known stories, characters, and denouements, these authors challenge various social and cultural norms. By foregrounding the creative power of language per se, they all also revivify literary discourse and enhance the possibilities of lyric poetry and narrative prose respectively.

The Grimm's fairy tales are considered to be of the same importance as ancient myth or biblical iconography in the Western cultural tradition. Together, they constitute a canon which not only has stood the test of time but continues to be challenged and revised by authors from different spaces and timelines. One of the prominent traits of these stories is how well they travel; not only through space, between national traditions and continents, but also between genres and individual literary forms. The universality of fairy tales lies in their consistency, yet the familiar blueprint provides enough plasticity for the literary material to be bent, in order to question its meanings, perspectives, and narrative voices. By looking at revisions by authors from various genres and traditions, the thesis maps out the inevitable tendency of the fairy tale to change and adapt to new contexts, and thus demonstrate the variability of the text in its full potential scope.

After all, fairy tales, as they exist in the collective consciousness, are already revisions since their historical roots stem from the oral tradition, marked, above all, by multiplicity and constant change. In this respect, the current, continuing processes of transformation can be viewed not only as adapting the popular tales for modern times and widely familiar to contemporary audiences, but as an attempt to return them to their original, open and plural form. A revision allows for the "original" text to be entered from a new angle and for its established order to be challenged. It also makes us question how the text behaves when it is reshaped from prose to verse narrative and back again.

All three authors introduce a moment of disruption into the engraved stories. They point up the tales' problematic associations with the patriarchal and heteronormative traditions and insist on their timeless nature. With imaginative speculation at its core, revisionism becomes a tool of literary transformation, shaping the old as something new which, after all, is one of the oldest principles of story-telling as such.

The three main chapters of this thesis focus each on one of the three authors and their fairy-tale adaptations: Anne Sexton's *Transformations* (1971), Olga Broumas's *Beginning with O* (1977) and Emma Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins* (1997). The study examines the authors' distinctive revisionist practices – their form, thematic scope, language, and agendas – and aims to map some of the key tendencies in fairy-tale revisionism in the last third of the twentieth century.

## Abstrakt

Klíčová slova: Pohádky, Revizionismus, Transformace, Feminismus, Poezie, Anne Sexton, Olga Broumas, Emma Donoghue

Diplomová práce pojednává rozmanité způsoby, jimiž tři anglofonní autorky a představitelky tří literárních generací, Anne Sexton (1928-1974), Olga Broumas (nar. 1949) a Emma Donoghue (nar. 1969), přistupují k přetváření klasických pohádek. Zkoumané básnické i prozaické revize, jejichž kořeny lze vysledovat až k ústně tradovaným verzím tradičních pohádek, sebraných a kanonizovaných bratry Grimmy, posunují hranice literárních forem, žánrů a narativních struktur. Pojednáváné autorky podtrhují multiplicitu a proměnlivý charakter těchto známých příběhů, postav a rozuzlení, čímž zpochybňují různé společenské a kulturní normy. Všechny také staví do popředí tvůrčí sílu jazyka jako takového a oživují tak literární diskurz a rozšiřují možnosti lyrické poezie, respektive narativní prózy.

Pohádky bratří Grimmů mají v západní kulturní tradici podobný význam jako antický mýtus nebo biblická ikonografie. Společně tvoří kánon, který nejenže obstál ve zkoušce času, ale je i nadále konfrontován a revidován autory (a zejména autorkami) z různých míst a časových období. Jedním z význačných rysů těchto klasických příběhů je jejich mobilita a skutečnost, že se prolínají napříč kontinenty, žánry i mezi jednotlivými literárními formami. Jestliže univerzálnost pohádek spočívá v jejich neměnnosti, známé příběhy jsou dostatečně tvárné k tomu, aby bylo možné literární materiál ohýbat a zpochybňovat jej z hlediska významu, perspektivy a vypravěče. Práce zkoumá revizionistické přístupy autorek reprezentujících různé žánry a tradice a mapuje tak nevyhnutelnou tendenci pohádky přizpůsobovat se novým kontextům.

Pohádky – a způsob, jímž přežívají v kolektivním vědomí, jsou koneckonců samy revizemi. Jelikož jejich historické kořeny vycházejí z ústní tradice, vyznačující se především mnohotvárností a neustálou proměnou. V tomto ohledu lze na současné, probíhající procesy transformace pohádek nahlížet nejen jako na adaptaci populárních pohádek vzhledem k požadavkům moderní doby a publika, ale i jako na pokus vrátit jim jejich původní otevřenou a pluralitní podobu. Revize nám umožňuje nahlížet na „původní“ texty z nového úhlu a zpochybnit jejich ustálený význam a řád. Vybízí nás také, abychom se ptali, jak se text chová, když je z prózy převeden do veršovaného vyprávění a naopak.

Všechny tři pojednávané autorky vnášejí do ustálených příběhů moment rozvratu. Poukazují na problematické asociace pohádek s patriarchální a heteronormativní tradicí a trvají na jejich skutečné univerzálnosti a nadčasovosti. Revizionismus, jehož jádrem je imaginativní spekulace, se stává nástrojem literární transformace a utváří ze starých příběhů něco nového, což je koneckonců jeden z nejstarších principů vypravování jako takového.

Každá z tří hlavních kapitol diplomové práce se soustředí na adaptace pohádek pocházející od jedné z těchto autorek: *Transformations* (1971) od Anny Sexton, *Beginning with O* (1977) od Olgy Broumas, a *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins* (1997) od Emmy Donoghue. Práce zkoumá odlišné revizionistické přístupy jednotlivých autorek – jejich širší společensko-kulturní motivace, práci s formou, motivy a jazykem – a mapuje vývoj těchto přístupů ke klasickému pohádkovému materiálu v průběhu poslední třetiny dvacátého století.

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# 1 Introduction

“How new!” one is quick to exclaim. But another thought supervenes, “How ancient is that lore.”

– Stanley Kunitz, “Foreword,” in *Beginning with O* by Olga Broumas

For many people, fairy tales provide their first encounter with the “literary” world. Stories of magic, chivalry, heroism, and romance have been an essential part of our canon for centuries. Often inscribed with moral lessons and traceable to orally distributed folk narratives, they appear to hold a primordial knowledge of humanity’s rights and wrongs. By lending themselves to constant adaptation, they have resisted the passage of time and gradually become, as Jack Zipes argues, “the fabric of our lives.”<sup>1</sup> The relationship we have sustained with the fairy tale, however, is reciprocal – as much as it has shaped our folkloric, and literary traditions and embedded itself in our collective imagination, we have kept it alive through a constant process of reiteration and revision.

The collected fairy tales of brothers Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm have dominated the Western mytho-folkloric canon virtually from its conception. Their first book of collected tales, *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (*Children’s and Household Tales*) was published in two volumes in the years 1812 and 1815 respectively. Eventually, the Grimm’s collected tales would comprise 211 stories and become vastly popular with the public, primarily because they reflected and promoted the moralities of the time. According to Zipes, the popularity of these tales was mainly due to the fact that “they all underlined morals in keeping with the Protestant ethic and a patriarchal notion of sex roles” and “[complied] with the phallocratic impulses and forces of the emerging middle-class societies of Western culture.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tale as a Myth / Myth as a Fairy Tale* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Jack Zipes, *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), xxvi.

As the title suggests, *Children's and Household Tales* were not initially intended just for children. From the beginning, the Grimm Brothers were aiming to appeal to both adult and children's audiences. Moreover, fairy tales for children were highly censored up until the 1820s and the motifs they contained were often considered unsuitable "for the development of young people's minds."<sup>3</sup> For this reason, the Grimms published a small edition (*Kleine Ausgabe*) entailing 50 stories that they considered appropriate for their child readers. On the whole, the tales collected by the Grimms were highly revised according to the ideals of their time. Zipes traces the changes Brothers Grimm made between their first manuscript from 1810 known as *Ölenberg Manuscript*, and their last edition entitled *Children's and Household Tales* published in 1857. For example, in the manuscript version of "Snow White," the dwarves felt pity for Snow White and "persuaded her to remain with them and do the cooking for them when they went to the mines." The edited version, as early as in 1812, turns away from sympathy and introduces new conditions for Snow White's stay. The dwarves set Snow White an ultimatum and noticeably extend the list of her chores: "If you keep house for us and cook, sew, make the beds, wash and knit, and keep everything tidy and clean, you may stay with us, and you will have everything you want. In the evening, when we come home, dinner must be ready."<sup>4</sup> The tales were thus altered to be appropriate for their child readers but also to appear sufficiently edifying so as to please the "proper and prudent bourgeois audiences"<sup>5</sup> of the time.

The practice of revising texts, both classical and popular, is almost as old as literature itself and is, of course, an inherent feature of all kinds of oral traditions. Revisionism – which in itself implies a critique of generally accepted beliefs, ideas, or values – has been repeatedly employed by different cultures and social groups to spread their own ideologies. The process has often involved reclaiming and rectifying age-old stories so that they would fit these groups'

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<sup>3</sup> Zipes, *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, xxv-vi.

<sup>4</sup> Jack Zipes, "Once There Were Two Brothers Named Grimm" in *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm* by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, trans. Jack Zipes (New York: Bantam, 1987), xxvi.

<sup>5</sup> Zipes, "Once There Were Two Brothers Named Grimm," xxvi.

ideals and moral views. Not all instances of revision, however, always receive automatic approval. When looking at the new versions of fairy tales that have originated over the past decade or so, we see that the emergence of the retelling practices of a “woke” culture has caused an uproar in the more conservative circles. In popular culture, recent examples would include Guillermo del Toro’s anti-fascist *Pinocchio* (2022), the latest live-action adaptation of *The Little Mermaid* (2023) with an African American actress cast as Ariel or the upcoming *Snow White* film, starring a Hispanic actress in the title role, who has recently received some backlash for her comments on the script. In an interview, Rachel Zegler explained:

It’s no longer 1937... She’s not going to be saved by the prince, and she’s not going to be dreaming about true love. She’s dreaming about becoming the leader she knows she can be.<sup>6</sup>

The conservative opponents argue that the strife for political correctness fatally destabilizes the stories which constitute our historical tradition and cultural heritage and undermines our sense of who “we” are by introducing disturbing elements of otherness into codified narratives of accepted “sameness.” Indeed, despite the plurality and shocking originality that we associate with folk tales on which many of the fairy tales as we know them today are based, the canonized versions of the latter have long served as consolidative structures for the perpetuation of highly conservative beliefs and traditional systems. Lewis Seifert writes that “the fairy tales popularized for the mass market (the most obvious example being the films made by the Walt Disney Studios) continue to valorize generic structures such as the marriage closure that reinforce highly conservative gender norms[.]”<sup>7</sup> It is remarkable how much emotional intensity fairy tales carry for so many and how any alteration to the versions most commonly shared is believed to pose a threat to not only a wider, collective

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<sup>6</sup> Conor Murray, “Diverse ‘Snow White’ Remake Is Latest Film To Anger Anti-‘Woke’ Crowd” *Forbes*, accessed September 27, 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/conormurray/2023/07/25/diverse-snow-white-remake-is-latest-film-to-anger-anti-woke-crowd/?sh=16fdd75e2945>.

<sup>7</sup> Lewis Carl Seifert, *Fairy Tales, Sexuality, and Gender in France, 1690-1715: Nostalgic Utopias* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 4.

tradition but also one's personal childhood memories and individual consciousness. As Zipes explains, "[i]t is as though one should not tamper with sacred material. By dissecting the fairy tale, one might destroy its magic[.]"<sup>8</sup> The fairy tale must pose as innocent, familiar, timeless and thus comforting, but also untouchable. Hence, Zipes writes, "we are led to believe that [the fairy tale] has not been contaminated and polluted by a social class,"<sup>9</sup> that the genre provides something that can or has, actually, been enjoyed by people irrespective of such differences. Although fairy tales obviously teem with instances of class, gender, and power divisions, the mechanism described by Zipes is one of the reasons why many readers, listeners, and viewers hate to see the norms established by classical fairy tales challenged and demonstrate an almost superstitious reverence for their "canonical" values and forms.

Indeed, the hard-fought-for immutability of these stories and the myth of the so-called "original text" is the true fantasy in this context. As Martha Gill aptly notes in her *Guardian* column, "[t]hose who demand fairytales stay 'exactly as they were' are searching for a point in history that never existed."<sup>10</sup> As has already been demonstrated, Grimm's collected tales were repeatedly revised, "cleansing their narratives of erotic and bawdy passages"<sup>11</sup> and re-published in seven *Children's and Household Tales* and ten *Kleine Ausgabe* editions during the brothers' lifetime alone. This makes one ask, then, about the source of the romantic idea of the sacredness of the untouchable and unaltered nature of these tales. Zipes ascribes it to the "widespread belief in unbroken chains of oral transmission, reaching from the present to antiquity"<sup>12</sup> which quickly endorsed the importance of the fairy tale as "the folk equivalent of ancient Greek myth"<sup>13</sup> in the Western literary canon. As a society, it seems, we yearn to

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<sup>8</sup> Zipes, *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, xv.

<sup>9</sup> Zipes, *Fairy Tale as a Myth / Myth as a Fairy Tale*, 7.

<sup>10</sup> Martha Gill, "Fairytales have always reflected the morals of the age. It's not a sin to rewrite them," *The Guardian*, accessed September 27, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/jun/04/contemporary-values-no-place-in-fairytales-you-must-be-living-in-a-fantasy-world>.

<sup>11</sup> Zipes, *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, xxv.

<sup>12</sup> Zipes, *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, 278.

<sup>13</sup> Zipes, *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, 278.

preserve those supposed fragments of ancient oral culture which give us a sense of both authenticity and continuity.

Although believed to be collected from oral folk tales, the traceability of the Grimm's sources is debatable, to say the least. In their introduction, the authors directly reference some existing fairy-tale collections of the time as their source, one of them being *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* (*Stories or Tales from Past Times*) by Charles Perrault,<sup>14</sup> that were published about 120 years prior to Grimm's tale and included versions of many of the classical fairy tales known today. Most of their collected stories have nonetheless been linked to even earlier written sources. Zipes concludes that "in all probability, the Grimm's early informants' tales derived not from the folk but either directly or indirectly from printed books."<sup>15</sup>

These facts challenge the significance ascribed to fairy tales' oral origins in the past. What is important to acknowledge is that at a certain point in time, the stories evolved into the uniform versions that we recognize today. In reality, the conception of the tradition relies on written literature; as Elizabeth Wanning Harries points out, "the history of fairy tales is not primarily a history of oral transmission but rather a history of print."<sup>16</sup> A variable medium (and often generic) shift is one of the foci of the present thesis. It is therefore valuable to identify the influence that this shift – from oral to written composition, and even vice versa – can have on such a fluid form as oral folklore. The point in which the fairy tale becomes demystified is when it is transported from the untraceable, mythological space of orality into print and develops into a genre. The three women authors discussed in the subsequent chapters of this thesis contribute to the modern print history of the fairy tale while pointing to its essential stylistic, motific, and moral fluidity.

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<sup>14</sup> Jacob Grimm, and Wilhelm Grimm, *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition*, trans. Jack Zipes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 8.

<sup>15</sup> Zipes, *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, 278.

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Wanning Harries, *Twice Upon a Time: Women Writers and the History of the Fairy Tale* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 4.

In *Twice Upon a Time*, a monograph on “women writers and the history of the fairy tale”, Wanning Harries challenges two myths popularly associated with the fairy tale as a genre: a) The fairy tale is the product of an ancient oral folk tradition and b) these folk tales, as they have been collected by the (predominantly male) modern authors, are delivered to the reader in their unchanged, authentic form. Wanning Harries uncovers the unseen complexities of the history of the fairy-tale genre and sheds light on the origins of these tales, as far into the past as possible. What she reveals is a trend not completely unfamiliar in the wider discussions of authorship. Although the most anthologized names in connection with the fairy-tale genre are Brothers Grimm and Charles Perrault, Wanning Harries argues that behind many of the sources of these male authors’ published works and the invention of the genre itself, she dares to say, we find women. At the time of the conception of the fairy tale as a literary genre, during the period between 1690 and 1715 that Seifert calls the “first fairy-tale vogue,”<sup>17</sup> seven female fairy-tale writers were responsible for seventy-four published fairy tales compared to thirty-eight tales written by nine male writers.<sup>18</sup> Throughout history, many works by women (who have often proved to be more productive than men) have been displaced by the works of male authors who came after them.

In the French literary tradition of the 1690s which Wanning Harries is mapping, the women authors’ stories, rather than gleaned from “the supposed ‘timeless space’ of folk culture” were often intended as ironic social commentaries, reflecting “the historical moment in which they were produced.”<sup>19</sup> Wanning Harries exposes the deceptive manner in which the fairy tales were intentionally constructed to imitate “the style and tone of ‘authentic’ folk narrative.”<sup>20</sup> The morals of the stories, nonetheless, were re-invented and implemented in accordance with the favoured ideals of the time. One of the most fitting examples would be

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<sup>17</sup> Seifert, *Fairy Tales, Sexuality, and Gender in France*, 8.

<sup>18</sup> Seifert, *Fairy Tales, Sexuality, and Gender in France*, 8.

<sup>19</sup> Wanning Harries, *Twice Upon a Time*, 24.

<sup>20</sup> Wanning Harries, *Twice Upon a Time*, 25.

“Rapunzel,” which the Grimms unknowingly sourced from Charlotte-Rose de Caumont de La Force’s 1697 story entitled “*Persinette*”<sup>21</sup> (meaning “Parsley” in translation). Laura Getty attests that the Brothers Grimm were working with a German translation of the French tale by Friedrich Schulz who claimed to have heard the story from a woman storyteller and later recorded it in 1790. He apparently translated La Force’s story word-for-word with only three minor changes, one of them being the shift from parsley into rampion, hence “*Persinette*” becoming “Rapunzel.” But because Schulz failed to properly credit his source, Jacob Grimm was of the impression that he was reading a retelling of a German folktale. Getty explains that “because of this (mistaken) belief Jacob simply eliminated everything that he thought Schulz had added to it, hoping to end up with the ‘core’ of the tale.”<sup>22</sup>

In La Force’s version, Rapunzel’s captor is a fairy, not a witch or a wicked stepmother as popularized by the Grimms. Rapunzel’s relationship with the prince is revealed through her showing pregnancy, which results in her banishment from the tower. She later gives birth to twins. This storyline, clearly implicating a sexual relationship, is purposefully omitted in the Grimm’s reworking of the tale, replacing the princess’s growing belly with a naïve comment which incriminates Rapunzel’s secret relationship: “Mother Gothel, how is it that you’re much heavier than the prince? When I pull him up, he’s here in a second.”<sup>23</sup> The retellings by later authors, like the one composed by Emma Donoghue, also do not shy from implying physicality. When Rapunzel meets the prince in *Kissing the Witch*, she tries to ask him: “What do I feel like?” while the prince’s “mouth [is] stopping [her] mouth.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Charlotte-Rose de La Force’s version is itself an alternation of a story by Giambattista Basile called “*Petrosinella*” from 1643. However, the earliest instance of a story with a motif of the “hair ladder” coming down from a tower comes from 10<sup>th</sup> century Persia.

<sup>22</sup> Laura J. Getty, “Maidens and their Guardians: Reinterpreting the ‘Rapunzel’ Tale,” *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 30, no. 2 (1997): 43, <https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.is.cuni.cz/scholarly-journals/maidens-their-guardians-reinterpreting-rapunzel/docview/205368716/se-2>.

<sup>23</sup> Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, trans. Jack Zipes (New York: Bantam, 1987), 49.

<sup>24</sup> Emma Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 94.

The evolution of “Rapunzel” provides a great example of the continuous processes of literary revision. The collecting and editing practices used by the Brothers Grimm demonstrate that revisions or retellings can be subtle, even unnoticeable, yet often calculated. Most importantly, however, they are inevitable. The Grimm’s conception of the tales, as well as the tales’ miscellaneous versions in the past, illustrate a larger trend which lies at the heart of storytelling. Revision of narratives is not only a common practice in human history, but also one of fairy tale’s intrinsic features. In reality, these tales have always been in motion, shifting between various iterations. One could even argue that the fairy tale’s true form is embodied through constant flux. Zipes attests to this variability when he writes that “[i]f there is one ‘constant’ in the structure and theme of [...] the literary fairy tale, it is transformation[.]”<sup>25</sup> This crucial quality enables the fairy tale to modify itself into different genres and literary forms, as well as travel spatially and through time which is one of the key topics of this thesis.

Wanning Harries categorises two concurrent forms which the fairy tale embodies. One tends to be simple, straightforward, and compact – these are the tales which attempt to emulate the form of the oral myth and behave “as unmediated expressions of the folk.”<sup>26</sup> They function as a cultural point of reference. This form is favoured by Perrault and Brothers Grimm. The second form is characterized as complex, convoluted, intertextual, and self-referential. Wanning Harries identifies the latter form with the works of women – not only the authors who wrote and collected fairy tales in the 1690s, but also the female exponents of the revisionist trends almost three centuries later. This also corresponds to formal features pinpointed by Seifert, who reports that “the tales of the [female fairy-tale writers] are, on average, considerably longer.”<sup>27</sup> By using this analogy, Wanning Harries demarcates a gendered

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<sup>25</sup> Zipes, *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, xvii.

<sup>26</sup> Wanning Harries, *Twice Upon a Time*, 17.

<sup>27</sup> Seifert, *Fairy Tales, Sexuality, and Gender in France*, 10.



difference in not only the process of canon formation and preservation of collected folk material, but also in the formal features traceable in revisionist approaches to fairy tales.

The Brothers Grimm show an effort to mythologize the fairy-tale form based on a false conception of its original shape. By reducing and condensing it, they considerably restrict its space for variation – an inherent feature of the fairy tale which, as a form of an oral myth, is by nature heterogeneous and mutable. A constant state of revision can therefore be viewed as the closest emulation of the original oral form. Wanning Harries' system of gendered form differentiation implies that the female, complex form may be a more successful attempt to return the fairy tales to their original, open, and plural form. In *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, Jan Vansina accentuates the fluid nature of orature, explaining that all “anonymous oral traditions share the common characteristic of being transmitted spontaneously from one person to another, and during this process the original form is lost and the content becomes fluctuating and blurred.”<sup>28</sup> This “loss” of the original form is the essence of oral literary transmission and embodies its defining factor. Viewed in this light, any effort to return a tale to a supposed “original form” in fact defies the fluctuating nature of the oral myth.

Zipes's outline of the theory of two opposing movements in the ongoing process of fairy-tale development follows a similar pattern as the one drawn by Wanning Harries. These two movements are characterized by the need for standardization on the one hand, and the need for reinvention on the other. Zipes defines these two forces as duplication and revision. Duplication is defined as a means of certainty and solace. It “does not challenge our customary routines or habits,” but “reinforces the deeply entrenched modes of thinking” and provides “our lives with [a sense of] structure” in a world where “the conditions of life change so rapidly.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, trans. H. M. Wright (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company), 5.

<sup>29</sup> Zipes, *Fairy Tale as a Myth / Myth as a Fairy Tale*, 8-9.

Therefore, the moral messages portrayed in fairy tales are not challenged but proven as traditional and socially conservative. While duplication requires no qualitative evaluation, revision is based on critical reinvention or transformation. With the use of critical re-examination, “the revised classical fairy tale seeks to alter the reader’s views of traditional patterns, images, and codes.”<sup>30</sup> Revisions, unlike duplications create a new imaginary space through the use of old, mythic language and symbolic systems. But rather than “forcing new wine into old bottles, and ‘distressing’ new bottles to make them look old,”<sup>31</sup> to use Wanning Harries’ analogy, the old stories are released from the old bottles, and expected to shed their old skin in order to be questioned and subverted through a fresh lens. It is by the act of revision, not duplication that stories stay alive, and continue to evolve and entice readers centuries later.

The main focus of this thesis are the complex processes of revision which challenge the comforting idea of “classical” fairy tales as a norm and disrupt the mechanisms of slavish (often commercially motivated) reproductions of traditional narratives devoid of defamiliarization. Anne Sexton (1928-1974), Olga Broumas (b. 1949) and Emma Donoghue (b. 1969) all revisit the classical fairy tales in their work and revise them using modern discourse and perspectives. They not only confront the traditional narratives but challenge conventional modes of storytelling through various forms of formal reshaping. While coming from different cultural and scholarly backgrounds, these authors found a source of inspiration in the fairy tales while also recognizing their problematic aspects. Their retellings openly recognize the fairy tales as products of the heteronormative, patriarchal culture and accordingly strive to dismantle the oppressive values which they inherently communicate. The fact that three authors from different generations choose to deconstruct the fairy tales further reinforces the genre’s universality, but also its mutability. While they all use the actual “universal language” (i.e.

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<sup>30</sup> Zipes, *Fairy Tale as a Myth / Myth as a Fairy Tale*, 9.

<sup>31</sup> Wanning Harries, *Twice Upon a Time*, 18.

English as a lingua franca), the familiar symbolic vocabulary of the Western fairy tales provides additional shared space in which everyone speaks the same language.

Examining and excavating the stories which constitute our literary but also cultural identity and uncovering their complex layering is an essential social practice. While it challenges old modes of storytelling, it redefines our literary and cultural identities. As Adrienne Rich writes, “[r]e-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering a text from a new critical direction – is for us more than a chapter in cultural history it is an act of survival.”<sup>32</sup> In this way, revision denotes both change and continuity. Revisions of culturally canonical stories through a contemporary lens allow one to conceptualize valuable perspectives symptomatic of society today. By studying the revisions of these authors, one is granted access to the past as well as the present.

Anne Sexton is an important representative of the confessional poetry school. Because of the fairy tale’s collective familiarity, the poet is able to encode a message in a narrative that is associated with certain rules and structures, so that any change conveys the author’s statement. The contours of the fairy tale thus invite one to ask what happens to the “I” of the confessional poet when taken out of the personal context and used in a (primarily) non-confessional, narrative. The subversive transformations initiated by Sexton are further developed by Olga Broumas who takes up Sexton’s cultural subversions and imbues them with her own imaginative speculation. Although both poets critique the traditionalistic and heteronormative morals of the fairy tales, Sexton does not liberate these stories from those constraints entirely, but merely points them out using sharp satire and modern language. After all, Sexton’s affinity with the feminist movement is vague, whereas Broumas is more radically open in her feminist attitudes. Where Sexton offers an inquisitive hint, Broumas, as a

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<sup>32</sup> Adrienne Rich, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision.” *College English* 34, no. 1 (1972): 18, <https://doi.org/10.2307/375215>.

representative of the next generation of poets and an active second-wave feminist, is forthright and explicit, and aims to create “a new dangerous vision of the world.”<sup>33</sup> Arguably, the most prominent inflection that the fairy tales endure in Sexton’s seminal collection *Transformations* (1971) and Broumas’s *Beginning with O* (1977) is the shift from one literary form to another, i.e. from prose narrative to lyric poetry, the impact of which will be further explored in the following chapters.

The third text chosen for analysis in this thesis is Emma Donoghue’s collection of short stories titled *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins* (1997). Despite the difference in form, the thematic correlation between the three writers is obvious; they all use classical fairy tales as a source for their own writing. While the two poets pursue narrative as well as formal transformation of the tales, Donoghue preserves the Grimm’s default prosaic structure yet intertwines the stories in an innovative way. Her narrators, who are also active characters in the retellings, hand down their stories from one speaker onto another, creating an endless chain of story-telling transmission and thus formally mirroring the fairy tales’ cyclicity and continuous presence in our cultural canon. Her stories champion the fairy tales’ female-based relationships that are, in the classical tales, often overshadowed by the drive to marital resolution. Donoghue’s female characters are empowered by gaining a new, distinctive voice and consequently the power over their own narratives. As the closest representative of contemporary literature, Donoghue embodies the continuation of the fairy tale revision as a tradition and thus, as was already established, pursues the fairy tale’s most natural state: perpetual transformation. The inclusion of authors from different timelines, spaces, and scholarships is a statement towards the fairy tale’s distinctive ability to cross time, continents, and genres.

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<sup>33</sup> Wanning Harries, *Twice Upon a Time*, 135.

All three authors introduce a moment of disruption into the fairy tales while preserving their relevance. The goal of their revisions is not simply to repossess the “male” genre and transform it into a thing of their own. Rather, they meet with the stories again, three centuries later, and enter them from a different angle in order to open them up and to articulate messages they find missing from earlier instances of this universal medium and its adaptations by their literary ancestors. The fairy tale provides a universal passage, a connection through meaning and time by the means of a common symbolic language. While they insist on the perennial essence of the tales, these authors draw attention to the stories’ problematic association with the patriarchal and heteronormative traditions, and thus dress the “old tales” in “new skins.”<sup>34</sup> This thesis will explore the various ways in which they do so.

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<sup>34</sup> Emma Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*.

## 2 Anne Sexton: *Transformations*

Pulitzer-winning poet Anne Sexton was born in Newton, Massachusetts, in 1928 and belongs to one of the most prominent American poets of the mid-twentieth century. Her extensive oeuvre, with the first poetry collection, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, published in 1960, has been considered a formative part of the confessional school of poetry. *Transformations*, Sexton's fifth poetry collection, represents one of the most iconic and sustained revisions of the fairy-tale genre. Sexton's collections are often significantly conceptual, tied by a single though complex and protean idea, as is the case in *Love Poems* (1969) or *The Death Notebooks* (1974). *Transformations* follows the same pattern but does not necessarily engage with the themes of life's hardships and predicaments. Instead, Sexton creates another compact collection by basing her poetic texts on a selection of classical fairy tales. The first edition of *Transformations* (published by Houghton & Mifflin in 1971) is accompanied by illustrations of Barbara Swan, seemingly in compliance with the traditional fairy-tale publication practice. Yet, despite their soft contours, these pictures are far from charming and naive. Vernon Young relevantly described them as "importunate and macabre; Gothic and placental"<sup>35</sup> and as such, the illustrations are an elaborate – and appropriate – complement to Sexton's poems. They not only fittingly capture the atmosphere that her poems evoke but provide clues to the poems' hidden meanings and intricate allusions, while emphasizing their bewitching allure.

*Transformations* represents a departure from Sexton's up until then typical style; a shift so considerable that it caused concern to her publisher who even contemplated cancelling its publication. The sixteen poems retelling the Grimm's fairy tales apparently steered far from Sexton's previous upfront, personal intensity for which had earned her success at the start of

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<sup>35</sup> Vernon Young, "Review of *Transformations*," in *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale*, ed. Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1988), 256.

her career. But for Sexton, this collection marked an important step forward, *especially* because of its specific method and tone. In a letter, she expressed her reasoning:

I realize that the “Transformations” are a departure from my usual style. I would say that they lack the intensity and perhaps some of the confessional force of my previous work. I wrote them because I had to . . . because I wanted to . . . because it made me happy. I would want to publish them for the same reason. I would like my readers to see this side of me, and it is not in every case the lighter side. Some of the poems are grim. In fact I don’t know how to typify them except to agree that I have made them very contemporary. It would further be a lie to say that they weren’t about me, because they are just as much about me as my other poetry.”<sup>36</sup>

Sexton makes several crucial points about her collection here. The confessional approach is not completely abandoned but incorporated into a broader method of personal expression. According to Alicia Ostriker, the merging of private and public matter in *Transformations* enables Sexton to “break the confined circle of a poetic mode [she] had needed but outgrown, that of the purely personal,” which thus results in a “brilliant fusion of public with personal matter.”<sup>37</sup>

Whether it was because of her alluring persona and turbulent life, or the nature of the confessional genre, Sexton was often approached with a request – which she willingly granted – to talk about her work and its connection to her personal life. This tension of public versus private, as articulated by Ostriker above, is not only at the centre of *Transformations*, but demonstrates a general dynamic of the fairy-tale genre. The tales are encoded with common morals valuable for society in Sexton’s time and today. Yet these morally charged stories are not confined to the public domain and seamlessly enter the private spaces – both in the domestic sphere and that of one’s consciousness. This calls for the re-examination of the impact of these morals onto one’s own beliefs. The method of self-reflection transcribed as external criticism conceptualizes *Transformations*. Sexton’s opinions and comments concerning the collection

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<sup>36</sup> Linda Gray Sexton and Lois Ames, ed., *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 362.

<sup>37</sup> Alicia Ostriker, “That Story: The Changes of Anne Sexton,” in *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale*, ed. Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 266.

will thus be used broadly throughout this chapter, as they often help to navigate the motivations of the poet and contribute to a better understanding of the symbolic code used by Sexton in her poems.

The introduction of fairy tales as a collective framework to her poems exemplifies Sexton's valuable capability of poetic control – the control she has over herself, what she shares and leaves out, as well as the mastery of form. Confessionalism, to many, evokes anything but restraint. Yet the pre-set fairy-tale narratives offer only so much space for variation for the stories to still stay recognizable, thus requiring a certain amount of self-restraint. Jeanne H. Kammer explains that for Sexton, “control [...] is not simply an antidote to autobiography, but also a vehicle for communicating the individual experience. It is a means of making strong poems – sturdy baskets – while telling the truth.”<sup>38</sup> The fairy tales include a collection of set symbols, whose interpretation, however, is mutable and informed by personal experience and particular social circumstances. *Transformations* still embodies the “process of the poet's effort to understand her stories on her own terms.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, while on the one hand, the transformed tales that unfold under Sexton's pen are shaped by her personal experience and a reflection of its meanings, on the other they allow her to comment on patterns of our shared past, and the limiting social and cultural mechanisms determining social life in her present. These include gender roles, women's position in the patriarchal system, the latter's obsession with youth and beauty, and the portrayal of women's relationships as mostly antagonistic.

*Transformations* opens with a poem titled “The Gold Key” based on a short tale of the Brothers Grimm called “The Golden Key,” which in itself evokes the myth of Pandora's box. In the Grimm's tale, the contents of the box stay sealed. A poor boy finds a golden key in the snow. Enchanted by its mystery, he continues digging and finds an iron casket to which the

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<sup>38</sup> Jeanne H. Kammer, “The Witch's Life: Confession and Control in the Early Poetry of Anne Sexton,” in *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale*, ed. Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: the University of Michigan Press, 1988), 128.

<sup>39</sup> Ostriker, “That Story: The Changes of Anne Sexton,” 269.



key fits perfectly. The tale ends mid-motion, as if the boy, kneeling in the snow, froze while uncovering the mystery: “He turned the key around once, and now we must wait until he unlocks the casket completely. That’s when we’ll see what’s lying inside.”<sup>40</sup> In her poem, Sexton unfreezes this moment and spares the reader the tense cliff hanger. Inside the iron box lie her poems, the secret tales, which she is setting free all at once. The poem outlines the essence of the collection which in itself is described as a feat of transformation. With the key she

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.)<sup>41</sup>

In this stanza, Sexton points out the commonality of the Grimm’s tales (represented by the “enlarged paper clip”), cunningly mocking their potential and need to be transformed, perhaps in a nod to the feedback she has received when embarking upon this project. Yet she treats the tales in her poetry as if they were both the building blocks and the blueprint which she uses to build her own structures, and thus suggests that the paper clip could be both “*a piece of [a] sculpture,*” or the idea of a sculpture. Sexton’s “sculpture” points back to the myth of Pandora, who has been sculpted from clay and sent as a punishment onto humanity for stealing God’s fire. Throughout Greek mythology and the classics, transformations serve as a key process of symbolic development. There are many instances of metamorphoses, in which one thing, person, or entity becomes something or someone else (Hermaphroditus, Leda and the Swan, Apollo and Daphne) and where something new is shaped from an already existing material (Pandora, Galatea). Sexton’s *Transformations* adopts these mythological principles and applies

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<sup>40</sup> Grimm, *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition*, 473.

<sup>41</sup> Anne Sexton, *Transformations* (Boston: Houghton & Mifflin, 1971), 2.

them in order to transform the mythology of fairy tales and, as a result, her personal mythology as well.

In the opening poem, Sexton introduces the narrator of her tales. She draws on the traditional transmission method of fairy tales when she writes: “The speaker in this case / is a middle-aged witch, me— [.]”<sup>42</sup> To refer once more to Vansina’s theory outlined in the “Introduction,” by explicitly giving her poems a narrator, Sexton emulates the common characteristic of fairy tales’ oral transmission. Like an oral transmission, where the content of the tale becomes often “blurred,” Sexton’s poems obscure the contours of the “original” tales through their own narrative processes. With the use of the personal pronoun “me”, Sexton foregrounds an element of personification, characteristic of her poetry. The narrator of the “fairy” poems to follow is not any middle-aged witch, but “me” – Anne. The witch-persona is no stranger to Sexton as she repeatedly alludes to it in the accounts of her personal life and in her poetry. In a letter to W. D. Snodgrass (1961), she self-consciously (or maybe self-indulgently) refers to herself as the witch who spoils the children’s fun: “The kids are giving a puppet show in the next room... the unconscious is showing. I’m the witch who won’t let them stay up all night (or so it seems)...”<sup>43</sup> In another letter, addressed to Paul Brooks (1968) she wrote: “I am a witch, an enchantress of sorts and have already been worshipped and hung and in the same order.”<sup>44</sup> Wanning Harries points out that the “middle-aged witch” persona is materialized again when Sexton refers to herself as “Dame Sexton” in the poem “The White Snake:” “Throw us some seeds / Dame Sexton / or we will shrink.”<sup>45</sup> Wanning Harries observes that Sexton is “both like and unlike the apparently serene, upper-middle-class, middle-aged

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<sup>42</sup> Sexton, *Transformations*, 1.

<sup>43</sup> Sexton and Ames, *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters*, 132.

<sup>44</sup> Sexton and Ames, *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters*, 325.

<sup>45</sup> Sexton, *Transformations*, 11.

woman we see smiling in a wicker chair on a sunporch in the photo of Sexton on the back cover of the paperback edition of *Transformations*.”<sup>46</sup>

The same witch has been the celebrated heroine in one of Sexton’s most famous poems, “Her Kind,” published in the poet’s first collection *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*. In this earlier poem, Sexton proclaims herself a witch, “not a woman, quite” but rather “a lonely thing,” deformed “twelve-fingered, out of mind[.]”<sup>47</sup> This witch gets up to many adventures, flying around town and caves, mingling with elves and worms, until, in a reference to the torture of witch trials, Sexton introduces an image in which the “flames still bite my thigh / and my ribs crack where your wheels wind[.]”<sup>48</sup> The poet ends each of the three stanzas with the same self-referential incantation: “I have been her kind.”<sup>49</sup> Sexton used this poem, which her daughter Linda later called “her signature,”<sup>50</sup> as an opener during her public readings. This poem not only set a powerful tone for her performance but also helped Sexton to assert her identity as a quasi-folkloric being, casting her poems as her enchanting spells. “Her Kind” thus provides an important “key” to the understanding of Sexton’s witches as they later appear in *Transformations*. Quintessential villains of the Grimm’s fairy tales, these witches are modelled on the poet’s self-image and allow her to incorporate references to the harrowing effects of cultural myths and societal conventions. Not unlike the poet herself, these female villains are misunderstood, and Sexton uncovers their psyches as fragile and complex. Her self-identification in “Her Kind” is an indication of how Sexton will treat the supposed evil characters from the classic tales in her poems included in *Transformations*.

As already implied, the witch does not only appear plentifully in Sexton’s symbolic vocabulary, but is one of the most iconic characters in the fairy-tale lore. Witches are the only

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<sup>46</sup> Wanning Harries, *Twice Upon a Time*, 124.

<sup>47</sup> Anne Sexton, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), 21.

<sup>48</sup> Sexton, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, 21.

<sup>49</sup> Sexton, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, 21.

<sup>50</sup> Linda Gray Sexton, *Searching for Mercy Street: My Journey Back to My Mother, Anne Sexton* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 1994), 224.

semi-supernatural characters whose presence transgresses from folklore and myth into a concrete space in reality. Inhabiting both realms, their liminality defines them. Many theoreticians have described the witch trials in Europe and America as clearly a misogynymotivated craze.<sup>51</sup> Beyond that, women aged over forty were among the most affected groups. Lyndal Roper establishes that “[m]enopausal and post-menopausal women were disproportionately represented amongst the victims of the witch craze – and their overrepresentation is the more striking when we recall how rare women over fifty must have been in the population as a whole.”<sup>52</sup> As the fairy tales reveal – and Sexton’s lyrical revisions subsequently reconfirm – the vilification of older women is deeply embedded in the folk tradition.

The Grimm’s fairy tales frequently obscure lines between the middle-aged woman, old woman, stepmother, and a witch as one often simultaneously is or subsequently becomes the other. A good example of such a tale would be “Snow White,” indisputably one of the most recognized tales from their repertoire. In her retelling, titled simply “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs,” Sexton’s main critical focus is the fetishization of the virgin archetype, obsession with beauty and the unfavourable fate of the evil queen stepmother. Sexton’s identification with the witch figure, it seems, had been prompted by similar motivations. Due to her continuous psychological turmoil, she often felt misunderstood and “out of [her] mind.” Were she born a few hundred years earlier, she would have probably met the same fate as the persecuted women. A condition that, in the times of the witch trials, was referred to as “hysteria,” was allegedly one of the causes for prosecution under the suspicion of witchcraft.<sup>53</sup> But above all, in a society perpetually obsessed with youth, Sexton allegedly struggled to

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<sup>51</sup> Anne Llewellyn Barstow, *Witchcraze: A New History of the European Witch Hunts* (San Francisco: Pandora, 1994) and Lyndal Roper, *Witch Craze: Terror and Fantasy in Baroque Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

<sup>52</sup> Roper, *Witch Craze*, 160.

<sup>53</sup> Llewellyn Barstow, *Witchcraze*, 112.

accept her ageing self – one possible expression of this being the unhealthy, possibly jealous, amount of attention she paid to her adolescent daughters’ developing bodies.<sup>54</sup> Diane Middlebrook writes in a biography of the poet that “Sexton had begun to feel the effects of age, and in 1971 something like the drama of ‘Snow White’ was unfolding in the Sexton household.”<sup>55</sup> “Snow White” thus stays true to Sexton’s promise she gives regarding the poems in *Transformations*, declaring that they are as much about herself as her other poetry.

“Snow White,” like all the other poems in *Transformations*, opens with a prologue. Many of these introductory stanzas that preface most of Sexton’s retellings typically start with a variation on the formulaic phrase “once upon a time,” and often function as stand-alone poems reflecting upon the meaning of the following “tale” and foreshadowing its focal point. The retellings themselves, then, in Sexton’s own words, “seem to grow out of the prologue to, as it were, take root in them and come forth from them.”<sup>56</sup> Ellen Cronan Rose also reminds us that it is the voice and “point of view [...] of the older woman,” the middle-aged witch from “The Gold Key” “whose voice speaks the prologue”<sup>57</sup> in *Transformations*.

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.

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<sup>54</sup> Dianne Middlebrook asserts in Sexton’s biography that Sexton has envied her daughter’s “big boobs.” She writes that Sexton had “proudly imagined the mother as an “old tree in the background” of the daughter’s developing sexual maturity, assuming that it was a mother’s prerogative to witness the changes and commend them.” She also expected to be informed in considerable detail about her daughters’ sexual lives. Diane Wood Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (London: Virago Press, 1991), 346-7.

<sup>55</sup> Diane Wood Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (London: Virago Press, 1991), 347.

<sup>56</sup> Sexton and Ames, *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters*, 371.

<sup>57</sup> Ellen Cronan Rose, “Through the Looking Glass: When Women Tell Fairy Tales,” in *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*, ed. Elizabeth Abel (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1983), 215.

She is as white as a bonefish.<sup>58</sup>

The prologue's imagery instantly transposes the reader from a fantasy land into a secular reality. Brian Gallagher considers the prologues "a major means of 'transforming' the fairy tales into a modern psychological idiom," that allow Sexton, "in her familiar voice [to] reflect upon the universal import of the terror, stupidity, fear, and wonder encapsulated in these stories."<sup>59</sup> These prologues also exemplify another staple feature of Sexton's style and one of her key revisionist techniques, i.e. her frequent and rather specific use of similes. Throughout the whole collection, similes serve to firmly secure the poems in the poet's timeline, demystifying and positioning the tales within a contemporary context, but also personalizing them. By comparing the virgin's cheeks to "cigarette paper" and her lips to red wine, Sexton initiates the tale's departure from its usual tropes, designed to make sense to a child, to those that would speak to an adult reader – and she applies the same technique later on, as the virgin is initiated into adulthood by "the thrust / of the unicorn." Further, the prologue foreshadows Snow White's fate encapsulated in the image of her inert body lying in a glass coffin. Displayed as a porcelain doll in the prologue, she is easily objectified and dissected into body parts which themselves become lifeless objects: "legs made of Limoges [...] china-blue doll eyes." Gallagher characterizes the similes as possessing a "complex, knowing, worldly tone" while also creating "a comic effect via their duality" being "both valid and absurd."<sup>60</sup> These modernizing similes allow the poet to shift the story without altering its original form and can be regarded as Sexton's trademark.

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<sup>58</sup> Sexton, *Transformations*, 3.

<sup>59</sup> Brian Gallagher, "The Expanded Use of Simile in Anne Sexton's *Transformations*," in *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale*, ed. Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 259.

<sup>60</sup> Gallagher, "The Expanded Use of Simile in Anne Sexton's *Transformations*," 259.

The retelling itself confirms that the virgin mentioned in the opening stanza is, indeed, Snow White – young and chaste: “[s]ay she was thirteen”<sup>61</sup> writes Sexton. Right after Snow White, Sexton presents the second chief female character of the story:

Her stepmother,  
a beauty in her own right,  
though eaten, of course, by age,  
would hear of no beauty surpassing her own.<sup>62</sup>

Not only is the stepmother mentioned in the same breath as the protagonist, but the first stanza is almost entirely dedicated to her. By shifting the focus from the obvious, titular heroine, Sexton indicates the significance of the stepmother character in the tale. However, Sexton’s obvious focus on the Queen is not an innovation of her own. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar mention in their chapter focused on the “Snow White” fairy tale, ““Snow White and the Seven Dwarves’ should really be called Snow White and Her Wicked Stepmother, for the central action of the tale – indeed, its only real action – arises from the relationship between these two women[.]”<sup>63</sup> In the first edition of the Grimm’s collection, the tale is titled “Little Snow White” (*Sneewittchen*). Later, through the many reprints and translations, she becomes simply “Snow White,” until she is accompanied by the “Seven Dwarfs” in the title of the 1937 Disney film. Tweaking the title of the fairy tale suggests a shift in focus. Yet, Snow White’s relationship with the dwarves, especially compared to the one with the queen, remains marginal in the Disney narrative and even more so in Sexton’s retelling. The arbitrary association of the heroine with the seven male figures of the story in the title makes one question its motivations.

The stanza quoted above portrays the maternal conflict as well as the poet’s way of coming to terms with her advancing age, which Middlebrook alludes to in her biography. The stepmother is “eaten by age” which deducts from her beauty, as Sexton sardonically remarks.

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<sup>61</sup> Sexton, *Transformations*, 3.

<sup>62</sup> Sexton, *Transformations*, 3.

<sup>63</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in The Attic: The Woman Writer and The Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 36.

Faithful to the original, even Sexton's queen has a mirror which she consults, asking: "Who is fairest of us all?"<sup>64</sup> The collective pronoun in the question stresses the inherent competition between the two women – and between older and younger women in general. Once it is revealed that the mirror considers Snow White to be the fairest one, the queen sends for her death: "Bring me her heart, she said to the hunter, / and I will salt it and eat it."<sup>65</sup> Alimentary images and metaphors of food appear in the poem with even greater insistence than in the Grimm's version of the tale. No wonder Ostriker even goes as far as to call it "sensationally and gratuitously oral."<sup>66</sup> On the one hand, the heightened and eroticized orality of these images points us to infancy with its key processes of sustenance and language acquisition (we are, after all, observing a relationship between mother and daughter, the mother struggling to accept her daughter is growing up). On the other, they also communicate that a woman's conception of beauty is constructed, powered, and sustained by consumerism: just like magical pills or super-foods, Snow White's heart seems to guarantee beauty.

In the Grimm's tale, Snow White finds herself in the wild woods with "wild beasts dart[ing] by her."<sup>67</sup> Sexton transforms these into sexual predators of the real world.

At each turn there were twenty doorways  
and at each stood a hungry wolf,  
his tongue lolling out like a worm.  
The birds called out lewdly,  
talking like pink parrots,  
and the snakes hung down in loops,  
each a noose for her sweet white neck.<sup>68</sup>

The dangers which she faces in the forest promote as well as threaten Snow White's valuable identity as a virgin. When she finally arrives to the seven dwarves' house after weeks of strenuous wandering and the avoidance of sexual advances, she finds the dwelling "as droll as

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<sup>64</sup> Sexton, *Transformations*, 5.

<sup>65</sup> Sexton, *Transformations*, 5.

<sup>66</sup> Ostriker, "That Story: The Changes of Anne Sexton," 272.

<sup>67</sup> Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, 197.

<sup>68</sup> Sexton, *Transformations*, 6.



a honeymoon cottage,”<sup>69</sup> suggestive of the sexual consummation at the end of her journey. In the Grimm’s version, Snow White eats “some vegetables and bread from each of the little plates”<sup>70</sup> upon her arrival. Sexton’s Snow White eats “seven chicken livers,”<sup>71</sup> and thus emulating the queen’s appetite for organs and demonstrating yet another parallel between the two women. Cronan Rose suggests that since “like her, she consumes organ meats,” Snow White “is in some sense ‘becoming’ her (step)mother[.]”<sup>72</sup> While Sexton does not invent these parallels, she identifies and underlines them as a reminder that the evil queen and the virgin are, in fact, one.

The ensuing part of the poem then, in a classical fashion, follows the stepmother’s many attempts to kill Snow White and the dwarves’ attempts to save her. Once Snow White bites into the forbidden apple, she falls down one last time. Although the dwarves, seven “little hot dogs” as Sexton refers to them, try to revive her – rubbing “her with butter” like a piece of meat to be baked – their attempts come “to no avail.”<sup>73</sup> It is in her motionless, lifeless state, Sexton points out, that Snow White’s beauty truly shines. Even in the ostensible sanctuary of the dwarves’ cottage, she is unable to escape the threat of being both admired and consumed, like a roasted turkey at the centre of a dinner table. Her corpse is likened to “a gold piece” that the dwarves cannot bring themselves to bury into the dark ground. As if she were a trophy, they put her in a glass box and prop her up on the top of a mountain for everyone to admire. This involuntary post-mortem performance eerily evokes Andrea Dworkin’s observation on fairy tales that “the only good woman is a dead woman.”<sup>74</sup> After all, it is in this state that her beauty charms the passer-by prince and awakens his necrophiliac urge: “I would rather have

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<sup>69</sup> Sexton, *Transformations*, 6.

<sup>70</sup> Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, 197.

<sup>71</sup> Sexton, *Transformations*, 6.

<sup>72</sup> Cronan Rose, “Through the Looking Glass: When Women Tell Fairy Tales,” 214.

<sup>73</sup> Sexton, *Transformations*, 8.

<sup>74</sup> Andrea Dworkin, *Woman Hating* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1974), 41.

you than anything in the world,”<sup>75</sup> he tells her possessively in the original tale, further perpetuating Snow White’s image as an object on display. Dworkin observes how fairy tales shape our consciousness and thus our expectations of reality: “When one enters the world of fairy tale one seeks with difficulty for the actual place where legend and history part. [...] [W]e find what the culture would have us know about who we are.”<sup>76</sup> Both Dworkin and Sexton insist on the fairy tales’ accountability for these kinds of topics, the “knowledge,” and the prejudice they perpetuate. Sexton acknowledges the toxic messages she has been taught to internalize with the “traditional” versions of fairy tales (virginity, youth, beauty, and obedience as the qualities most praised in a woman) and exposes them through razor-sharp satire.

Snow White's physical incarceration in the glass box replicates the psychological grasp that the mirror has on the queen stepmother. Since both are trapped on the opposite side of the reflecting surface, the (looking) glass encapsulates their interconnected fate and mutual conflict. This is further emphasized by Swan’s fitting illustration of the poem; two hands – one young, one old – holding two mirrors, partially facing one another, as if they were pages of a book. Each of them reflects a face – one of a young woman, one of old – that seem to be looking at each other, as if one mirror reflected the other, suggesting the fact that the women are two different versions of a single being. Equally, Gilbert and Gubar, when commenting on the Grimm’s tale, observe that “the conflict between these two women is fought out largely in the transparent enclosures into which [...] both have been locked: a magic looking glass, an enchanted and enchanting glass coffin.”<sup>77</sup> Even in Sexton’s retelling, the wicked queen is rightfully punished by death for her villainous actions: she “dance[d] until she fell down dead,” wearing the “red-hot slippers,”<sup>78</sup> which Sexton comically transfigures into “red-hot roller

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<sup>75</sup> Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, 204.

<sup>76</sup> Andrea Dworkin, *Woman Hating*, 32.

<sup>77</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in The Attic*, 36.

<sup>78</sup> Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, 204.

skates[.]”<sup>79</sup> Sexton’s previous subtle hints at the women’s “mirroring” fates come to a culmination in the anti-climactic closing lines of the poem.

Meanwhile Snow White held court,  
rolling her china-blue doll eyes open and shut  
and sometimes referring to her mirror  
as women do.<sup>80</sup>

Thus, in the end, Snow White ultimately becomes the evil queen. Like her late nemesis, she is confined in her castle, dependent on the looking glass for validation.

Sexton’s “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs” puts the fairy-tale universe on the spot and exposes the manner in which female characters are expected to perform. In both “Snow White” and fairy tales in general, they often act in tandems of mutual contestants. They are both products of antithetical forces as beings who stay frozen in time and their paths cross only for the plot’s sake. But whether described as damsels, virgins, (step)mothers, or witches, these women are all the same. The need to preserve and glorify youth encoded in fairy tales makes one too easily forget that these older women do not just spawn from the earth and there is only so much a virgin can do to prevent becoming one herself: ageing is in store for even the fairest ones among them all. Sexton introduces an element of inevitability into the stories which work vigorously to protect the logic of magic and perpetuate the fairy tales’ unrealistic illusions. As Ostriker explains, Sexton’s reimaginings are a “valid continuation of folktale tradition – and [part] of poetic subversion, whereby the ‘healthy’ meanings we expect to enjoy are held up to icy scrutiny.”<sup>81</sup> *Transformations* thus proves itself a revision in the true sense of the duplication/revision dichotomy defined by Zipes: Sexton’s poems offer critical transformation, and create new imaginary spaces where traditional modes of thinking are not reverently preserved but creatively subverted and scrutinized.

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<sup>79</sup> Sexton, *Transformations*, 9.

<sup>80</sup> Sexton, *Transformations*, 9.

<sup>81</sup> Ostriker, “That Story: The Changes of Anne Sexton,” 268.

Examining Sexton's retelling of "Hansel and Gretel" can make certain predominant patterns and tools used in her collection even more evident. One is that the collection as such is preoccupied with parental relations and family constellations – after all, Grimm's fairy tales offer a vast playground for the examination of these relationships. Another one is that food imagery is used abundantly, and it would be fair to say that in no other tale do these alimentary metaphors appear in such plenitude than in "Hansel and Gretel." In a letter addressing *Transformations*, Sexton admitted that her "transformations of the Brothers Grimm are full of food images," and asked, "but what could be more directly food than cooking the kids[?]"<sup>82</sup> In this poem, Sexton introduces perhaps the most iconic witch in the Grimm's lore – the cannibalistic mother-turned-witch-turned-mother who haunts the poem from the prologue onwards.

The prologue opens with a mother addressing her son. "Little plum," she says,

I want to bite,  
I want to chew,  
I will eat you up.  
Little child,  
little nubkin,  
sweet as fudge,  
you are my blitz.<sup>83</sup>

Sexton plays with the affectional tone of motherly love standardly expressed through the language of food and eating. Rosalind Coward examines the relationship between affection and nourishment but more importantly sexual gratification and food. Analysing the use of pet names in affectionate language, she concludes that "American society turned the love affair into a veritable trip to the confectionery shop: sweetie, sweetiepie, sugar, honeybunch, lollipop – the staple diet of familiarity."<sup>84</sup> The poem quickly turns the affectionate nurture from

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<sup>82</sup> Sexton and Ames, *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters*, 352-3.

<sup>83</sup> Sexton, *Transformations*, 101.

<sup>84</sup> Rosalind Coward, *Female Desires: How They are Sought, Bought, and Packaged* (New York: Grove Press, 1985), 87.

figurative to literal and Sexton reveals the speaker of the prologue to be a flesh-hungry fiend who is not just gushing over her child but has a full intention to eat them:

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.  
[...]  
Oh succulent one,  
it is but one turn in the road  
and I would be a cannibal!<sup>85</sup>

As in the previous poem, the prologue grants Sexton space to encapsulate the primary focus of the subsequent retelling. In this case, as Wanning Harries aptly points out, it is “the narrow boundary between mother love and engulfment by the mother”<sup>86</sup> which evokes the Freudian analogy foregrounded by Mutlu Konuk Blasing: “[t]he mother both satisfies hunger and institutes a need for ‘love.’”<sup>87</sup> Once again, Sexton’s suggestive prologue points towards the conflation of two (or more) female characters in the original tale – the cruel, starving mother and the ravenous, child-eating witch. Naturally, one is the consequence of the other and, as we have seen with the child-eating (step)mother in “Snow White,” plentiful variants of the two populate the Grimm’s universe. Maria Tatar classifies these types of female villains as “female ogres” or “the German *Menschenfresserin* (devourer of humans),”<sup>88</sup> and defines them as the quintessential villains of fairy tales.

Just like in the Grimm’s tale, the mother in Sexton’s poem concludes that she can only feed herself and her husband, “[w]e have enough bread for ourselves / but none for them,”<sup>89</sup> and orders him to leave their children in a forest. Akin to Snow White, they wander around the forest before finding a supposed refuge in “a rococo house / made all of food from its windows

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<sup>85</sup> Sexton, *Transformations*, 101.

<sup>86</sup> Wanning Harries, *Twice Upon a Time*, 126.

<sup>87</sup> Mutlu Konuk Blasing, *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and the Pleasure of Words* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 80.

<sup>88</sup> Maria Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimm’s Fairy Tales* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1987), 140.

<sup>89</sup> Sexton, *Transformations*, 102.

/ to its chocolate chimney.”<sup>90</sup> There lives the famous witch who, in a motherly fashion, provides them with endless nourishment, only that her aim is “to fatten them up” as “[s]he was planning to cook [Hansel first] / and then gobble him up /as in a feast[.]”<sup>91</sup> Tatar notes that these ogre-like figures often initially “work hard to earn the trust of their victims with magnanimous maternal behaviour, then reveal their true colours as cannibalistic monsters.”<sup>92</sup> In the end, the witch is, of course, tricked into climbing into her murderous oven, upon which the practical Gretel turns up the heat. As a result, the witch’s “blood began to boil up / like Coca-Cola,”<sup>93</sup> as Sexton remarks with a modernizing simile that seamlessly brings the ancient tale up to date.

When the children return home, “[t]heir mother, / you’ll be glad to hear, was dead”<sup>94</sup> and food becomes miraculously plentiful again. The children are eating their celebratory supper of “a chicken leg” which echoes the chicken chase from the poem’s prologue and the savage mother luring her prey: “Come, my pretender, my fritter, / my bubbler, my chicken biddy!”<sup>95</sup> It is the taste of the chicken which evokes the memory of both their mother and “the smell of cooking witch[.]”<sup>96</sup> Sexton’s association conveys a sinister implication of yet another cannibalistic ritual and re-introduces the trope of “becoming” as Gretel inherits her mother’s cannibalistic urge; after all, she is the only one in the story who does not just threaten to but actually cooks a human being. Sexton thus focuses on appalling deeds and emotions implied in the original tales, turning them into actual actions and events. As Wanning Harries explains, Sexton exposes “the barely repressed murderous impulses in the heart of the nuclear family and the terrifying interchangeability of its characters.”<sup>97</sup> By that token, she brings out

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<sup>90</sup> Sexton, *Transformations*, 103.

<sup>91</sup> Sexton, *Transformations*, 103.

<sup>92</sup> Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimm’s Fairy Tales*, 140.

<sup>93</sup> Sexton, *Transformations*, 105.

<sup>94</sup> Sexton, *Transformations*, 105.

<sup>95</sup> Sexton, *Transformations*, 101.

<sup>96</sup> Sexton, *Transformations*, 105.

<sup>97</sup> Wanning Harries, *Twice Upon a Time*, 127.

complexity and parallelism in the relationships between characters whom the Grimm's versions depict as isolated or merely antithetical.

By linking the death of the two evil female protagonists, Sexton openly proposes that the cannibalistic witch had been their mother all along. Tartar points out that in other earlier versions of the classical tale the affinity of the two women is clearly stated, and the witch is simply "the stepmother stripped of her parental disguise."<sup>98</sup> Sexton's prologue shows this to be true. She reveals the mother's appetite as murderous and follows a pattern delineated by Tartar who writes that "[i]nstead of functioning as nurturers and providers, cannibalistic female villains withhold food and threaten to turn children into their own source of nourishment," in an effort of "reincorporating them into the bodies that gave birth to them."<sup>99</sup> This combination of sentimental, possessive, and cannibalistic motives identified by Tartar is highlighted by Sexton in both her prologue and the poem itself.

As the title of Sexton's collection suggests, in her rendering, the fairy tales are subjected to significant thematic but also formal transformations. On the whole, however, *Transformations* attempts very little experimentation when it comes to poetic form – especially when compared to some of Sexton's thematically original poems. The poems in Sexton's first collection, *Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960), for example, often use rhyme, although irregularly. In *Live or Die* (1966), Sexton frequently uses enjambement and experiments with alternating line lengths. *Transformations* attains a consistent and easily comprehensible structure; there is rarely a formal surprise – except for occasional assonance ("the whole town knows by breakfast"<sup>100</sup>), consonance ("rolling her china blue doll eyes"<sup>101</sup>), and the sporadic use of enjambement. The stanzas are usually self-contained and convey in consecutive parts the recognisable fairy-tale narrative. But what the poems lack in innovative use of poetic

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<sup>98</sup> Tartar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimm's Fairy Tales*, 72.

<sup>99</sup> Tartar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimm's Fairy Tales*, 140.

<sup>100</sup> Sexton, *Transformations*, 18.

<sup>101</sup> Sexton, *Transformations*, 9.

devices, they make up for in language, figures of speech, and a cunning use of imagery. By deconstructing the “original” narratives, and the familiar images within them, the poet is able to offer their new interpretations, but also to discover and help us understand the layers of meaning already encoded in those longstanding stories. Sexton believed that “the hardest truths would come to light if they were made to fit a stanzaic pattern,”<sup>102</sup> as Maxine Kumin reminds us. The curbed space characteristic for poetry form acts as a pressure cooker: it allows for meanings and conclusions to come to light in a shorter space and time on the page, compared to prose. Sexton’s *Transformations* is a project of searching for truth – about the stories which have been forming our consciousness for centuries and thus about herself – and challenging it by pressuring the well-known tales into uncomfortable shapes, timelines, and the language of poetry.

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<sup>102</sup> Maxine Kumin, “Foreword,” in *The Complete Poems* by Anne Sexton (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), xxv.



### 3 Olga Broumas: *Beginning with O*

*Beginning with O*, Olga Broumas's first poetry collection was selected by Stanley Kunitz for the Yale Younger Poets Award upon its publication in 1977. Born in Ermoupoli, on the Greek island of Syros in 1949, Broumas emigrated to the USA in 1967. *Beginning with O* is a testament to her position in the Anglophone literary space as a poet of Greek-American origin. The collection draws its themes from two traditions: the stories of Greek mythology (in a section titled "Twelve Aspects of God") and the Western canon of fairy tales (in a section titled "Innocence"). Like Sexton, Broumas revisits these canonical stories in order to revise them and repossess them. As someone of mixed heritage, she is, according to Wanning Harries, "adept at transforming the characters of one alphabet into the alien characters of another,"<sup>103</sup> and the same goes for her literary revisions which she translates into the figurative language of poetry.

Right from its title, *Beginning with O* commits to unpredictability and nonconformity. The collection aims for openness; the "O" is an invite for an entry, resembling a gate opening onto a pathway into the past where Broumas sets out to re-examine the established myths constituting our history and knowledge of ourselves found therein. The titular letter "O," is suggestive of the encompassing nature of Broumas's subject matter – she addresses stories that are a part of the collective memory of the Western population. She aims to close the circle of time and point to the cyclical character of the stories she examines as re-occurring and cyclical. Beyond the O-shaped gate, Broumas finds her own Rosetta stone by which she deciphers the ancient messages encoded in our shared past. In a poem titled "Artemis," she writes that

decoding, appears  
to consist of vowels, beginning with O, the O-  
mega, horseshoe, the cave of sound.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Wanning Harries, *Twice Upon a Time*, 135.

<sup>104</sup> Olga Broumas, *Beginning with O* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 23.

The incessant echo of “the cave of sound” embodies Broumas’s idea of a continuous tradition that is communicated through revision. This perpetual movement of the stories through time and space, represented as a reverberating sound in a cave, is the core principle of Broumas’s collection. It is through the practice of revision and continuous transformation, after all, that the myths remain ingrained in our consciousness.

Starting with its potent title, Broumas’s collection is a project which epitomizes Wanning Harries’s conception of female retellings as an attempt to return the fairy tales to their “original” form; they are complex, self-referential and, most importantly, open-ended. Moreover, Broumas’s collection is directly and uncompromisingly feminine, both in its subject matter and focus. The volume forthrightly celebrates women’s sexuality and lesbian relationships and aims to develop a special kind of vocabulary that would reflect women’s and lesbian experiences. Broumas writes in what Stanley Kunitz describes as “the alphabet of the body[,]”<sup>105</sup> creating imagery that is explicitly corporeal and symbolism which has been traditionally tied to the female sex. Indeed, by “beginning with O,” Broumas recalls the beginning of life itself – as the o in its shape resembles the *ovum*, or the egg cell. These “eggs” are literally scattered all across the pages of the collection – the small O-shaped signs or circles that are arbitrarily placed in between and at the end of stanzas of some of her poems. The egg is an ancient symbol of female fertility, new life, but also resurrection. The connotations of the symbol aptly encapsulate the essence of *Beginning with O*: the stories Broumas sets out to revise are some of humanity’s oldest tales that represent the beginning or the “ovum” of storytelling.

In the collection, Broumas reaches into the past for the voices of women whose perspectives often remain unheard and transcribes them with her own poetic language. This act

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<sup>105</sup> Stanley Kunitz, “Foreword,” in *Beginning with O* by Olga Broumas (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), xii.

of revisionist revival is essential for Broumas. As she concludes in one of her poems, we must “find words” for the “possible shifts of meaning [...] in a ward on fire” or otherwise, we “burn.”<sup>106</sup> In the foreword to *Beginning with O*, Kunitz notes that “Broumas aspires to be an archaeologist of ‘the speechless zones of the brain,’ to grope her way back to the language of the ancestral mother[.]”<sup>107</sup> Her excavation evokes what Adrienne Rich pursues in her seminal poem “Diving into the Wreck.” Like Rich, Broumas has “read the book of myths” and has now come “to explore the wreck” to “see the damage that was done[.]”<sup>108</sup> She sets out to uncover “[w]hat tiny fragments / survive, mangled into our language.”<sup>109</sup> Rich’s influence on Broumas is explicitly mentioned in a poem titled “Demeter” where Broumas recognizes her literary predecessors and models: “Anne. Sylvia. Virginia. / Adrienne the last, magnificent last.”<sup>110</sup> Through this loud gesture, Broumas acknowledges an existing and continuous tradition of the female revisionist practice – of not only fairy tales but the whole mythological, classical canon. Because Broumas incorporates her precursors into the poem, they themselves become mythologized and are thus introduced as the co-creators (rather than just revising adaptors) of the continuous stream of mythological narratives. In particular, Anne Sexton’s *Transformations* is repeatedly pinpointed as an important source of inspiration as many of the poems or epigraphs in Broumas’s sequence of fairy-tale retellings in *Beginning with O* quote passages from the older poet’s collection.

Despite being Sexton’s direct continuator, Broumas’s approach to revisionist technique differs from that of her poetic predecessor. Sexton’s revisionist methods involve social analysis through biting satire. Her retellings are critical and innovative in how they reflect on modern issues. At times, however, Sexton can be slightly ambiguous in her subversive implications.

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<sup>106</sup> Broumas, *Beginning with O*, 24.

<sup>107</sup> Kunitz, “Foreword,” x.

<sup>108</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Collected Poems, 1950-2012* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016), 370-1.

<sup>109</sup> Broumas, *Beginning with O*, 24.

<sup>110</sup> Broumas, *Beginning with O*, 21.

Broumas erases any space for speculation that Sexton had left in her revisions and provides her own, fully-fledged narratives. One such case is the retelling of “Rapunzel.” In her poem of the same title, Sexton allusively indicates a romantic relationship between Rapunzel and Mother Gothel. The nature of the bond between the two women is unclear and is portrayed in terms of both a family and sexual romance. Sexton’s poem follows the course of the original tale and the women’s romance is in the end spoiled by the Prince and his “dancing stick.”<sup>111</sup> Broumas quotes part of Sexton’s prologue – certainly the most explicitly suggestive passage of the poem – in the epigraph of her own “Rapunzel”: “A woman / who loves a woman / is forever young.”<sup>112</sup> Unlike Sexton, nonetheless, Broumas removes any implication of a heterosexual romance from her poem and focuses completely on the relationship between Rapunzel and Gothel. Her transformation of the tale allows her to portray a sensual lesbian romance, which had only been intimated by Sexton.

Broumas’s speaker of the poem is Rapunzel, unlike in Sexton’s prologue where the speaker is Gothel. In the Grimm’s version, Gothel calls on Rapunzel up in the tower, using the famous line: “Rapunzel, Rapunzel / let down your hair for me.”<sup>113</sup> The usually passive character of the entrapped girl is rewritten as the initiator of their relationship in Broumas’s poem, as Rapunzel addresses her lover from above: “Climb / through my hair, climb in / to me, love.”<sup>114</sup> The subsequent tryst is depicted as charged with an electric passion:

Every hair

on my skin curled up, my spine  
an enraptured circuit, a loop of memory, your first  
private touch.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Sexton, *Transformations*, 41.

<sup>112</sup> Broumas, *Beginning with O*, 59.

<sup>113</sup> Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, 48.

<sup>114</sup> Broumas, *Beginning with O*, 59.

<sup>115</sup> Broumas, *Beginning with O*, 59.

The love between the two women is described as a “lush perennial,”<sup>116</sup> this being one of the many botanical metaphors used in the poem. Broumas alludes to the reality of lesbian desire associated with repression and denial and suggests that such yearning between Rapunzel and Gothel might be also present, though consciously hushed up, in the Grimm’s tale:

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. How many  
grew to confuse greed  
with hunger[.]<sup>117</sup>

In this passage, Broumas refers to Rapunzel’s fate outlined in an early version of the Grimm’s tale, discussed in the “Introduction,” where Rapunzel becomes pregnant by the prince. Broumas highlights the involuntary nature of the compulsory heterosexual narrative (and relationship), as Rapunzel had to “subdue [her] heat / drown out [her] appetite” with, the strikingly phallic “pickles and harsh weeds.” Broumas thus criticizes the notion of compulsory heterosexuality (recognized by many feminists as an oppressive institution<sup>118</sup>) which is championed as a normative element in Grimm’s “Rapunzel,” and the majority of their tales.

The vigorous voice of the young Rapunzel in Broumas’s poem is one which celebrates and advocates for her and Gothel’s relationships and consequently subverts the stereotyped portrayal of a passive, young virgin as a helpless victim in the Grimm’s version:

*Old*

*bitch, young  
darling. May those who speak them  
choke on their words, their hunger freeze*

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<sup>116</sup> Broumas, *Beginning with O*, 59.

<sup>117</sup> Broumas, *Beginning with O*, 59.

<sup>118</sup> Adrienne Rich first coined the term “compulsory heterosexuality” in her 1980 essay titled “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” where she proposes that “heterosexuality, [...] needs to be recognized and studied as a political institution[.]” Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” *Signs* 5, no. 4 (Summer 1980): 637.

in their veins like lard.<sup>119</sup>

Broumas rejects the general thinking that renders any relationship between a younger and older woman as predatory and unnatural, in terms of both its age difference and sexual orientation. Rapunzel claims that she is “[l]ess innocent / in [her] public youth / than [Gothel],”<sup>120</sup> thus pointing out that younger women are commonly (and most often involuntarily) sexualized and objectified by the public eye, while menopausal women are more often viewed as asexual. In her essay on the double gender standard of ageing, Susan Sontag explains that older women face a double-marginalisation; both for their gender and their age, as ageing for women, among other things, represents “a humiliating process of gradual sexual disqualification.”<sup>121</sup> The “virtually invisible subject of older women,”<sup>122</sup> as coined by Kathleen Woodward, is exempt from sexualization, both accepting and deprecatory, and marked as undesirable for its lack of youth and attractiveness, and thus deemed not only unfeminine but generally insignificant. As Clare Anderson observes in her study, “within the cultural ideal of femininity, within its visual and linguistic vocabulary, there remains little place for the ageing female body.”<sup>123</sup> Broumas’s poem engages in an outspoken criticism of the portrayal and invisibility of middle-aged and older women in the patriarchal system and as a result, the women’s reciprocal sexuality is celebrated and idealized, with the problematic age difference between the protagonists invariably brushed under the carpet.

Broumas appropriates the imagery of a flourishing garden, typically used in celebration of young, fruitful and heterosexual love, to extol Rapunzel and Gothel’s bond.

I’ll break the hush  
of our cloistered garden, our harvest continuous

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<sup>119</sup> Broumas, *Beginning with O*, 59.

<sup>120</sup> Broumas, *Beginning with O*, 59-60.

<sup>121</sup> Susan Sontag, “The Double Standard of Ageing,” in *An Ageing Population: A Reader and Sourcebook*, ed. Vida Carver and Penny Liddiard (Sevenoaks: Hodder and Stoughton in association with Open University Press, 1978), 75.

<sup>122</sup> Kathleen Woodward, *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), x.

<sup>123</sup> Clare Anderson, *Discourses of Ageing and Gender: The Impact of Public and Private Voices on the Identity of Ageing Women* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 28.

as a moan, the tilled bed luminous  
with the future  
yield. Red  
vows like tulips. Rows  
upon rows of kisses from all lips.<sup>124</sup>

The closing lines of the poem coincide with a sexual climax. Although not in the sense of reproduction, the two women's relationship is fertile emotionally and sensually. Broumas's botanical play conveys highly feminine metaphors, such as the "two lips" that grow into "tulips" and a tilled flower bed that represents the bed in which the "tulips" lie. The flora-based symbolism serves as yet another way to secure the lesbian relationship as natural. As Wanning Harries explains, "Broumas rewrites profoundly natural sexuality that has been written off as 'unnatural' or perverse."<sup>125</sup> In Broumas's rendition, lesbian love is the organic consequence, a status quo which exemplifies sensual fulfilment.

Broumas's portrayal and normalization of a romantic and sexual relationship between two traditionally polarized female characters in "Rapunzel" exhibits a powerful transgression of classical elements of the fairy-tale genre. As Turner and Greenhill observed in 2012, "[f]airy-tale scholarship rarely dips a proverbial toe into interpretive waters that might impel readers to take account of attractions, rather than repulsions, between witches and maidens."<sup>126</sup> The forbidden possibility of attraction which Sexton initiates and Broumas fully realizes embodies a challenge to the heteronormative categories represented by the traditional fairy tales and the academic discourse surrounding them in which such categorizing predominated until relatively recently. Unquestionably, Sexton was the one who had planted the seeds in the untrodden terrain for this interpretation of the fairy tale to exist. Sexton's transgressive retelling from 1971 introduces the initial possibility of affinity and love between the two opposing female characters in the fairy tales as well as in reality. Broumas, however, with the use of her

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<sup>124</sup> Broumas, *Beginning with O*, 60.

<sup>125</sup> Wanning Harries, *Twice Upon a Time*, 150.

<sup>126</sup> Kay Turner and Pauline Greenhill, *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms, Series in Fairy-Tale Studies* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012), 246.

environmental imagery, cultivated the landscape into a garden at the end of the same decade. When Broumas writes about “break[ing] the hush,” Wanning Harries points out that it can be related to “the cloistered ‘hush’ that still surrounds Sexton’s version” that is shattered by “Rapunzel’s rapt evocation of sexual ecstasy.”<sup>127</sup> The female subject remains at the forefront of Broumas’s retellings in the poem “Little Red Riding Hood.”

The tale of “Little Red Riding Hood” has been deemed by the psychoanalysts as a parable of a girl’s entry into sexual maturity, seduction, or as a parable of rape.<sup>128</sup> Broumas’s version retains the focus on female sexuality yet rearticulates it as a tale about the mother-daughter bond and the discovery of female pleasure. The imagery in the first part of the poem evokes the scene of birth.

Dressed in my red hood, howling, I went—  
evading  
the white-clad doctor and his fancy claims: microscope,  
stethoscope, scalpel, all  
the better to see with, to hear,  
and to eat—straight from your hollowed basket  
into the midwife’s skirts.<sup>129</sup>

The characteristic hood of Little Red Riding Hood, earlier referred to as the “mantle of blood”<sup>130</sup> here indicates the mother’s birth canal and the bleeding during parturition. The cross-dressed wolf from the Grimm’s version is here clothed in a doctor’s coat. Instead of the grandmother, Wanning Harries notes, he takes the form of “a frightening male obstetrician with his shiny instruments, an obstetrician who is not allowed to intervene between the mother and the midwife.”<sup>131</sup> The stanza recalls the most iconic scene of the traditional fairy tale, as the wolf’s beastly features transform into surgical tools, the “better to see with, to hear / and to eat[.]” In Broumas’s version, the girl successfully evades the male surgeon and is passed from

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<sup>127</sup> Wanning Harries, *Twice Upon a Time*, 150.

<sup>128</sup> Tartar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimm’s Fairy Tales*, 41.

<sup>129</sup> Broumas, *Beginning with O*, 67.

<sup>130</sup> Broumas, *Beginning with O*, 67.

<sup>131</sup> Wanning Harries, *Twice Upon a Time*, 151-2



one woman (her mother) onto another (the midwife). The girl's passage from her mother's "hollowed basket" symbolizes the empty womb but also a mother's empty nest after her children mature and leave home. The transition "straight [...] into midwife's skirts" also implies a dual meaning, hinting towards the girl's sexuality and her attraction to women, and confirms the fact that Broumas's retellings always ultimately point to a lesbian interpretation.

Unlike the Little Red Riding Hood in the Grimm's story, the one in Broumas's poem follows her mother's advice to "[s]tick to the road" and avoid the "wolves in [the] bushes[.]"<sup>132</sup> In the next stanza, the "hood" undergoes yet another transformation: while still remaining female and corporeal, it transmutes into the hood of the clitoris. Broumas implies that the heroine's inclination to women (and thus avoidance of all men,<sup>133</sup> as Wanning Harries suggests) is the result of her following her mother's guidance. Little Red Riding Hood thus followed "the road" and "kept / the hood secret" and

kept what it sheathed more  
secret still. I opened  
it only at night, and with other women  
who might be walking the same road to their own  
grandma's house, each with her basket of gifts, her small hood  
safe in the same part.<sup>134</sup>

As a symbol of female affinity, the hood in the tale (both as the mantle of blood and the clitoral hood) is the protagonist's link to her mother and a passage to sexual pleasure. As Cronan Rose explains, the mother "is her first and therefore most impressive image of adult womanhood."<sup>135</sup> Like in "Rapunzel," Broumas's retelling of "Little Red Riding Hood" is devoid of any male intervention. She makes sure that the presence of the wolf-physician is rendered redundant and therefore successfully avoided, which also means that there is no need for the appearance of the rescuing huntsman towards the end of the story. In Broumas's poem, Little Red Riding

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<sup>132</sup> Broumas, *Beginning with O*, 68.

<sup>133</sup> Wanning Harries, *Twice Upon a Time*, 152.

<sup>134</sup> Broumas, *Beginning with O*, 68.

<sup>135</sup> Cronan Rose, "Through the Looking Glass: When Women Tell Fairy Tales," 221.

Hood indeed never makes it into the beast's stomach. "The threat of being devoured"<sup>136</sup> that Bruno Bettelheim in his seminal psychoanalytical study on the fairy-tale genre recognizes as the central theme of the traditional tale, is reconstructed by the poet as a narrative of a return to "the architect of [the] body,"<sup>137</sup> the mother.

While Sexton's poems criticize the rivalry between the women in classic fairy tales and suggest that each of these conflicts is essentially a version of the same one, Broumas portrays the male characters as the stories' main invaders whose major effect is that they spoil the harmony of female-based relationships. In an effort of restoration, Broumas orchestrates the reunion of her female characters. As Nancy Walker observes, in Broumas's poems, "[m]en are not rescuers, but rather intruders; women are lovers and nurturers of each other instead of jealous competitors."<sup>138</sup> Broumas's retellings repeatedly close the divisions between the female characters whose rivalry dominates the Grimm's fairy tales and upholds their significance against the heteronormative tradition.

The poem titled "Sleeping Beauty" is inspired by the motifs of sleep and an arousing kiss from the Grimm's tale. Broumas, however, uses these motifs in a poem which becomes a parable of forbidden love. The poem's speaker appears to be Sleeping Beauty herself, recalling the dreams she had during her long sleep. The poem's chronology is scattered and fragmentary, emulating the sensations of a dream-like state. This atmosphere is further amplified by the structure of the poem's formal features, including the use of enjambement which creates short and choppy lines, emulating the fragmentary nature of dream-like sequences. The poem catches the speaker as she wakes up from her dream, clearly still affected by it:

I wake  
still later, breathless, heart  
racing, sleep

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<sup>136</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 211.

<sup>137</sup> Broumas, *Beginning with O*, 68.

<sup>138</sup> Nancy Walker, *The Disobedient Writer: Women and Narrative Tradition* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 60.

peeling off like a hairless  
glutton, momentarily  
slaked.<sup>139</sup>

Once she starts recollecting her dream, she notices “lovebites like fossils” as remnants of “*something that did exist / dreamlike, though[.]*”<sup>140</sup> The speaker remembers her dreams as if they were not dreams but memories of which her body bears the evidence: “Evidence. / Strewn / round my neck like a ceremonial necklace[.]”<sup>141</sup> She begins to feel the “bitter, metallic” taste of her lover which “sharpens [her] tongue like a thousand shells[.]”<sup>142</sup> As she can taste both “Blood” and “Tears,”<sup>143</sup> the scene evokes feelings of deep suffering.

The second part of the poem relocates us from the dreamscape into a concrete reality where the speaker’s lover is named.

City-center, mid-  
traffic, I  
wake to your public kiss, Your name  
is Judith, your kiss a sign[.]<sup>144</sup>

The intimate, quiet space of introspection is suddenly replaced by a public bustle of the city. The couple’s kiss shocks the pedestrians, while the traffic lights glow red – and red, Broumas writes, “in our culture [...] is a warning[.]”<sup>145</sup> The red traffic light functions as a non-verbal marker of the women’s public kiss perceived as something wrong, signalling them to stop. Carolina Fernández Rodríguez interprets Broumas’s name choice for Sleeping Beauty’s lover as an allusion to the Old Testament heroine Judith who beheads the tyrannical Holofernes.<sup>146</sup> However, since Broumas continues her poem stating “[y]our kiss / is for them / a sign of

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<sup>139</sup> Broumas, *Beginning with O*, 61.

<sup>140</sup> Broumas, *Beginning with O*, 61.

<sup>141</sup> Broumas, *Beginning with O*, 61.

<sup>142</sup> Broumas, *Beginning with O*, 62.

<sup>143</sup> Broumas, *Beginning with O*, 61.

<sup>144</sup> Broumas, *Beginning with O*, 61.

<sup>145</sup> Broumas, *Beginning with O*, 62.

<sup>146</sup> Carolina Fernández Rodríguez, “The Deconstruction of the Male-Rescuer Archetype in Contemporary Feminist Revisions of ‘The Sleeping Beauty,’” *Marvels & Tales* 16, no. 1 (2002): 68, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41388615>.

betrayal”<sup>147</sup> I would argue that Broumas also recalls another biblical scene, and that her “Judith” is a transfiguration of Judas. The kiss here, however, is not a sign of betrayal to her lover. Rather, the women’s shared kiss is a sign of betrayal of the “men” in the poem. While it parallels the great betrayal of Jesus in the New Testament, their kiss is a defiant gesture aimed not at Jesus himself, but the heteronormative aspects of the Judeo-Christian tradition. As the two women “cross the street, kissing,”<sup>148</sup> Judith’s “red / lips” glare like a scarlet letter, “suspect, unspeakable / [suggestive of] liberties.”<sup>149</sup> In this scene, Broumas metaphorically demonstrates the sexual ostracization that occurs in public spaces.

The literal awakening of the Sleeping Beauty which the poem portrays is aligned with the speaker’s internal sexual awakening:

*This  
is the woman I woke from sleep, the woman that  
woke me sleeping.*<sup>150</sup>

Moreover, since the awakening the speaker experiences is of homosexual attraction, therefore another possible interpretation of her long “sleep” suggests itself: it refers to compulsory heterosexuality (throughout modern history) from which she is eventually liberated by “the woman that woke” her. According to Mary J. Carruthers, for Broumas “lesbian love provides an image of psychic and social wholeness.”<sup>151</sup> In *Beginning with O*, female unity and lesbian love represent the ultimate consummation, a denouement which replaces the Grimm’s famous “happily to the end of their days.”<sup>152</sup>

In her version of “Snow White,” Broumas imagines a sequel to the traditional tale where three generations of women share the “marriage bed”<sup>153</sup> while the men fight in war. That

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<sup>147</sup> Broumas, *Beginning with O*, 62.

<sup>148</sup> Broumas, *Beginning with O*, 62.

<sup>149</sup> Broumas, *Beginning with O*, 62.

<sup>150</sup> Broumas, *Beginning with O*, 62.

<sup>151</sup> Mary J. Carruthers, “The Re-Vision of the Muse: Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Judy Grahn, Olga Broumas,” *The Hudson Review* 36, no. 2 (1983): 308. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3856702>.

<sup>152</sup> Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, 189.

<sup>153</sup> Broumas, *Beginning with O*, 69

period which Broumas calls in the poem “peacetime years”<sup>154</sup> is disturbed when the husband/father returns. By describing him as “[b]lond, clean, / miraculous, [...] alien,”<sup>155</sup> she clearly presents him as an intruder. Once the man is back, the women lay separated as “two continents” divided by an “opulent ocean.”<sup>156</sup> The heterosexual relationship which dominates the Grimm’s story is subverted as inferior and represents an involuntary gulf between the women who belong together. Broumas once again portrays the men in these stories as interruptions of the divine, feminine cycles. In another homage to Sexton, Broumas writes:

A woman  
who loves a woman  
who loves a woman  
who loves a man.  
*If the circle  
be unbroken...*<sup>157</sup>

By dismantling the heteronormative relationship structures of traditional fairy tales and by portraying the return to the mother as the desired conclusion, Broumas brings forth, according to Cronan Rose, “the possibility that lesbianism is not deviant but a natural consequence of the undeniable fact that a woman’s first love object, like a man’s, is her mother.”<sup>158</sup> With the use of the characteristic symbols of the Grimm’s “Snow White,” Broumas describes her Snow White and her mother to be

[l]ike two halves  
of a two-colored apple—red  
with discovery, green with fear—we lay  
hugging the wall between us, whitewash  
leaving its telltale tracks.<sup>159</sup>

Broumas transfigures these emblematic fairy-tale objects which originally functioned as instruments of polarization between the women characters into symbols of unity and love. As

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<sup>154</sup> Broumas, *Beginning with O*, 69.

<sup>155</sup> Broumas, *Beginning with O*, 70.

<sup>156</sup> Broumas, *Beginning with O*, 70.

<sup>157</sup> Broumas, *Beginning with O*, 69-70.

<sup>158</sup> Cronan Rose, “Through the Looking Glass: When Women Tell Fairy Tales,” 221.

<sup>159</sup> Broumas, *Beginning with O*, 70.

Snow White calls herself her mother's "fairest, most / faithful mirror"<sup>160</sup> Walker points out that "instead of an occasion for jealousy, the mirror is here representative of the mother-daughter bond[.]"<sup>161</sup> The mirror which Sexton, as we have seen, partially retains as a locus of conflict, represents in Broumas's poem embodiment of Snow White's adoration for her mother. The poem, which is also the final poem in the collection, finishes with the line "[r]eceive / me, Mother[.]"<sup>162</sup> followed by two O-shaped symbols. The whole collection thus closes with a plea which encapsulates the return to the mother as the ultimate goal. Broumas's use of enjambement, however, proposes a dual meaning in which the plea is not only addressed to *a* mother but also to the reader, in which Broumas proclaims herself as *the* mother (of the poem) asking to be received.

The intricately constructed enjambment that emulates the collection's subject matter and creates flowing, boundless structures is characteristic of Broumas's poems. Her poetry's form is distinct and particular. Broumas's lines cascade like a waterfall, creating anticipation and introducing unexpected suspense. Thanks to this feature, the poems provide layers of meaning – one could choose to read the isolated lines, which in themselves function as self-contained – as in the case of "Sleeping Beauty" where Broumas writes, as we have seen,

[y]our kiss  
is for them  
  
a sign of betrayal[.]<sup>163</sup>

Broumas suggests that the woman's kiss is intended for "them," her onlookers. However, the subject complement which follows in the next stanza further evolves the meaning of the previous statement.

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<sup>160</sup> Broumas, *Beginning with O*, 71.

<sup>161</sup> Walker, *The Disobedient Writer: Women and Narrative Tradition*, 60.

<sup>162</sup> Broumas, *Beginning with O*, 71.

<sup>163</sup> Broumas, *Beginning with O*, 62.

Experimentation with the form of fairy tales is in line with their one constant, as Zipes names it, which is transformation. As a genre whose nature is essentially protean, fairy tale encourages formal variation. The modification from one literary form into another opens up new possibilities of expression and meaning. The new processes of communication and interpretation expose the legacy of traditional fairy tales as outdated. For the poetic transformation to be effective, and for the fairy tales to stay relevant, the narratives need to be dismantled and put together anew, both on the motific and formal level. Coming back to Wanning Harries's analogy, the tales, in Sexton's and Broumas's rendering, are not only old bottles filled with new substance, but, because of their formal transformation, entirely new objects constructed from old materials.

#### 4 Emma Donoghue: *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins*

Emma Donoghue was born in Ireland in 1969 but is often characterized as an Irish-Canadian author, as she emigrated to Canada in 1998 and lived there ever since. Abigail Palko notes that “[b]oth Ireland and Canada proudly claim Donoghue as a member of their respective literary traditions,”<sup>164</sup> recognizing the author’s strong connection to both European and North-American literary cultures. Donoghue identifies as lesbian and many of her works, among which are novels, plays, and studies on literary history, explore the subject of female homosexuality and have been considered “an exemplar of contemporary [...] lesbian fiction.”<sup>165</sup> Her works often portray lesbian stories and explore the subject of female homosexuality. Although her contribution to lesbian visibility in fiction is indisputable, Palko points out that defining Donoghue’s fiction as simply “lesbian” would perpetuate pigeonholing her work “into categories that often obscure the richness of her range.”<sup>166</sup> Donoghue’s focus involves women’s stories in general, especially those that have been silenced and made invisible throughout human history. In an interview, she explains that “ransacking the past for odd women (whether real ones or fictional equivalents) has been crucial to [her] career.”<sup>167</sup> Her aim, in her own words again, is to interrogate “how women fitted into history – or rather, how history as a story changed once a woman was telling it.”<sup>168</sup> Donoghue’s fiction abundantly echoes female voices previously unheard – *Kissing the Witch* is no exception.

Twenty-six years after Sexton’s and twenty years after Broumas’s revisionist projects, Emma Donoghue’s collection of short stories *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins* (1997)

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<sup>164</sup> Abigail Palko, “Emma Donoghue” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Contemporary British and Irish Literature*, Volume 1, ed. Richard Bradford (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2021), 513.

<sup>165</sup> Anna Charczun, *Irish Lesbian Writing Across Time: A New Framework for Rethinking Love Between Women* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2021), 157.

<sup>166</sup> Palko, “Emma Donoghue” 513.

<sup>167</sup> Emma Donoghue, and Laird Hunt, “Emma Donoghue and Laird Hunt on Writing Historical Women,” *Literary Hub*, February 15, 2017, <https://lithub.com/emma-donoghue-and-laird-hunt-on-writing-historical-women/>.

<sup>168</sup> Abigail Palko, “Emma Donoghue, In Conversation with Abby Palko,” *Breac: A Digital Journal of Irish Studies*, July 17, 2017, <https://breac.nd.edu/articles/emma-donoghue-in-conversation-with-abby-palko/>.



carries on the revisionist legacy, taking it into the new millennium. She reimagines the traditional tales, drawing on the Grimms as well as Hans Christian Andersen, with the use of an experimental framing device. While many sources name Donoghue as a direct continuation of the revisionist practices introduced by Sexton and Broumas,<sup>169</sup> it is important to emphasise the parallel between this Irish-Canadian prose writer active from the 1990s onwards, and the two American poets who, although from different generations, meet with their respective revisionist works in 1970s. As has already been shown in the previous chapters, the stories which had inspired the modern versions of fairy tales come from all over the world. It was only after the Grimm Brothers collected the tales that the latter entered the Western consciousness en masse. Nevertheless, since all three authors are inheritors of the Western Anglophone tradition, their common focus on the fairy tale consolidates the integral position of the tales in the Anglophone mytho-folkloric cannon, while concurrently underlining its transcultural quality. The discussion thus far has shown that the tradition of fairy tales is timeless – despite its relatively recent conception as a badge of stability, it continues to be consistently revisited, reinterpreted, and reformed. By incorporating the work of Donoghue with the other authors from different national and formal backgrounds, the fairy tale further proves itself to be transnational and multi-genre. Zipes considers the principle of transformation to be the only constant of fairy tales. Examining it in a multitextual context can help us demonstrate the heterogenous nature of the fairy tale as a genre and its proneness to transformation as well.

The stories in *Kissing the Witch* are organised by a unique narrative structure in which the tales are handed down from one narrator onto another. The stories are not only framed but ultimately linked together by a string of characters who continue to encounter and interact, until it seems that the individual tales form one consecutive narrative. Each story, except for

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<sup>169</sup> Zipes, *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, 136; and Abigail L. Palko, “‘No Mother Nor Nothing To Me’: Excavating The Maternal Figure In *Kissing The Witch*,” *Women’s Studies*, 44, no. 7 (2015): 919. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2015.1071613>.

the first one, is introduced by a variant of the same interlude which then functions as a knot between the two adjacent stories. In this connecting passage, the speaker of the previous story asks, “[W]ho were you / before [...]?” And the speaker of the following tale answers, “Will I tell you my own story? / It is a tale of a [...]”<sup>170</sup> Donoghue chose to name all of her revised stories using the same formula of “The Tale of the [...]” where she highlights the elements which epitomize the embedded tales – such as “The Tale of the Shoe” (Cinderella), or “The Tale of the Apple” (Snow White). Donoghue does not only avoid naming the elemental characters of the fairy tales in the titles but in the whole collection altogether. This allows Donoghue to evoke the well-known narrative of the tales while liberating its characters from their constraining names and associations and thus ensuring their mobility within the fairy tale universe. This omission of the protagonists’ names further stimulates the move from individuality to collectiveness of the female characters in the book which constitutes one of its essential features.

The frame of Donoghue’s narrative technique emulates the practice of the oral transmission of folk stories. The fairy tales themselves, as it proves to be the case, continue to hover on the edge between oral and literary expression, making them “liminal texts,”<sup>171</sup> as Stephen Benson calls them in his study on folktale cycles. He further argues that if fairy tales are literary, they are nevertheless “implicitly and explicitly [structured] around a staged orality: they mimic orality by staging the event of their narration.”<sup>172</sup> In *Kissing the Witch*, this “event of narration” is employed by an agency shift – whereas the traditional stories collected by the Grimms introduce a detached, third-person narrator, Donoghue engages the central characters of the stories as direct participants in the formation of their narrative. The character-narrators of the tale are empowered by the agency of choice – since they become subjects of the

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<sup>170</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 9.

<sup>171</sup> Stephen Benson, *Cycles of Influence: Fiction, Folktale, Theory* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2003), 46.

<sup>172</sup> Benson, *Cycles of Influence*, 46.

narratives, the outcomes of the stories are in the hands of their narrators. Simultaneously, this “cooperative storytelling” as Jennifer Orme calls it, suggests that the narrators are able to leave things out of their stories, which, according to Orme, signifies “that these tales are ‘in process’ and never entirely closed.”<sup>173</sup>

Wanning Harries concludes that “[n]early all fairy tales are framed in some way.”<sup>174</sup> Considering the tales collected and edited by the Grimm Brothers, one thinks of a variation of the formulaic and repetitive “once upon a time” and “happily ever after.” These framing devices are put into place in order to establish a contained world into which the reader is introduced by way of the easily recognizable opening line and departure is marked by the closing one. The kind of frame that Donoghue deploys in *Kissing the Witch*, however, defies closure. As Orme observes, “the frames of [the collection] are left radically open,” and because of the “openness and fluidity of the structure” they “resist closure through multivocality”<sup>175</sup> but also through the interconnectedness of those narrating voices. Donoghue’s approaches to revision as such, including her distinct use of framing devices, thus epitomize Wanning Harries’s observation referenced in the “Introduction” of this thesis. According to Wanning Harries, the fairy tales written by women, are mostly complex, convoluted, and self-referential, especially compared to the male-written stories (such as those by the Grimms and Perrault). By resisting closed structures – a method that *Kissing the Witch* actively pursues, the revised fairy tales stay true to their “original,” open, plural form.

In the first story of the collection titled “The Tale of the Shoe” the narrator (Cinderella, although not explicitly named) rhetorically asks, “How can I begin to describe my transformations?”<sup>176</sup> As if in response to the question she notes: “[m]y old dusty self was spun

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<sup>173</sup> Jennifer Orme, “Mouth to Mouth: Queer Desires in Emma Donoghue’s ‘Kissing the Witch,’” *Marvels & Tales* 24, no. 1 (2010): 118, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41389030>.

<sup>174</sup> Wanning Harries, *Twice Upon a Time*, 104.

<sup>175</sup> Orme, “Mouth to Mouth,” 118.

<sup>176</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 3.

new.”<sup>177</sup> This remark represents a powerful introduction to Donoghue’s revisions and encapsulates the collection’s intent implied in its subtitle; that is, to transform the old tales and clothe them into new skins. This itch for transformation reminds us of Sexton’s eponymous collection while it reconfirms Zipes’s observation about transformation being the fairy tale’s single constant. Like with Broumas, corporeality is a key theme in Donoghue’s revisions. Both parts of the collection’s title denote close physical contact with the stories and their characters, as well as their visceral embeddedness in our collective consciousness. In order to change them, transform them, Donoghue needs to get up close and intimate with her sources and characters – she kisses the witch and breaks the stories out of their old skins so that she can get under the surface of given meanings and reveal the hidden, unrepresented desires within.

“The Tale of the Shoe” itself retells Cinderella’s story from the protagonist’s perspective and through her narration. But instead of following her storyline with the prince, the tale focuses on the story of Cinderella and her fairy Godmother. This focus shift is a core value and the main contribution of Donoghue’s revisions. As Zipes points out, “Donoghue disrupts the usual patterns of heterosexual desire; in these tales princesses often ignore princes to fall in love with fairy godmothers, stepmothers, and even with witches[.]”<sup>178</sup> This is evident from the outset of the tale where Cinderella says: “Till she came it was all cold[.]”<sup>179</sup> alluding to the influence the godmother had on her life. Like in the Grimm’s tale, Donoghue finds Cinderella as she is mourning her mother’s death.

Ever since my mother died the feather bed felt hard as a stone floor. Every word that came out of my mouth limped away like a toad. [...] I heard a knocking in my skull, and kept running to the door, but there was never anyone there. The days passed like dust brushed from my fingers.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 3.

<sup>178</sup> Zipes, *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, 134.

<sup>179</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 1.

<sup>180</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 2.

But unlike the Grimm's Cinderella, who is made to do all the chores by her evil stepmother and stepsisters, Cinderella's sweeping in "The Tale of the Shoe" is motivated by her grief: "I scrubbed and swept because there was nothing else to do,"<sup>181</sup> she remarks. The detestation that, in the classical version, comes from Cinderella's step-family is internalized as self-contempt and even depression. The speaker makes a clear point about her torment being self-inflicted.

Nobody made me do the things I did, nobody scolded me, nobody punished me but me. The shrill voices were all inside. Do this, do that, you lazy heap of dirt. They knew every question and answer, the voices in my head. Some days they asked why I was still alive.<sup>182</sup>

She is rescued from her state only after the Fairy Godmother appears on the scene and reinstates a connection between Cinderella and her mother through the emblematic Hazel tree. The Fairy Godmother can facilitate this reunion because "[i]t turned out that she had known my mother, when my mother was alive. She said that was my mother's tree."<sup>183</sup> Even though the introductory tale lacks the formulaic interlude, Donoghue hints at the metatextuality of her characters through their interpersonal connections within the tale.

"The Tale of the Shoe" uses the stereotypical elements of the Grimm's tale to provide a social commentary on the patriarchal constraints that these tales promote. With the use of the first-person narration, Cinderella's perspective provides a previously unseen point of view as she is able to question and elaborate on the actions which, at first, follow the course of the classical tale. When she arrives at the ball, she notes:

I knew just how I was meant to behave. I smiled ever so prettily when the great doors swung wide to announce me. I refused a canape and kept my belly pulled in. Under the thousand crystal candelabras I danced with ten elderly gentlemen who had nothing to say but did not let that stop them. I answered only, Indeed and Oh yes and Do you think so?<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 1-2.

<sup>182</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 2.

<sup>183</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 3.

<sup>184</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 4.

In this paragraph, the speaker describes her applying the prescribed behaviour she knew so well. In her version, Donoghue criticizes the stereotypical notions that the fairy tales promote and illustrates the gendered expectations that women were expected to fulfil all throughout history, such as appearing as frail as possible, talking as little as possible, and pleasing men that they did not find appealing. When Cinderella attends the ball again and continues to replicate this learned behaviour, she starts to lose her sense of self: “He asked me my favorite color, but I couldn’t think of any. He asked me my name, and for a moment I couldn’t remember it.”<sup>185</sup> In “The Tale of the Shoe,” Donoghue directly critiques gender stereotypes as destructive to women’s individuality. As Orme aptly explains, the revisions in *Kissing the Witch* expose “[t]he power and danger of social norms upon bodies, lives, and desires.”<sup>186</sup> The revised tale further demonstrates how the protagonist’s true desires were eclipsed by the imposed patriarchal expectations.

Cinderella describes her time with the prince ironically as “all very fairy-tale”<sup>187</sup> as he proposes to her on the steps outside of the ballroom, yet she cannot bring herself to accept: “I opened my teeth but no sound came out.”<sup>188</sup> When the bell tolls midnight, like in the classical fairy tale, she runs away back to the Fairy Godmother, leaving a shoe behind – but instead of keeping the other slipper as a piece of evidence, she throws it into a bush. Once seeing the Godmother, she confesses “I had got the story all wrong. How could I not have noticed she was beautiful?”<sup>189</sup> All throughout the revised tale, Donoghue uses symbolic language that hints towards the women’s romantic/sexual connection. For example, when Cinderella says that the “[Fairy Godmother] showed me the sparkle in my eyes, how wide my skirt could spread,”<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 5.

<sup>186</sup> Orme, “Mouth to Mouth,” 126.

<sup>187</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 6.

<sup>188</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 6.

<sup>189</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 7.

<sup>190</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 4-5.

or when “[s]he claimed her little finger was a magic wand, it could do spectacular things.”<sup>191</sup> Donoghue’s tale ends with the union of the two women similar to the version produced by her revisionist predecessors, addresses the evident age difference between the two women in the tale. Yet, instead of just blurring the lines, she puts both these concerns and their resolutions into the agency of the two women. When the Godmother says: “I’m old enough to be your mother,” and Cinderella answers “[y]ou’re not my mother, [...] I’m old enough to know that.”<sup>192</sup> Although Donoghue portrays lesbian love as a conclusion in her revisionist projects, the prevalent desire in her tales is for freedom and autonomy. Her female characters are repeatedly empowered by their reclaimed agency over their own decision making.

In a story titled “The Tale of the Rose,” the protagonist accepts her fate as a promised bride in a freak deal her father arranges. The tale is a retelling of the story known as “Beauty and the Beast” and perhaps most embedded into the modern consciousness in the Disney’s film adaptation from 1991. The tale was first written by the French novelist Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve in 1740 and was spread over an astounding 362 pages. The story was then taken up by Madame Leprince de Beaumont in 1756 who significantly edited and shortened the tale into the version which is widely known up until today.<sup>193</sup> The tale initially made its way to the Grimm’s collection and was published in the first edition of *Children’s and Household Tales* in 1812 under the title “The Summer and the Winter Garden,” but did not appear in further reprints. For the sake of consistency, Donoghue’s retelling will be compared to the version which appears in the first edition of Brother Grimm’s collection.

In the Grimm’s version, the father of three daughters promises each of them a present brought home from a fair. The third daughter, the most beautiful of the three, asks for a rose. Since it is midwinter, the rose is impossible to obtain. Yet the father does not want to disappoint

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<sup>191</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 6.

<sup>192</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 8.

<sup>193</sup> Jack Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1979), 10.

“his favorite child”<sup>194</sup> so he decides to steal the flower from a castle whose garden is “half summer, half winter.”<sup>195</sup> When he rides away, “a large black beast” catches up with him and threatens to kill him if he does not give his most beautiful daughter for a wife in exchange. In a week’s time, the beast duly comes to fetch his prize. The father never tells his daughter about the deal he made, and this scene of the tale is filled with terror:

“Since my bride didn’t come and the time is up, I’ve come to fetch her myself!”  
Upon saying that he went up to the youngest daughter and grabbed her. She began to scream, but that didn’t help at all. She had to go off with him, and when her father came home, he found that his dearest child had been kidnapped.<sup>196</sup>

In Donoghue’s retelling, the protagonist (let us call her Belle) and her fate are completely transformed. She is no longer the helpless victim whose fate is decided by the men in her life, but rather a character with compassion for the arduous situation her father finds himself in. She again is empowered by the decisions, although limited, that she makes for herself.

In her revision, Donoghue paints her protagonist as a character who questions her place in the world and yearns for a higher purpose. The judgment the father makes in the Grimm’s tale, naming her to be the most beautiful of his daughter, is irrelevant to her. In Donoghue, she says: “I was beautiful, or so my father told me. My oval mirror showed me a face with nothing written on it [...] I looked in my mirror, and saw, not myself, but every place I’d never been.”<sup>197</sup> Like the Grimm’s Belle, she asks her father to bring her a rose. Rose is a flower with a high symbolic value, and even in the Grimm’s version, it can be read as denoting love, purity, and virginity. In *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, Michael Ferber writes that “[a]lmost any flower can represent a girl, but the rose has always stood for the most beautiful, the most beloved.”<sup>198</sup> It is therefore fitting that in exchange for the rose, the beast asks for its closest human

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<sup>194</sup> Grimm, *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition*, 225.

<sup>195</sup> Grimm, *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition*, 225.

<sup>196</sup> Grimm, *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition*, 226.

<sup>197</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 27-8.

<sup>198</sup> Michael Ferber, *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 173.



embodiment – the father’s favourite and most beautiful child. Furthermore, the symbolism of rose expands when the French origin of the tale is taken into consideration; the French phrase “to lose her rose”<sup>199</sup> is a figurative phrase for losing a girl’s virginity. Ferber also mentions the word’s origin in the Greek term *rhodon*, meaning the hymen or female genitalia.<sup>200</sup> The theft of the literal rose in the Grimm’s tale thus results in exchange for the figurative rose in the form of the daughter’s virginity. However, as the speaker in Donoghue’s tale – who “had suitors aplenty but wanted none of them”<sup>201</sup> – states that she “wanted something improbable and perfect as a red rose just opening[,]”<sup>202</sup> we get the first hint that this version will focus on homosexual desire

Donoghue portrays the protagonist’s imminent abduction as her impending fate. The homodiegetic narrator implies she can sense something major will take place in her life soon: “I was washing my old self away; by midsummer I was almost ready.”<sup>203</sup> When her father comes home with her present, he is not in denial of what he had to do in order to obtain it, unlike the father portrayed by the Grimms, but rather succumbs with guilt and regret. “My father fell down [...] He gripped my wrist and said, Daughter, I have sold you [...] he [then] said in a voice like old wood breaking, can you ever forgive me?”<sup>204</sup> Since he confesses to the Faustian deal he has made, he deters the beast’s forceful intrusion later on. Donoghue’s speaker is thus not a woman stolen against her will, but instead, tells her father: “Father, I said, I will be ready to leave in the morning.”<sup>205</sup> Curiously, she feels that the purpose and direction she has been searching for, it seems, has finally been presented to her.

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<sup>199</sup> Ferber, *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, 174.

<sup>200</sup> Ferber, *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, 174.

<sup>201</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 27.

<sup>202</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 27-8.

<sup>203</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 29.

<sup>204</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 30.

<sup>205</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 31.

Now you may tell me that I should have felt betrayed, but I was shaking with excitement. I should have felt like a possession, but for the first time in my life I seemed to own myself. I went as a hostage, but it seemed as if I was riding into battle.<sup>206</sup>

She does not feel betrayed, but rather liberated and empowered by turning her father's blunder into her own choice. To Belle, the real prison has been the inaction, the unceasing wait, and the inability of being in charge of her own direction. Ironically, accepting this challenge comes closest to being in control of her own fate. We could therefore conclude that by making this compromise, Donoghue's protagonist defies the archetypal role of "a damsel in distress" portrayed in the Grimm's version. This sense is later confirmed by the outcome of Donoghue's tale in which the beast's unexpected identity is revealed.

A pattern which *Kissing the Witch* repeatedly demonstrates is the subversion of traditional gender roles outlined by the classical fairy-tale lore. The fairy tales abundantly contain both male and female heroes, but their characteristics noticeably differ. Zipes describes the male hero archetype as "active, competitive, handsome, industrious, cunning, acquisitive" while his goals are "money, power, and a woman."<sup>207</sup> The female hero, on the other hand, "learns to be passive, obedient, self-sacrificing, hard-working, patient, and straight-laced" while "[h]er happiness depends on conformity to patriarchal rule."<sup>208</sup> The protagonist in Donoghue's story is initially framed as a stereotypical female character. Yet, as the story progresses, and as we have seen in the above-quoted passage, her active, determined, and brave behaviour exhibits the attributes typically embodied by the male heroes.

The villain of this story is not the typical monster, as might be expected. Even in the Grimm's version, Belle is reported to have eventually become "very fond of the beast,"<sup>209</sup> the protagonist in "The Tale of the Rose" also notices that the beast does not behave according to

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<sup>206</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 31.

<sup>207</sup> Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization* (New York: Wildman Press, 1983), 57.

<sup>208</sup> Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, 57.

<sup>209</sup> Grimm, *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition*, 226.

her expectations. His voice “was not cruel but hoarse, as if it had not been much used in twenty years.”<sup>210</sup> He was “always courteous [...] always gentle.”<sup>211</sup> This all makes sense once the true identity of the beast is revealed – in the original tale, Belle finds the beast dying among rotting cabbages, where, with a splash of water, he changes into “a handsome prince.”<sup>212</sup> Donoghue’s retelling contains two revelations; in the first case, the story directly sets itself apart from the “original,” as the beast who provides a clue to their own identity: “I must tell you before you go: I am not a man.”<sup>213</sup> In the beast’s statement, the story self-consciously defies the traditional narrative (where the reader is left in the dark about the spell behind the monstrous shape until the happy ending). However, the narrator-protagonist of Donoghue’s tale (and presumably, the same goes for the reader) does not understand the full import of the message at first. It is not until she comes back from her father’s house that she literally unveils the truth. She finds the beast lying lifeless in the rose garden: “I pulled off the veils one by one. Surely it couldn’t matter what I saw now? [...] I saw that the beast was a woman.”<sup>214</sup> The change in the beast’s gender destabilizes the heteronormative and patriarchal structures defined by the traditional fairy tales.

Donoghue’s tale maps the protagonist’s coming to terms with her own sexuality and prejudice. In the tale, the narrator remarks that, for her, “[t]his was a strange story, one I would have to learn a new language to read, a language I could not learn except by trying to read the story.”<sup>215</sup> This process of repossession through language use mirrors the general gendered prejudices embedded within our culture, which the Grimm’s tales champion. The narrator further admits:

I was a slow learner but a stubborn one. It took me days to learn that there was nothing monstrous about this woman who had lived alone in a castle, setting all her suitors

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<sup>210</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 33.

<sup>211</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 34-5.

<sup>212</sup> Grimm, *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition*, 227.

<sup>213</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 37.

<sup>214</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 39.

<sup>215</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 39.

riddles they could make no sense of, refusing to do the things queens are supposed to do, until the day when, knowing no one who could see her true face, she made a mask and from then on showed her face to no one.<sup>216</sup>

Belle is forced to question not only her own desires, but also the integrity of the patriarchal expectations that she subscribes to, which rendered the Queen abject for her nonconformity and made her turn into a “beast.” As Orme explains, “[t]he queer moment of the discovery of the woman behind the mask disrupts Beauty’s reading of her own desires and leads her to try to continue to unmask other normative discourses she has never before questioned.”<sup>217</sup> The narrator’s need for “new language,” in order to tell her “strange story” represents a metatextual moment in which the revised stories, and the characters in them, acknowledge the inadequacy of the existing vocabularies and plots to create new storylines that would provide a space for a more diversified image of desire – a need that can be observed in Donoghue, but Sexton and Broumas as well. As Wanning Harries points out, “[m]any of the women who have recently revised or rewritten fairy tales have created ‘a new language’ for them.”<sup>218</sup> This “new language” – referring not so much to new lexis but rather, metonymically, to new stories, plots and characters – is one of the key instruments of revisionist practice that ensures that the embedded stories are not simply replicated, but challenged from within in order to stay alive.

Donoghue’s retellings furthermore subvert the character dichotomy (often gender related) typical of fairy tales. In *The European Folktale*, Max Lüthi explains that “folktale has a liking for all extremes, extreme contrasts in particular.” This also applies to its characters that, as he points out in unison with Zipes’s hero characteristic referenced above, tend to be either “completely beautiful and good or completely ugly and bad; they are either poor or rich, spoiled or cast out, very industrious or completely lazy.”<sup>219</sup> The protagonist of “The Tale of the Rose” initially demonstrates a similar pattern of thought when she admits: “I thought the

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<sup>216</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 39-40.

<sup>217</sup> Orme, “Mouth to Mouth,” 125.

<sup>218</sup> Wanning Harries, *Twice Upon a Time*, 135.

<sup>219</sup> Max Lüthi, *The European Folktale: Form and Nature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 34.

beast must be everything I was not: dark to my light, rough to my smooth, hoarse to my sweet.”<sup>220</sup> The framing device that Donoghue employs in her collection, i.e. the chain or interlinked stories which allows a character to inhabit multiple narratives at the same time, enables Donoghue to blur the lines between villains and heroes and thus introduce an unprecedented ambiguity into the tales’ heart. This method is aptly demonstrated at the end of “The Tale of the Rose,” where Beauty and the beast become indiscernible from each other.

And as the years flowed by, some villagers told travelers of a beast and a beauty who lived in the castle and could be seen walking on the battlements, and others told of two beauties, and others, of two beasts.<sup>221</sup>

The characters’ conflation and communality, which is already realized in the framing interludes, is also epitomized in the tales themselves where the female characters form unlikely connections and co-create their narratives.

A key mission of *Kissing the Witch* is to create one cohesive universe which all the characters can inhabit as a common space. In order to do that successfully, Donoghue discards the conflict between the villains and heroes in the “original” tales. In their essay on the Grimm’s “Snow White,” Gilbert and Gubar observe that “female bonding is extraordinarily difficult in patriarchy [where] women almost inevitably turn against women because the voice of the looking glass sets them against each other.”<sup>222</sup> The battle for female community and connection through love and closeness is at the centre of Donoghue’s stories. In its title, the collection promises to heal conflict and estrangement – by “Kissing the Witch,” a character who is profusely vilified in the fairy-tale cannon, Donoghue reveals the subject of her attention and implies who the real heroes of her stories will be. According to Wanning Harries, Donoghue is “interested in ‘rehabilitating the witch,’” and “speaking in the voice of a witch who is both human and vulnerable, contesting the ways the witch has been represented in generations of

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<sup>220</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 35.

<sup>221</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 40.

<sup>222</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, “The Queen’s Looking Glass” in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 38.

tale-telling.”<sup>223</sup> This interest in reclaiming the witch as an intricate and misunderstood being is shared between Donoghue and Sexton. Donoghue further explores this character in the last story of the collection titled “The Tale of the Kiss.”

The speaker of “The Tale of the Kiss” is the witch from the previous tale, based on Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid.” Although the final story itself is not a retelling of any particular tale, it draws on various elements from the fairy-tale tradition. Donoghue tells the story of a young woman who realizes she is barren and knows she will be judged by her community. “I knew what they thought of women past bearing,” she says, “they were old rags tossed in the corner. A barren woman was hated even more; the way they saw it, she had never earned a bite of bread.”<sup>224</sup> Just like Sexton and Broumas, Donoghue engages in a critique of society’s treatment of menopausal women and women who cannot or do not want to have children. In a quest for autonomy and freedom from judgement, the speaker decides to reside alone in a sea-side cave. Her identity is still inevitably shaped by the outside perception – the people of the nearby town assume that the only explanation for a solitary woman is that she is, in fact, a witch. She discovers the cave has been inhabited by “a witch” once before. “What happened to the old one?” a boy once asked her, “[h]ave you got her locked up in her cave or did you boil her in her pot?” In response to this, the protagonist thus accepts the identity everyone associates with her anyway: “So it was a witch they were wanting [...] soon enough I learned how to be what they needed.”<sup>225</sup> Gradually, she grows content in her role and starts serving the people who seek her help. The stereotypical character of the witch in the Grimm’s tales (portrayed as an old, evil hag) is thus repossessed by Donoghue as that of a female outcast, rejected by the society on account her nonconformity to gender norms – either regarding her

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<sup>223</sup> Wanning Harries, *Twice Upon a Time*, 129-30.

<sup>224</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 208.

<sup>225</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 211.

procreative abilities or her gender expression and sexual orientation (as was the case with the beast).

The witch's idle life is transformed when she is approached by the parents of an unruly daughter, they both want different things for her – the mother wishes “she'd only quiet down”<sup>226</sup> and stay with her in her old age, while the father wants her to settle down and, more importantly, do what he says. When the daughter approaches the witch herself, the witch is charmed by her wild spirit. To the girl's mother, she then tells this prophecy: “If you ever order her to stay at home with you, she will turn into a hare and run off up the mountain.” And to her father: “If you ever order her to marry, her husband will turn into a wolf and devour her on their wedding night.”<sup>227</sup> Both of the alternative fates conjured up by the witch echo elements of other fairy-tale plots, particularly “The Hare's Bride” and “Little Red Riding Hood.” When the daughter returns offering to repay the witch's favour, the witch wishes to receive a kiss in return, and is surprised to see how willingly, even enthusiastically the girl responds. This kiss, as Orme proposes, “shatters the witch's equilibrium” and “her solitude and self-containment are broken by a girl who dares to kiss her.”<sup>228</sup> The kiss is a sign of a great transgression. It not only subverts the heteronormative order of the fairy-tale genre, but it also destabilizes the hero-villain hierarchy which constitutes the fairy tales' framework. Donoghue, using her narrator's voice, asks what then happens to a fairy tale (represented by the classical character of the witch) when it undergoes such drastic transformation (a kiss): “can [she] also die of it, can [she] wake into something unimaginable,” or does she “[turn] herself into some new species[?]”<sup>229</sup> Thus, the simple gesture of “kissing the witch,” a transgression so great it disrupts the entire tradition, is an essential moment in the process of clothing the old tales into new skins.

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<sup>226</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 216.

<sup>227</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 223.

<sup>228</sup> Orme, “Mouth to Mouth,” 127.

<sup>229</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 226.

“The Tale of the Kiss” functions as a reminder of the elements of continuity, inheritance, and change highlighted by Donoghue’s collection. This is demonstrated when the witch acknowledges that her cave was home to a witch before her, or when she provides the girl’s parents with prophecies about her many possible fates. The prophecies symbolize the agency that storytellers have over their stories and their tractability, since any of these women narrators and characters could be the heroines of the next tale. The flexible narrative space offered by the story-telling technique reminds us, as Orme points out, “that these tales are ‘in process’ and never entirely closed.”<sup>230</sup> Through a series of these integrated implications, the tale recognizes and honours the pliability of the stories that are being told, retold, and transformed. Perhaps the most radical testament to the openness of story-telling is provided by the closing lines of “The Tale of the Kiss,” in which the witch intentionally leaves her own story without a conclusion:

And what happened next, you ask? Never you mind. There are some tales not for telling, whether because they are too long, too precious, too laughable, too painful, too easy to need telling or too hard to explain.<sup>231</sup>

Donoghue makes a point about the choice which stands at the origin of every story; that is, the stories which we know are the ones which we have decided to tell, and, conversely, just because some stories are not told again and again does not mean they do not exist. Furthermore, Donoghue identifies these stories, whether vocalized or not, as our basic sustenance: “[M]y secrets are all I have left to chew on in the night”<sup>232</sup> the witch says. In a similar vein, Donoghue’s collection closes with an image that literally embodies the process of oral transmission: “This is the story you asked for. I leave it in your mouth.”<sup>233</sup> The image which Donoghue conjures up evokes an image of a mother bird feeding her hatchlings. The substance the speaker has “chewed on” is put in the mouth of the next person, the reader. This intimate

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<sup>230</sup> Orme, “Mouth to Mouth,” 118.

<sup>231</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 227-8.

<sup>232</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 228.

<sup>233</sup> Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 228.



connection between the author, her character and her reader, concurrently bears extremely primal connotations through which the act of oral story-telling is established as primordial. In her book, Blasing states that “the oral zone is both an erotogenic zone and the site of the earliest and most intimate presymbolic connection between language and the body.”<sup>234</sup> *Kissing the Witch* constitutes the oral zone as the site of sexuality, nurture and language and thus the source of story-telling. Moreover, Donoghue declares the reader to be a direct participator in the narrative cycle. As Orme observes, “the passing of stories from one mouth to another [...] draws the reader into not only the tale-telling cycle but also its sensuality.”<sup>235</sup> Blasing further suggests that the act of “speaking” as such is located “between sexuality and eating,” and finds that all three processes “are necessary for the survival of the discursive species, the linguistic community, and the individual speaker.”<sup>236</sup> The survival – of stories, their characters, and their speakers – in *Kissing the Witch* is ensured by way of the same channels as those defined by Blasing: eating, sexuality, and speaking. Donoghue positions her stories somewhere between the kiss and the chew, between the act of giving and taking, ultimately marking the orality of her stories as both their productive and preserving force.

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<sup>234</sup> Blasing, *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and the Pleasure of Words*, 80.

<sup>235</sup> Orme, “Mouth to Mouth,” 129.

<sup>236</sup> Blasing, *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and the Pleasure of Words*, 81.

## 5 Conclusion

In his 2006 book *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre*, Jack Zipes suggests that “the only way we can do justice to traditional tales and storytelling [...] is to problematize the value of these tales and to question the purpose of tradition and the role of the storyteller.”<sup>237</sup> As this thesis has demonstrated, constant revision and adaptation is not only a long-standing practice and an inherent characteristic of traditional fairy tales, but a practice that enables these tales to simultaneously stay alive and reflect on issues relevant at the given moment. There is not a moment in our time (and the same would apply to any historical period) in which revision does not take place. Thanks to our tendency to keep returning to them, fairy tales have secured their prominence in the classical Western canon. They continue to prove their overarching relevance through time and space, while their symbolic arsenal has become a universal language. As Wanning Harries writes, “[w]e can refer to these stories and expect to be understood.”<sup>238</sup> These lasting, universal qualities associated with the fairy-tale heritage have been presented in the previous chapters as the primary uniting agent of three authors from different eras and cultural, theoretical, and formal backgrounds. At the same time, it is these authors’ diversity which has enabled me to demonstrate on a broad scale the multiplicity of the fairy-tale genre and its revisionist aspects.

Anne Sexton has proved herself to be the pioneer that she is deemed to be when it comes to poetic fairy-tale revisionism. The impact of *Transformations* has repeatedly been acknowledged by the ones who have come after Sexton and dabbled into the same practice. The collection became unarguably a shared point of reference. The strength of Sexton’s revisions lies in the sharpness of her satire that she achieves through making the tales, in her

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<sup>237</sup> Jack Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 226.

<sup>238</sup> Wanning Harries, *Twice Upon a Time*, 163.

own words, “very contemporary.”<sup>239</sup> By bringing these tales up to date, Sexton positions the traditional elements communicated by the fairy tales into a new environment and displaces them against the contemporary socio-political context. However, what makes her revisions so enchanting is, as Brian Gallagher points out, “how much they sound like ‘Anne Sexton’ and how, at the same time, they remain faithful to the stories recorded by the Brothers Grimm.”<sup>240</sup> Sexton encodes these embedded stories with her own voice in order to question and criticize their supposed universal truths which formed her reality. While at first glance, *Transformations* steers away from the confessional style typical for Sexton, the fairy tales continue to prove themselves as highly personal entities that, at the same time, sit openly in the public space.

In *Beginning with O*, Olga Broumas acknowledges the revisionist practice as a tradition to which she decides to contribute. She consciously carries on Sexton’s legacy of transforming the traditional fairy tales and follows up on cues Sexton has given in her poems. Concurrently, her approach recognizes the revisionist practice as an essential tool in the process of the re-discovery and reclamation of the ancient stories, uncovering “[w]hat tiny fragments / survive, mangled into our language”<sup>241</sup> and their meanings. Akin to Donoghue, Broumas makes it her aim to give voices to the otherwise voiceless female characters of fairy tales and reflect their inner thoughts and desires. These women, and their corporeality in particular, constitute the core of Broumas’s revisions.

Together, Sexton and Broumas not only endeavour a thematic transformation but a formal one. Broumas’s poetic form especially transfigures the tales into whole new entities, complex in structure and meaning. Sexton and Broumas demonstrate that it is crucial to deconstruct and reassemble these stories, addressing both their motifs and formal structures, to ensure the enduring relevance of fairy tales and enhance their impact through poetic

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<sup>239</sup> Gray Sexton and Ames, *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters*, 362.

<sup>240</sup> Gallagher, “The Expanded Use of Simile in Anne Sexton’s *Transformations*,” 260.

<sup>241</sup> Broumas, *Beginning with O*, 24.

metamorphosis. As an inherently adaptable genre, fairy tales are kept in motion by the ongoing formal variation. Essentially, these tales need to change because the people to whom they serve change. As Zipes puts it in his book, “[j]ust as we as a species have mutated [...] so has the oral folk tale transformed itself and been transformed as literary fairy tale to assist us in coming to terms with the absurdity and banality of everyday life.”<sup>242</sup> The transformation from one literary form to another not only maintains the tales’ vitality but also introduces fresh avenues of expression and symbolic value.

Emma Donoghue’s approach exemplifies the need for female-based stories in which the characters not only triumph but tell their own stories too. Her biggest innovation lies in the introduction of a new framing device which places her collection somewhere between the oral and literary and thus epitomizes the nature of the fairy tales as liminal texts. Donoghue’s collection transgresses the literary boundaries and creates an epitomizing finale when she hands over the story-telling tradition and transforms the reader into a direct participator in the process of story transmission. In *Kissing the Witch*, Donoghue recognizes that the stories – “chewed but still lying in the stomach,”<sup>243</sup> as Dworkin puts it – keep travelling from one mouth onto another. The subtitle of Donoghue’s collection, *Old Tales in New Skins*, which I borrowed for the title of my work encapsulates how personal and visceral fairy-tale revision is; that in order to access these stories one must get “under their skin” and thus, under one’s own skin as well.

All three authors come from different literary generations, yet their revisions find common ground in the criticism of the morals and values that traditional fairy tales prescribe. Their revisions openly critique the fairy tales’ highly conservative gender norms. The authors comment on the unfavourable depiction of female characters in the stories and the agency they, more often than not, lack. But while Sexton’s main subversive tools are satire and the

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<sup>242</sup> Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick*, xii.

<sup>243</sup> Dworkin, *Woman Hating*, 33.

displacement of the stories and their characters into the modern timeline, the heroines often remain confined within the traditionalist structures that have been harming them. Broumas and Donoghue are, in this sense, less forgiving. Their retellings empower the female protagonists with agency which allows them to actively change the outcome of their own narratives and, as a result, challenge the conventional marriage ending. The authors' different approaches in a way exemplify their personal (and their generation's) distinctive attitudes to feminist liberation. While Sexton never acknowledged her involvement with the feminist movement, Broumas's elaboration on some of Sexton's cues in *Transformations* proves, nevertheless, that this kind of content has always been there. Donoghue then creates a fully female-centred universe where women's relationships thrive. The analysis of these three authors can thus serve as an instrument for a comprehensive understanding of feminist revisionist tendencies in the last third of the twentieth century.

The tradition of fairy-tale revisions is, of course, a much broader phenomenon than this thesis could encompass. Among the most notable figures of this subgenre would be Randall Jarrell, Angela Carter and her *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), Carol Ann Duffy and her *The World's Wife* (1999), Jeanette Winterson and many others who have reached into the fairy-tale lore for inspiration. Yet, as was also mentioned in the "Introduction," fairy-tale revisionism goes beyond the sphere of literature, and the most recent adaptations of well-known fairy tales have been dominated by film. What the phenomenon of literary revisionism examined in this thesis has shown us is that we are not willing to give up the fairy tale any time soon. These tales continue to enchant us, comfort us, and challenge us – all while we keep undermining the idea of their immutability and permanence. They represent a passage into our shared past while enabling us to reflect on our present and future. The revisions of these tales not only corroborate the relevance and the influence they have had on us but also epitomize our unceasing need to

move forward and keep adjusting the inherited moral codes without losing touch with our cultural past.

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