

“Something Very Modern”:
Order and Mess in the Later Work of Anne Sexton
by
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A thesis presented for the B. A. degree
with Honors in
The Department of English
University of Michigan
Winter 2018

For Rene Ribant.

Acknowledgments

Writing this thesis never would have been possible without the amazing support I've received, and I owe thanks to more people than I can acknowledge here.

I first would like to thank my family and friends. To my parents, who have taught me self-sacrifice, thank you for never having failed to encourage me to put my best effort into my work. To my siblings, who inspire me to better myself each day, thank you for your enthusiasm and your willingness to listen. To Sandy, who has been so supportive and so understanding, thank you for your kindness. To Alyssa, who reminds me of where I have been, thank you for having stood by my side throughout the tumult of the past twelve months. To Patrick, who has helped me remember where I want to go, thank you for your patience. To Laci, who can always make me laugh, thank you for having made my last year at Michigan especially memorable.

I next must express my gratitude toward the many brilliant instructors and professors I've had during my undergraduate career, who have helped me become a more lucid writer. I must thank in particular Maayan Eitan, whose mental dexterity and agility never cease to astound me, and Professor Madhumita Lahiri, whose insight helped shape this thesis during its first stages.

Finally, I would like to thank my ever-incisive advisor, Professor Gillian White. Working with you over the past year on this project has been the most stimulating and rewarding intellectual experience I've had at Michigan, and I'm deeply grateful for the amount of time and energy you've invested into helping me better my writing. Had I not had your support, this year wouldn't have gone nearly as well as it has: thank you for your invaluable guidance.

Abstract

In 1971 poet Anne Sexton published *Transformations*, a collection of pop-art poems that transform stories from the Grimms' Fairy Tales. Departing from her earlier collections' self-conscious focus on order, Sexton's *Transformations* adopts a messy aesthetic that subverts her time's dominant standards of taste: the collection's convention-defying poems read as sloppy, participatory, noisy, performative, dynamic, historical, disorienting, and more. The messy aesthetic of Sexton's poetry of the 1970s, I argue, helps to collapse her time's divide between art and everyday life, reviving a sense of poetry's subversive social and cultural uses. So often denigrated by critics, Sexton's later poetry challenges the aesthetic standards of her time in ways that still read as disruptive, making attempts to assess and analyze her work in academia today messy endeavors that necessarily contest the boundaries of conventional critical categories.

I first contextualize Sexton's work in relation to her poetic culture. After I introduce Sexton's own thought on her artistic project, I discuss her time's New Critical model of poetic production, as well as what Andreas Huyssen calls the modernist Great Divide between art and everyday life. Referring to recent Sexton scholarship, I then relate Sexton's earlier and later poetry to those aesthetic ideals, and I justify my reasons for calling her later poems 'messy.'

After overviewing the environment in which Sexton writes, I argue that the messy aesthetic of her later poetry upends her poetic culture's dominant standards of taste. Through close readings of poems in *Transformations*, I focus on three manifestations of Sexton's embrace of mess: her transformation of patriarchal form and narrative, her sequencing of those transformations, and her disorientation of her reader's affects. I argue that her later work subverts her poetic culture's demand for poetry to function as ordered craft that transforms the poet's personal experiences into autonomous works of art with universal appeal. Signaling a broader cultural crisis in the interpretation of poetry, Sexton's messiness frames the reading and writing of poetry as an entertaining social arena that can facilitate the development of female community, and it undermines the primacy of the white male university critic in the handling of postwar American poetry.

Shifting to considering the reception of Sexton's messy work, I then contend that reading her poetry inside of academia today can help destabilize critics' conventional understanding of postwar American poetry. The decay of the 'confessional' as a widely accepted critical category, I claim, has forced recent critics to uneasily situate Sexton's work in broader cultural contexts without the aid of a neat literary period under which to place her poems. I argue that Sexton's distinctive status as the emblem of a critical category falling out of use allows her work to act as an especially dynamic cultural node through which scholars might usefully reconceptualize the critical categories of our time.

I conclude by speculating about the directions that future Sexton criticism might take. I highlight the importance of exploring her work in relation to her poetry readings, the literary marketplace, and the work of feminist poets of the late 1960s and 1970s.

Keywords: Midcentury Poetics of the United States, Anne Sexton, Entertainment in Literature, Women's Literature, Contemporary Literary Aesthetics, Post-1945 Poetry, Critical History

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Short Titles

CP: Sexton, Anne. *The Complete Poems*. Mariner Books/Houghton Mifflin Co., 1999.

NES: Sexton, Anne, and Steven E. Colburn. *No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews, and Prose*. Univ. of Michigan Press, 2000.

Introduction

In Anne Sexton's 1974 interview with Gregory Fitz Gerald, an early exchange between the poet and her interviewer reveals much about Sexton's feelings toward the poetic culture in which she began to write her poems:

FG: The contrasting literary atmosphere then was a highly academic one; some would say "boring"?

S: All I know is that most poetry I was reading then was boring *me*. I might admire some. Poets weren't exciting me, weren't moving me. Not that I thought *I* was very good, or anything like that, but I thought, he doesn't have to be boring.

(*NES* 181)

Sexton frames the birth of her artistic consciousness as a direct response to a literary atmosphere she found to be "boring," unexciting and unmoving. She fashions her poems as first having arisen out of an intense desire not to teach but to delight, contrary to the demands of what she acknowledges to be an "overintellectualized, overliterary" poetic-critical culture. Sexton upholds pleasure, excitement, and movement as the unfashionable ideals that consistently have guided her artistic project of entertainment over edification, stimulation over detachment. If Sexton aims for her poems to move her reader, she later clarifies that she nevertheless wishes for her reader to experience and understand her poems without authoritative reference to her intentions, stated or implied:

S: It takes [the experience of reading the poem] away from the reader to say, “It means *this*.” It ceases, then to belong to that reader.

FG: You’re asking your readers to have a personal experience?

S: Yes, and let them have it! Don’t rob them of it—too early, anyway. Later on—way, way later on—let someone tell them what it means, give opinions, including the writer’s, who might not know either. (*NES* 185)

While Sexton does not deny the supplemental value of literary criticism, she insists upon the reader’s right to possess the experience of reading a Sexton poem on her own terms. She implies that her time’s order-oriented criticism, guided by the assumption that the white male university critic can and ought to “say, ‘It means *this*,’” functions as a kind of theft that steals a poem that ought “to belong to that reader.” For Sexton, the reading of her poetry is to be a multidimensional, participatory experience that facilitates a wide range of emotional and intellectual reactions in her reader, belonging to her reader. To the great extent to which Sexton’s late poems realize the artistic mission sketched here, they clash not only with her time’s dominant standards of taste but also with the conventional reception of her poetry as naïve and narcissistic.

Influential upon the dominant poetic culture of Sexton’s time, New Critical thought valued formal mastery as a means through which the poet’s work might attain a ‘universal’ character. In Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren’s influential 1938 *Understanding Poetry*, a foundational New Critical text, the pair writes, “*The poetic effect depends not on the things themselves but on the kind of use the poet makes of them*” (Brooks and Warren 187). Brooks and Warren’s italicized point concludes their

introduction's set of tidy responses to what they call common "misunderstandings of poetry." The pair locates the value of a successful poem in the poet's proper "use" of her materials; they assume that the poet ought to carefully construct her poem in order to meet a set of formalist interpretive expectations, which they naturalize as a universally recognizable "poetic effect." Other leading American literary critics paralleled or developed Brooks and Warren's emphasis on formal mastery as a means to universality. W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley in their 1946 "The Intentional Fallacy" exalt poetry as the impressive craft of the poet, designed to convey meaning that can be "personal" only in the narrowest of senses:

Poetry is a feat of style by which a complex of meaning is handled all at once. Poetry succeeds because most of what is said or implied is relevant; what is irrelevant has been excluded [. . .] The meaning of a poem may certainly be a personal one, in the sense that a poem expresses a personality or state of soul rather than a physical object like an apple. (Wimsatt and Beardsley 203)

Wimsatt and Beardsley later consolidate their views, concluding that poetry is "the conscious objectification of feeling, in which an intrinsic part is the critical moment," and it is to be judged on the basis of its "'integrity,' 'relevance,' 'unity,' 'function,' 'maturity,' 'subtlety,' 'adequacy,' and other more precise terms of evaluation" (204-5). This pair, too, judges the success of a poem by the extent to which the poet has crafted an object the critic easily can interpret as an orderly work of art with a universal character or function that nevertheless can be deciphered and fully possessed only in "the critical

moment.” New Critics such as these exerted great influence over the taste of Sexton’s poetic culture, dictating the terms upon which poetry was written and read (Hartman 44-5). Their thought helped perpetuate what Andreas Huyssen terms ‘The Great Divide,’ the type of modernist discourse that insists on the gendered categorical distinction between mass culture and high art.

Huyssen’s study of the relations between modernism, mass culture, and postmodernism argues that the modernist ideal of the autonomous artwork arose in opposition to mass culture, which was gendered as feminine. Huyssen sketches the modernist artwork’s “ideal type” in his book’s third chapter: the artwork is “totally separate from the realms of mass culture and everyday life”; “rigorously experimental,” making it “analogous to science”; “the expression of a purely individual consciousness”; and averse to “realism of whatever kind” (Huyssen 53-4). He attributes these features to the modernist artist and critic’s ever-increasing desire for “purity and autonomy,” which originally arose in the nineteenth century due to the modernist artist and critic’s adversarial stance toward “the bourgeois culture of everyday life,” including “mass culture and entertainment which [were] seen as the primary forms of bourgeois cultural articulation.” Huyssen suggests that the elitist desire for aesthetic autonomy became most intense during the postwar period (viii-ix), even as he details how that desire had long since lost any connection it might have had to “political radicalism” (4-8). In fact, Huyssen argues that, as the 1950s artist/critic idealized the artwork’s autonomy, he gendered as feminine that which he devalued (i.e. mass culture), belittling both the work of women artists and the culture of the masses. In doing so, he attempted to ensure that, “high culture, whether traditional or modern, clearly remain[ed] the privileged realm of

male activities” (Huysen 47), and he eased his fears concerning the power of “the metropolitan masses, who did indeed represent a threat to the rational bourgeois order” (53). In short, the framing of mass culture as feminine and, thus, inferior not only lay behind the idealization of the modernist artwork as autonomous but also upheld the oppression of the bourgeois social order.

Useful as Huysen’s argument is as a lens, I must briefly clarify its place in a larger historical context. Huysen focuses on the specifically modernist idealization of order that arose in opposition to the decline of the ideal of art as expression or mimesis. From Sidney’s Neoplatonism in *The Defence of Poesy* to Burke’s conceptualization of the beautiful in *A Philosophical Enquiry*, however, order held a prominent position in Western aesthetics long before modernism: any defense of it as an aesthetic ideal necessarily recalls or responds to a tradition of patriarchal thought spanning centuries. Pre-postmodern aesthetic categories also, as Sianne Ngai argues, “make insistent if necessarily indirect claims for their extra-aesthetic power (moral, religious, epistemological, political), asserting not just a specifically aesthetic agency but agency in realms extending far beyond art or culture” (Ngai 22). Especially considering its historical weight, then, the privileging of order in modernist aesthetics held implications for kinds of agency well beyond the realm of art.

As I have suggested, New Critical standards of taste clearly helped constitute the ‘Great Divide’ in postwar America.¹ It is not at all surprising to find that Huysen himself

¹ What I generally call ‘New Critical standards of taste’ or ‘aesthetic standards’ in this thesis objectifies a broad set of critical ideals informed by the lyricization of poetry that were put forth by American academics over the course of decades. Having roots in centuries of Western aesthetic thought about order, these academic ideals pervaded the broader literary culture and influenced how poems were read and written. For a case

identifies the New Criticism as an American school of thought that functioned as the “more theoretically limited expression” of the European Great Divide (Huysen ix). As with European theorists, the American New Critics’ preoccupation with control, unity, and restraint, as well as their idealization of the poem as the expression of an individual consciousness or voice, reflect deeply gendered, classed, and racialized anxieties over the social uses and cultural prominence of the work of marginalized artists. As Gillian White points out, the underlying assumption of the ideal of the universal poem or speaker is the idea, derived in part from John Stuart Mill’s writing on poetry, that “however distinct one’s actual historical experience, all ‘truly’ poetic experiences will allow their readers to identify with the generalized ‘human heart’ they realize” (White 102). The ideal demands marginalized poets not only erase their historical experiences but also tailor their art in accordance to the conventions of their time’s white male literary tradition.

Sexton’s early and late poetry violates such aesthetic and cultural norms in its emphasis on specifically female experience and its intimate discussion of taboo subjects. Be it the exploration of the aging female body in her 1966 “Menstruation at Forty” or the performative address of her daughter in her 1972 “Mother and Daughter,” Sexton’s poems consistently foreground the kinds of female experience suppressed and devalued by the New Critics, and her poems deal with taboo subjects such as adultery and mental

study in the lyricization of poetry, a historical process through which poems are stripped of their historical or occasional purpose and read as transhistorically “lyric,” a process encompassing but extending beyond the work of the New Critics, see Virginia Jackson’s 2005 *Dickinson’s Misery*. Conversely, Charles Altieri’s anti-lyric 1996 “What Is Living and What Is Dead in American Postmodernism: Establishing the Contemporaneity of Some American Poetry” sketches the outlines of New Critical thought as received by late twentieth-century critics, while Gillian White’s 2014 *Lyric Shame* and Artemis Michailidou’s 2004 “Gender, Body, and Feminine Performance: Edna St. Vincent Millay’s Impact on Anne Sexton” offer historical accounts of the relationship between Sexton and her academic poetic culture.

breakdown in ways that draw attention to their own historicity and particularity. In this regard, Sexton's work always violated her academic poetic culture's insistence upon "universality," attesting to Alicia Ostriker's claim that part of what bothers Sexton's critics is that her poetry's "material is heavily female and biological," it "presses intimately toward its audience," and it has a "quality of unresignedness" (Ostriker 251-2). If Sexton's work always engendered some critical anxiety due to such qualities, as James Dickey's vitriolic reviews of her early collections suggest, her late poetry's turn from formal mastery made those qualities less palatable to patriarchal critics and enflamed critical concerns about the destruction of conventional poetic form, turning Sexton herself and her poetry into objects of critical scorn shortly before and long after her death.

Given that Sexton's late work so often overturns her poetic culture's critical ideals, her late poems can be considered messy subversions of order-oriented aesthetic standards. Artemis Michailidou explains that, as with the late work of her self-designated predecessor Edna St. Vincent Millay, critics conventionally have unfavorably contrasted Sexton's late poems with her early work (Michailidou, "Gender, Body, and Feminine Performance" 121). It is not difficult to imagine why her late poems should provoke anxiety in critics attached to a model of literary production that expects the poet to deferentially position herself and her work within her time's white male literary tradition. Beginning with *Transformations*, as the first chapter explores, Sexton's late poems react against her academic poetic culture in ways that often read as sloppy, collaborative, participatory, dynamic, historical, anti-interpretive, disorienting, and more. Sexton's entertaining rejection of her time's standards of taste thwarts critical attempts to confine her work within the postwar university, reframing the dominant social and cultural uses

of poetry; it helps develop consciousness-raising interpretive communities of women readers, and it undermines the white male university critic's role in the handling of postwar poetry. I frame Sexton's subversion as messy for a few reasons in particular.

I use 'messy' in part because the word draws attention to the comparative lack of care with which Sexton composed her late work. In her biography, Dianne Middlebrook describes how Sexton composed her early poems with great care over the course of months: she "pour[ed] over her rhyming dictionary," "work[ed] out elaborate sound patterns and rhyme schemes by hand," and "[g]radually the channeled flow of images would coalesce into a work of art" (Middlebrook 74-5). The care and self-consciousness of Sexton's early composition practices, however, gave way to the rushed way in which she composed her late poems. In a 1973 interview with William Heyen and Al Poulin, Sexton herself claims to have written her latest collection, *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, "in two and a half weeks" (NES 143). If the New Critical ideals against which Sexton rebelled measure a poem's success by the care with which the poet puts her materials to proper "use," as I have suggested, it seems imperative to acknowledge that the anarchy of her late work's aesthetic extends to the way in which she composed it.

To favorably assess Sexton's late poems as messy is to emphasize rather than conceal that they often read as having been sloppily or quickly composed. Reviewing *45 Mercy Street*, Patricia Meyer Spacks parallels the complaints of many other critics when she questions how she might "respond to lines as grotesquely uncontrolled as these" (qtd. in Gill, "Anne Sexton and Confessional Poetics" 430). As I discuss in the first chapter, some favorable Sexton critics have responded to such criticisms by denying or underplaying the "uncontrolled" quality of Sexton's late poetry. By contrast, the use of

messy to describe the aesthetic of Sexton's late poems highlights the fact that those poems often were—and read as having been—rapidly written and lightly revised: it unites her late aesthetic with her late composition practices. In other words, 'messy' represents Sexton's turn away from order on the level of composition not as an artistic failure to be either mocked or ignored, as many misogynistic critics have in the past, but as inseparable from the success of her late aesthetic's subversion of her time's critical ideals, which prescribed not just what but how women ought to write.

Exploring Sexton's late work as messy and thus antithetical to her poetic culture's preoccupation with order also offers new angles from which to consider her poems. Sexton writes her late poetry in opposition to the tastes of her academic poetic culture, which idealizes, as Anne Hartman suggests, "the poem as an autonomous object whose value derives from the tensions sustained among its parts as the internal dynamic of the lyrical movement unfolds" (Hartman 44). Sexton's late poems move beyond her early poetry's self-conscious exploration of her poetic culture's boundaries: they upend its critical ideals of formal mastery and universality, as I explore in the first chapter. If favorable Sexton critics such as Miranda Sherwin have argued that Sexton's early work is "the attempt to objectify and universalize subjective and individual thoughts, emotions, and experiences," as with the work of many of her time's academic poets, they noticeably have not done the same for her far more subversive late work (Sherwin 38).² Framing Sexton's late poetry as 'messy' acknowledges its meandering and rushed character, even as it flags it as multifaceted and rebellious work that seeks to discard, not revise, critical

² That is, these critics praise the subversive subject matter of Sexton's work of the 1950s and early 1960s, but they frame part of the artistic project and the form of her early poems as similar to that of the orderly work of poets like Richard Wilbur and Yvor Winters. They tend to ignore her work of the 1970s.

ideals privileging order in the work of art. The social and aesthetic disruption implied by the use of ‘messy,’ then, offers Sexton’s work a degree of self-awareness, rage, and innovation denied to it by Sexton’s typical reception as quintessentially confessional, or rather as naïve, passive, and conventional.

Against the backdrop of the decay of the ‘confessional’ as a widely accepted critical category amongst favorable Sexton critics, ‘messy’ describes not just Sexton’s work but also the state of current Sexton criticism. Some recent critics like White have challenged confessional as an accurate descriptor of Sexton’s work by questioning the assumptions behind that category, while others like Gill and Sherwin have sought to radically redefine what it means to be confessional. As I explore in the second chapter, few critics favorably reading Sexton’s work in academia today unhesitatingly describe it as confessional, or rather read it biographically or expressively. The conversation amongst recent favorable Sexton critics lacks a widely accepted category under which to place her work, and it isn’t difficult to see why. In her discussion of Sexton’s poetry, Gill stresses Sexton’s disruption of generic boundaries:

The received history of American poetry is the history of a movement from an impersonal, modernist aesthetic to a personal, lyrical, confessional narcissism and on to a cool, self-reflexive, linguistically sophisticated postmodernism. Sexton’s poetry, I have suggested, transgresses generic boundaries and problematizes this trajectory. (Gill, “Textual Confessions” 83)

Categorizing Sexton's work as 'messy' acknowledges the many problems faced by critics writing in a culture that lacks categories within which they might neatly situate her convention-defying poetry. The term's unconventionality and lack of specificity seems an apt descriptor for a poet whose work, as Gill claims, often disrupts generic boundaries in unfamiliar ways. 'Messy' necessarily implies a critical field confused and vexed about how best to approach Sexton's work; it doubles as a descriptor of Sexton's work and the current reception of her work, drawing the two together in close conversation. The dual nature of 'messy' allows me to pivot from considering the ways in which her poetry subverted her time's standards of taste in the first chapter to examining the ways in which it helps us think through our own in the second chapter.

This thesis contends that Sexton's messy aesthetic subverts her time's dominant standards of taste, integrating art and everyday life. Unlike other efforts to recover Sexton's reputation, it does not argue against her fiercest critics' charge that she writes sloppy poems that routinely violate her time's critical standards during her the second half of her poetic career. It does, however, claim that Sexton's failure to conform to those standards is her artistry's principle strength in two regards. First, Sexton's subversion of her time's aesthetic standards undermines the primacy of the hierarchical postwar university in the handling of American poetry; second, it helps to build consciousness-raising interpretive communities of women readers. Both effects of Sexton's subversion help collapse the 'Great Divide' between poetry and everyday cultural and social life. The convention-defying reading experiences fostered by Sexton's later poetry, I suggest, can help critics today interrogate the assumptions behind a wide range of critical categories within which Sexton's work still does not neatly fit.

The first chapter argues that the messy aesthetic of Sexton's late poetry resists her time's New Critical practices of reading, drawing attention to the difficulty of assessing poetry only textually. Through close readings of late poems, I focus on three particular manifestations of Sexton's embrace of mess. First, I examine how Sexton situates the majority of her late poems in the context of conventional patriarchal form and narrative, which she subverts through multifaceted acts of feminist revision and transformation. Then, I suggest that her late poems often function as dynamic sequences that resist academic interpretation and foreground the pleasures of reading. Finally, I analyze the many ways in which Sexton's late poetry disorients her reader's affects, blurring the moral distinction between art and commercial entertainment. As I explore these facets of Sexton's messiness, I argue that her late work subverts the New Critical demand for poetry to function as ordered craft that transforms the poet's personal experiences into autonomous works of art with universal appeal; signaling a broader cultural crisis in the interpretation of poetry, Sexton's messiness exposes the reading and writing of poetry as a social arena that can facilitate the development of female community.

In the second chapter, I assert that sympathetically reading Sexton's messy poetry inside of academia today helps to destabilize our time's dominant critical categories, shared by mainstream and avant-garde critical cultures alike. I first discuss the grounds upon which misogynistic critics have denigrated Sexton's hyper-mediated poetry: I claim that their attacks have led to a hostile critical atmosphere for the reading of her poetry inside of academia. Uncomfortably aware of the many charges against Sexton, critics' attempts to take her work seriously consistently have tended to read as self-conscious defenses. The decay of the 'confessional' as a widely accepted critical category in the

twenty-first century, I claim, has forced recent critics to uneasily situate Sexton's work in broader cultural contexts without the aid of a neat critical category under which to place her poems. I conclude that Sexton's distinctive status as the emblem of a critical category falling out of use allows her work to act as a productive cultural node through which scholars might reassess the categories they use to understand postwar American poetry.

In this thesis, then, I explore first the mess of Sexton's late aesthetic and then the mess of favorably assessing and analyzing that aesthetic in academia today. My two chapters are guided by the belief that the subversive reading experiences facilitated by Sexton's poetry are what made and make her poetry especially valuable: they are experiential and entertaining rather than instructive and edifying. Different as the specific forms of cultural and social work accomplished by Sexton's poetry are between the date of its initial publication and today, the reading of her poems over the years consistently has helped build community and undermine reactionary critical assumptions; it helped collapse the once-prominent 'Great Divide' between art and everyday cultural and social life, and it offers the opportunity today to dispel the remnants of that oppressive critical discourse. After summarizing my main arguments, I conclude this thesis by speculating about the directions that future Sexton criticism might take.

Chapter I: Messy Aesthetic

The messy aesthetic of Sexton's late poetry rejects her time's dominant standards of taste, reframing the social and cultural uses of poetry. Beginning with her 1971 *Transformations*, Sexton moves away from her early aesthetic's self-conscious focus on order toward her late aesthetic's unashamed embrace of mess. With *Transformations*, Sexton's poems begin to interrogate and transform patriarchal cultural forms and narratives; refer to each other in dynamic ways that resist interpretation; and disorient the reader's affects. In these and other ways, Sexton's messy aesthetic routinely subverts her poetic culture's demand for poetry to function as achieved craft that transforms the poet's personal experiences into easily interpretable autonomous works of art with universal appeal. Sexton's late aesthetic, then, leads not only to messy poems but also to messy reading experiences. Signaling a broader crisis in the interpretation of poetry, Sexton's messiness exposes the reading and writing of poetry as a social arena, the poem as a form of commercial entertainment that must be approached not only textually but also culturally and socially; it reframes poetry as pleasurable and experiential, not edifying and interpretable, in opposition to her time's aesthetic standards. In doing so, Sexton's late aesthetic undermines the role in the handling of postwar poetry afforded to the white male university critic by New Critical models of reading; simultaneously, it helps to build consciousness-raising communities of women readers. Both effects of Sexton's subversive messy aesthetic contribute to a project of integrating art and everyday life.

Sexton's writing of *Transformations* marked a distinct shift in her understanding of her aesthetic and her social role as a poet. During her early years as a poet, Sexton's critical success in her New Critical-influenced poetic culture depended upon the

evaluations of what Gillian White has called “audiences of judgmental, professional academics eager to authenticate the poem as ‘spoken,’ achieved, and personal” (White 105). Familiar with her poetic culture’s academic conventions, Sexton responded to this pressure by aiming to use primarily “very tight form,” or rather conventional form, in her first collection of poems, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (NES 94). In her life, Sexton similarly sought out academic literary credentials, prestigious fellowships, and teaching posts (Michailidou, “Edna St. Vincent Millay and Anne Sexton” 72). However, by 1969, a decade after Sexton began to write poems, much had changed. She had written four commercially successful books, found inclusion in anthologies, performed across the country, and received regular publication in literary journals: Sexton’s critical and commercial success, as well as the burgeoning resurgence of feminist thought and activism in America, prompted Sexton to “turn away from peers and toward her audiences” (Middlebrook 332). Sexton wrote *Transformations*, a collection of poems that “transform” the Grimm’s Fairy Tales.

Transformations inaugurates the subversive messy aesthetic that defines Sexton’s collections of the 1970s. Feminist allegories such as “Cinderella” and “Rapunzel” sarcastically critique the misogynistic values of the fairytales that they transform. Surreal tales such as “Red Riding Hood” and “Iron Hans” disorient the reader with confusing mixtures of affects. Functioning as a sequence, the volume’s poems consistently refer to each other in open-ended ways. With *Transformations*, Sexton compels her audience to approach her poems as pleasurable experiences enmeshed in the social and cultural life of the 1970s, not as edifying works of art autonomous from the realm of the everyday. For the first time in her career, Sexton abandons her preoccupation with restraint, control, and

order: she embraces a messy aesthetic that obscures the lines of the New Critical divide between art and everyday social and cultural life, reviving a sense of the subversive uses of poetry.

Interestingly, Sexton's turn from order in *Transformations* extends to the way in which she composed the collection. In a representative 1973 interview, Sexton says of writing the volume that she especially enjoyed writing "the prefatory things," the introduction to each poem's transformation, and referring to the length of her revision process, she says that the poems "all came rather quickly except for "Sleeping Beauty," which took me three months" (*NES* 145). Sexton's method of composition here starkly contrasts that of her first collection, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*. For *Bedlam*, Sexton painstakingly wrote her poems over the course of months, subjecting each poem to several laborious revisions: her friend Maxine Kumin claims that Sexton then "would push a poem through twenty or more drafts" (Middlebrook 94). Sexton's newfound method of composition continued with subsequent volumes, as did her messy aesthetic. In the same 1973 interview, Sexton reveals that she wrote *The Awful Rowing Toward God* "in two and a half weeks" (*NES* 143). That Sexton's method of composition changed with her aesthetic testifies to the great extent to which she embraced mess as an artistic strategy during the second half of her career as a poet.

Many posthumous critics sympathetic to Sexton uncomfortably affirm that her late poems stray from her early work's preoccupation with order. Alicia Ostriker regrets that she often "burn[s] with the desire to edit" Sexton's work, noting in particular that Sexton's "late [poems] tend to be shapeless" (Ostriker 253). Ostriker corroborates Sexton's claim that her late work abandons her early work's emphasis on restraint and

formal mastery. In a study dealing primarily with Sexton's early poetry, Jeanne Kammer Neff, too, notes that Sexton in her late work "moves beyond the visual security of the reiterated stanza form and loosens her grip on meter and syntax" (Kammer Neff 277). As with Ostriker and Kammer Neff, many feminist critics sympathetic to Sexton register that her late work subverts New Critical aesthetic standards. These critics then try to explain away the messiness of Sexton's subversion, such as when Kammer Neff hints without explanation that Sexton's unconventional, fast-paced late work somehow "preserves [Sexton's] early discipline of internal control" (Kammer Neff 277). These critics' discomfort with the messy character of Sexton's late work is understandable given that hordes of misogynistic critics like Ron Silliman routinely crucify Sexton for having written what they refer to as "drunken nursery rhymes" (qtd. in *Lyric Shame* 295). As I have suggested, however, Sexton in both her interviews and poems privileges mess, as opposed to order, beginning with *Transformations*. It seems useful to dwell in and explore facets of that mess rather than attempt to dismiss them.

Returning to the aesthetic of *Transformations*, "Cinderella" offers a surprising point of entry into considering Sexton's embrace of mess. Sexton ends her poem, writing:

Cinderella and the prince
 lived, they say, happily ever after,
 like two dolls in a museum case
 [. . .] Regular Bobbsey Twins.
 That story. (*CP* 258)

Sexton's use of caesura, as well as her end-stopped lines, slows her reader's pace, discernibly contrasting the abrupt lines and fast pace that characterize most of the transformation. Sexton forces her reader to linger on what each part of the line signifies: idealized domestic life, dominant sociocultural narratives, and the patriarchal myth of fulfillment through marriage. Sexton's change in pace puts what is signified under pressure and taints it with skepticism. With the last two lines' sarcasm, Sexton humorously undermines belief in all three concepts, which she unites in "That Story." The poem's final stanza ends as its first ends; it doubts the legitimacy of "That Story," or what Caroline King Barnard Hall has called "the fairy-tale promise of finding an emotionally mature, psychologically integrated, happy life" (Hall 121). The ending's doubt draws attention to the messy project of feminist transformation that characterizes the poem, present behind the façade of its tight form.

"Cinderella" satirically transforms a patriarchal cultural form and narrative in order to critique misogynistic social values, transgressing the critical expectation that a poet's work aspires to attain a universal character. Sexton's formally tidy poem presents few interpretive difficulties of the kind found in many of Sexton's late poems, such as loose form or frenetic pacing. The poem takes as its subject the Brothers Grimm's "Cinderella," and the narrative of Sexton's transformation roughly aligns with that of the Brothers Grimm. However, Sexton's sarcasm, slang, and allusions to pop culture consistently expose and mock the sexism of her source tale's conventional morality, which idealizes female passivity and domesticity. Sexton dismisses the story's famous ball as "a marriage market," while she brands the prince and Cinderella "Regular Bobbsey Twins." In addition to her flippant tone, Sexton's erratic reference to her time's

popular culture helps her develop an amusing, if not edifying or instructive, critique of her historical moment's patriarchal idealization of marriage. Sexton ensures that her reader is ever aware that they are reading not a universally applicable work of art that impersonally objectifies feeling, but rather a historically specific poem produced by a particular writer. That Sexton's foregrounding of the historical and the particular should also casually entertain her reader enflames the New Critical anxiety that poetry be, as Huyssen writes of the standards of the Great Divide in general, "totally separate from the realms of mass culture and everyday life" and "rigorously experimental" in ways "analogous to science" (Huyssen 53-4). By also splitting her reader's attention throughout the poem, Sexton intensifies the tumultuous reading experience fostered by her project of transformation.

In addition to critiquing patriarchal social values, Sexton's transformation compels her reader to ceaselessly contrast her poem and her source, adding a participatory dimension to her poem. In the penultimate stanza, Sexton develops her feminist critique of her patriarchal source. She parodies the violence that her source inflicts upon its "bad" female characters, dryly noting:

the two sisters came to curry favor
and the white doves pecked their eyes out
Two hollow spots were left
like soup spoons. (*CP* 258)

Whereas the source's violence perpetuates misogynistic social values, the understatement

of Sexton's deadpan imitation makes clear the disturbing sexism that underlies the fairytale's logic of punishment. As in the rest of the poem, this stanza grotesques its source, leading to a chaotic reading experience in which the reader is ever aware of the clash between the patriarchal source with which Sexton engages and her feminist transformation of it. Referring to Yeats's poetics, Brooks and Warren figure a successful poem's "total poetic effect" as dependent upon "the relation of the objects [of the poem] to each other and to the idea of the passage" (Brooks and Warren 189-90). By contrast, the "total poetic effect" of Sexton's poem appears to depend not on the critic's detached observation of the poet's careful arrangement of her work's parts, but on the reader's active participation in contrasting disparate historical moments, cultural objects, levels of discourse, and ideologies. That is, Sexton demands her reader swiftly situate her poem in a variety of historically specific social and cultural contexts; she positions her reader as a kind of collaborator whose involved reading helps to produce the poem's meaning, thwarting models of reading that figure the reader as detached, the poem as the elite work of one mind.

"Cinderella" exemplifies many facets of the messiness involved in its parent volume's attempt to transform the patriarchal fairytale. As with the collection's other poems, it validates Sexton's claim to Kurt Vonnegut in a 1970 letter that she has done "something very modern" with her "small, funny and horrifying" poems (Sexton, *Portrait* 367). She has transmogrified a children's literary form famous for its sexual repression, sexism, and facilitation of ethical, psychological, and emotional growth (Hall 115). Poems like "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" and "Rapunzel" make explicit the latent sexual undercurrents of many fairytales; those like "Hansel and Gretel" critique the

form's virulent misogyny; those like "The Golden Key" and "Red Riding Hood" subvert the imperative that text be easily interpretable or instructional. Often, the collection's poems do all at once. Throughout her collection, then, Sexton twists, corrupts, and undermines the fairytale's well-known conventions. *Transformations* embraces a socially and aesthetically disruptive project of transforming patriarchal form and narrative in ways not found in Sexton's early collections; the collection's poems call into question the traditional morality and gender roles espoused by their patriarchal sources, and they split the reader's attention between reading Sexton's poetry and considering her sources. In contrast to "Cinderella," other poems from the collection read as far less formally conventional and far less clear in meaning or intention.

The end of *Transformations*'s first poem foregrounds the ambiguity often found in Sexton's project of transformation, intensifying the reader's sense of that project's depth and confusion. As White notes, "The Golden Key" ends with "two sharp rhetorical shifts" (White 125). Referring to the titular "golden key," Sexton writes:

It 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.) (CP 224)

The first two lines set up a logical relation between Sexton's "book of old tales" and "the

Brothers Grimm,” implying that the former transforms the later in a straightforward way. However, the opaque last four lines cast doubt upon that easily discernible relationship, explicitly questioning what it means to “Transform?” and implicitly raising a host of other equally unanswerable questions about the value, limits, and possibility of transformation. Given that the poem functions as an attempt to frame the volume, such questions prepare the reader for an equivocal reading experience of poems that rarely engage with their sources in clear-cut ways. Sexton ends the poem that introduces her transformations of patriarchal fairytales ends not on a decisive note, but on a decisively perplexing note that stresses the uncertainty and moral complexity involved in her project of transformation. As Michailidou claims of Sexton’s late poetry in general, the poems of *Transformations* can frequently be read as “abstract, philosophical meditations on gender, authority, and religion” (Michailidou, “Gender, Body, and Feminine Performance” 121). Far from “The Golden Key” reducing Sexton’s project to the status of simplistic allegory, the poem introduces the reader to the ambiguity often encountered in her transformations. I will soon analyze another such poem, but I now turn to considering the social and cultural work accomplished by Sexton’s project of transformation in general.

The different kinds of mess involved in Sexton’s transformation of the fairytale force her reader to approach her poems not just textually but also socially and culturally. As discussed, the volume’s poems center on their subversion of patriarchal cultural form and narrative; the reader’s attention ricochets from reading the transformation to considering the socially inflected, oft-multifaceted ways in which it deviates from its source’s conventional morality and ethical simplicity on the levels of both form and content. Sexton compels her reader to consider her work not as autonomous from but

inextricably enmeshed in the public realm of social and cultural life, subverting what White has called the Millean-derived New Critical fantasy that the poem ought to create “a privacy at once radically untouched by social concern and yet able to speak universally” (White 32-3). That Sexton foregrounds her poems’ historical social and cultural concerns renders impossible New Critical practices of reading that aspire to focus exclusively on textual, or aesthetic, concerns.

As I have implied, Sexton’s transformation of patriarchal form and narrative blurs her academic poetic culture’s artificial distinction between art and everyday social and cultural life. Sexton’s subversion of the patriarchal cultural form of the fairytale demands that the reader, academic or not, contextualize her poems in relation to the collection’s historical moment of 1971, as well as the cultural artifact of the 1812 *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*. Sexton’s topical poems spotlight their relationship to a particular time and place, as opposed to pretending to universality, and they swing the reader’s attention reading text to considering the society and culture in which that text is embedded. For the first time in her career, Sexton makes it nearly impossible for the white male university critic to frame either her poetry or the aesthetic experience of reading her poetry as autonomous from the public realm of everyday social and cultural life, thwarting his attempt to dehistoricize or universalize her work. Even a fairly conventional poem like “Briar Rose” references Bab-o and Novocain, and problematizes its source’s happy ending. Interestingly, as Hall points out, the collection’s themes:

“[. . .] appear consistent with the thematic concerns of her previous poetry: guilt, love, anger and madness; uneasy relationships between parents and children;

ambivalence over women's roles; imaginative identification of poet with witch; anxiety and fear over sexual awakening, parental rejection, or oedipal conflicts; and the torment and joy of passion." (Hall 110)

In *Transformations*, Sexton has not abandoned but reframed her past subjects, especially forms of female subjectivity and "madness." Whereas her past poems tend to deal with such subjects in solitary and carefully arranged ways, as in her 1959 seven-part meditation on motherhood, "The Double Image," Sexton explores them here in the context of patriarchal form and narrative, the conventions of which she rapidly destabilizes.

Sexton's subsequent poetry collections also subvert popular patriarchal cultural forms and narratives, testifying to the feature's centrality to her late work. The second part of Sexton's 1972 *The Book of Folly*, "The Jesus Papers," perverts the Biblical narrative of Jesus Christ and the form of the gospel; "The Furies," a poetic sequence from Sexton's 1974 *The Death Notebooks*, engages with Greek myth's erinyes and, arguably, the form of the epic; "O Ye Tongues," the concluding poem of the same volume, burlesques the form of the psalm; Sexton's final 1975 volume, *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, also distorts Biblical narratives and the form of Christian allegory. The prominent position in public consciousness held by the patriarchal sources that Sexton transforms signals that her project depends upon the reader's knowledge of her sources. Far from Sexton aspiring to emulate a kind of modernist erudition, she values her reader's ability to identify her source and join her in interrogating the source's conventions and social values, functionally helping to bring about each poem's "transformation" in a participatory manner. In the second half of Sexton's career as a writer, then, her poetry

collections consistently transform well-known patriarchal cultural forms and narratives in intricate ways, typically for subversive social and cultural ends.

Alicia Ostriker implies as much in her early defense of Sexton's late work, "That Story." Ostriker lauds Sexton's late collections for their sociocultural "transformations," arguing that they artfully interweave the personal and the public by "interpreting prior, external, shared cultural traditions" (Ostriker 254). To some degree, my argument parallels Ostriker's. Whereas Ostriker glosses over, denies, and orders the aesthetic messiness of Sexton's late work, however, I emphasize its centrality to Sexton's artistic project of integrating art and everyday social and cultural life. However much Ostriker might concede that she "burn[s] with the desire to edit" Sexton's work (253), she concludes her article by arguing for considering Sexton's late work as a kind of unified whole in which Sexton becomes not "merely a private person," as in her early work, but "the heroine in a spiritual quest" (261). As a feminist critic writing in 1982, a time of contentious canonical revision, Ostriker's desire to defend Sexton's late work by aligning it with her time's emphasis on wholeness, unity, and order is understandable, especially given Sexton's posthumous denigration. Most critics lambast Sexton's late work as inferior to her early work even during her life (Michailidou, "Gender, Body, and Feminine Performance" 120). Decades later, though, what seems most significant about Sexton's late work are the specific forms of social and cultural work accomplished by the way in which its messiness explodes the aesthetic standards of Sexton's poetic culture.

Sexton's messy transformations continue a then-recent tradition of American women poets developing consciousness-raising communities of women readers through feminist poetry. As has been discussed, Sexton distorts and grotesques the conventions of

patriarchal cultural forms and narratives throughout the second half of her career as a poet; Sexton's reader's attention ceaselessly bounces from reading her poem to contrasting it with the well-known conventions of her source as she reads. Both acts can be read as constituting the transformation of each of Sexton's poems, adding a collaborative dimension to the experience of reading Sexton's late poetry. Just as Sexton's early work "succeeds in making domestic enclosure a new subject for women writing in the 1950s and 1960s," as Michailidou argues of Sexton's revival of Edna St. Vincent Millay's 1920s domestic subject matter (Michailidou, "St. Vincent and Sexton" 84), Sexton's late work of the 1970s can be read as continuing the consciousness-raising feminist revisions of earlier twentieth-century American women poets, such as H.D.'s 1961 *Helen in Egypt* and "The Anniad" of Gwendolyn Brooks's 1949 *Annie Allen*. On the levels of both form and content, Sexton's transformations enact feminist critiques of patriarchal cultural forms and narratives, as well as the misogynistic social values perpetuated by those forms and narratives.

Sexton's transformations help to develop pre-existing consciousness-raising communities of women readers, radically expanding their numbers. By the date of Sexton's 1969 publication of *Love Poems*, as Dianne Middlebrook notes of Sexton's last pre-*Transformations* volume, Sexton has earned the critical and commercial success that she has long desired. Sexton writes her poems "in the atmosphere of celebrity, and 'Sexton' was a brand name" (Middlebrook 293). It comes as no surprise to find that "after only a month in print *Transformations* had earned Sexton \$6400 in royalties, or \$1400 over and above Houghton Mifflin's advance of \$5000—a record for her on both counts" (Middlebrook 356-7). At a rate unprecedented for a poet of her kind, Sexton

expands the scope of her inherited audience with each new poetry volume: she rapidly reaches new readers, including those who do not regularly read poetry. By exploring “the social confusions of growing up in a female body and of living as a woman in postwar American society,” Sexton moves thousands of women who have contact with the postwar psychiatric system and hundreds of thousands who share dissatisfaction with their social role as suburban housewives (Middlebrook xx). Sexton’s increasingly socially conscious poems raise the collective consciousness of her community of women readers. The broad appeal of her poems’ transformations reframes poetry as a democratic medium that can pleurably facilitate female community within a misogynistic society, helping to integrate aesthetic experience into everyday social and cultural life in ways thoroughly opposed to the Great Divide. Sexton’s accessibility does not simplify her project of transformation but rather constitutes another way in which it can be read as overturning New Critical taste.

Sexton’s accessible use of the past dismantles her time’s dominant critical model of poetic production, which implies that the poet ought to use the past to help maintain an oppressive social order and an elite base of readers. In T.S. Eliot’s 1919 essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot argues that the English public ought to judge each poet “by the standards of the past” and consider poetry as consisting of “existing monuments [that] form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them” (Eliot).³ Influential upon New Critical standards of taste, as well as modernist enforcers of the Great Divide, Eliot’s argument mandates that the poet’s work reverence and modify, not challenge and deconstruct, a

³ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69400/tradition-and-the-individual-talent>

tradition of white male authorship, tacitly affirming that tradition's racist and sexist social values in doing so. Furthermore, his argument suggests that the poet writes for those "very few [who] know when there is an expression of *significant* [impersonal] emotion." By contrast, as I have discussed, Sexton's late work skeptically engages with the literary tradition Eliot and many New Critics idealize only in order to transform, or rather undermine, its social values. Sexton similarly tends to reference only the most well-known texts of that tradition. Her poems' engagement with the past does not maintain preexisting social divisions and limit her base of readers, then, but breaks down hierarchy and substantially broadens the scope of her audience, helping her develop wide-ranging interpretive communities of women readers. In both regards, Sexton's late poetry reads as both experimental and anti-elitist in its rebellious use of the past: it flagrantly upsets an academic poetic culture that privileges strict adherence to convention.

Sexton's upsetting of convention extends to the means through which she tends to structure her transformations: the open-ended poetic sequence. In her late collections, Sexton sometimes includes standalone transformations that can be read as not a sequence but an individual poem, just as she includes poems not interested in the transformation of patriarchal form and narrative. Whatever subversion is involved in the project of transformation involved in poems like "Making a Living" and "Jesus Walking" of Sexton's 1974 *The Death Notebooks*, they can still be approached conventionally as individual texts; similarly, poems like "Anna Who Was Mad" of Sexton's 1972 *The Book of Folly* do not radically foreground the social and the cultural. Despite these aberrations, most of Sexton's late poems are transformations, and her transformations often function as a poetic sequence, be it as an entire volume of individual poems, as in *Transformations*

and *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, or as one poem with many sections, as in “O Ye Tongues” of *The Death Notebooks*. That is, most of Sexton’s transformations invite the reader to approach them as a series of interrelated literary parts, none of which can be fully experienced without dynamic reference to the others. Sexton’s sequencing of her transformations, then, subverts her time’s dominant view of the lyric poem as a self-referring expressive object that the reader privately stumbles upon and “overhears” in a clear way (White 2). It leads to a noisy reading experience in which it is impossible to approach the poem as an autonomous, self-referential work of art.

The anti-interpretive character of Sexton’s sequencing makes that reading experience even more riotous and stimulating. The many parts of Sexton’s sequences frequently echo each other in associative language-based ways, as when *Transformation*’s last poem bizarrely repeats its first poem’s use of “Presto!” in a thematically unrelated context. The parts’ direct reference to each other tempts Sexton’s reader, especially her critic, to offer moral or analytical interpretation, but the disjointed, purely linguistic character of the reference resists the kind of edifying, order-oriented interpretation fostered by New Critical practices of reading. The sequences’ hostility toward narrative and thematic coherence is further intensified by Sexton’s tendency to include a “frame” poem that promises explication but functions as a taunt. As I have discussed, “The Golden Key” begins *Transformations* by stressing the uncertainty, not coherence, of the sequence’s project of transformation, while “The Author of the Jesus Paper Speaks” ends “The Jesus Papers” with a series of nonsensical first-person declarations almost totally unrelated to the sequence’s preceding parts. Once more, Sexton’s loose sequencing parodies the conventions of a poetic culture obsessed with

locating “force” and “clarity” in a poet’s work (Gill, “Anne Sexton and Confessional Poetics” 431). The sequences’ resistance to interpretation continues Sexton’s reframing of the social and cultural uses of poetry.

Sexton’s messy sequencing of her transformations frames poetry as pleasurable, not edifying. As I have suggested, the dynamic character of Sexton’s sequencing compels her reader to approach each of her transformations as a series of interrelated parts in a kind of engaging dialogue with each other, and on a structural level, it thwarts any attempt the reader might make to impose a moral or sense of definite order on her work. The reader must consistently situate each part in relation to others, even as she can never definitively “close” the sequence of parts or locate a set of coherent morals in it. Such an open-ended, dynamic reading experience fulfills the aspirations of a poet who begins to write poems in reaction to a literary atmosphere that she identifies as “boring” (*NES* 181). Sexton’s captivating sequences structurally foreground the pleasure of reading, not the edification of interpretation. Sexton’s emphasis on the pleasure poetry might provide further blurs the line between art and everyday social and cultural life, positioning poetry as a kind of entertainment rather than an academic form of moral instruction. Her sequences attack what Huyssen calls the elitist desire for aesthetic autonomy by spotlighting poetry’s non-pedagogical, popular uses (Huyssen viii-ix). Far from Sexton’s sequencing undermining the social and cultural work accomplished by her project of transformation, it develops it.

Sexton’s animated emphasis on pleasure undermines the role in the handling of postwar poetry afforded to the white male university critic by her New Critical-influenced poetic culture. As White explains of New Critical canons of taste:

[H]owever difficult the good poem was to be, it should not be so difficult as to be uninterpretable, because that would render it not useful. In all ways, the poem was not to be for the author alone but to serve as part of a verse culture still attached to an Arnoldian notion of art's edifying and instructive function. (White 100-1)

Sexton's anti-interpretive sequencing of her transformation of patriarchal form and narrative, then, violates a fundamental New Critical tenet. In regards to both Sexton's transformations and her sequencing, Sexton's late work positions poetry not as edifying and "useful," or rather produced for the white male university critic's universalist interpretation, but as pleasurable and historical. Her entertaining poems render his New Critical practices of reading outmoded and useless; they undermine his role in the reading of postwar poetry, and they signal the need for practices of reading that are not solely textual or informed by the interpretive paradigm of the Great Divide.

Sexton's sequencing also facilitates her project of transformation's development of consciousness-raising communities of women readers. As discussed, the messiness involved in Sexton's transformation of patriarchal form and narrative in itself makes for an engaging, open-ended reading experience that defies conventional order-oriented practices of reading. Even a formally neat transformation like "Cinderella" rarely reads in entirely clear-cut ways, as it complicates the conventions of a patriarchal form known for its tidy resolution of "moral, psychological, ethical, and emotional conflicts" (Hall 109-10). Sexton's success in her consciousness-raising project of transformation in part depends upon her ability to produce poems that will foster new kinds of messy reading

experiences, ones that position the reader as active and encourage her to join Sexton in interrogating the conventions of patriarchal form and narrative. To that end, the lively reading experience fostered by Sexton's sequences' resistance to academic interpretation facilitates her transformations' development of consciousness-raising communities of women readers. Sexton's anti-interpretive sequencing does not impede but adds depth to her transformation of patriarchal form and narrative, further preventing the reader from closing, simplifying, or ordering her messy work.

Sexton's resistance in late interviews to interpreting her work according to New Critical practices of reading attests to the degree to which clarity increasingly disinterested her. In a 1973 interview with William Heyen and Al Poulin, for instance, Sexton resists Heyen's request that she explain whether or not she has "come somewhere" in regard to the religious quest that Heyen claims structures Sexton's entire poetic career (*NES* 155-6). The subsequent exchange between Poulin and Sexton is typical:

S: I would say I *do* in *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, and I even do to a certain degree in *The Death Notebooks*. I mean it certainly ends on, I don't know—could you say how it ends?

P: Well it ends with that series of psalms, which are, praise.

S: Which are praise!

P: And I think even the section called "The Furies."

S: Which are praise! No, well, yes, yes they are.

Sexton initially responds to Heyen's question in the most general of terms, then asks the pair to analyze her latest collection's ending, and finally settles for repeating the interpretation Poulin gives. Such ambiguity and imprecision characterize Sexton's oft-teasing answers in her late interviews, a stark contrast to the highly orchestrated responses that Sexton recites across her early interviews. Just as Sexton's early work's concern with order gives way to her late work's embrace of mess, so does the precise self-presentation of her early interviews give way to the performative nonchalance of her late interviews. Having achieved critical and commercial success, Sexton no longer tailored her work or self-presentation so that it might be easily interpreted, or consumed, by her time's dominant poetic culture. As I have discussed, the messiness of Sexton's project of transformation, as well as that of her sequencing, is key to her late work's rejection of New Critical standards of taste. A close examination of "Red Riding Hood," a poem near the middle of *Transformations*, highlights the equal importance of the way in which Sexton disorients her reader's affects.

The poem's beginning establishes the swift pace that characterizes Sexton's affective disorientation. Sexton opens her transformation with a succinct declaration:

Many are the deceivers:

The suburban matron,
 proper in the supermarket,
 list in hand so she won't suddenly fly,
 buying her Duz and Chuck Wagon dog food,

meanwhile ascending from earth,
 letting her stomach fill up with helium,
 letting her arms go loose as kite tails,
 getting ready to meet her lover
 a mile down Apple Crest Road
 in the Congregational Church Parking Lot (*CP* 267-8)

The suggestive first line flickers the reader's curiosity. The next seven lines stage an affective contrast between the indifference elicited by Sexton's description of a supermarket trip and the whimsy aroused by her surreal images. Sexton ricochets from the banal to the fantastical, making it difficult for the reader to linger on, or deeply experience, either affective state. In the stanza's final lines, Sexton shocks her reader first by revealing that the "suburban matron" is about "to meet her lover," then more so by stating that the pair will meet "in the Congregational Church Parking Lot." However, the lines' conversational tone and quick speed, as well as their lack of syntactical rupture from the preceding lines, weaken that sense of shock. The poem's opening, then, exemplifies the swift pace of Sexton's affective disorientation, and it makes clear how that swift pace helps to disorient the reader's affects in the first place.

Many critics have labeled Sexton's late work as failed precisely because of the messiness of this swift mixing and weakening of her reader's affects, or emotions. In Joyce Carol Oates's 1981 review of Sexton's *The Complete Poems*, Oates ventriloquizes Eliot's preoccupation with impersonality and tradition when she writes:

The problematic nature of Anne Sexton's poetry has less to do with her admittedly self-entranced subject matter than with how judicious she was in translating emotion into art. [. . .] [T]his collection begins with poems of eerily compelling authority, in the superb "To Bedlam and Part Way Back" (1960) and "All My Pretty Ones" (1962), and then gradually disintegrates, through "Live or Die" (1966), "The Book of Folly" (1972), "The Awful Rowing Toward God" (1975) and the painful posthumous work consisting of "45 Mercy Street" (1976), "Words for Dr. Y." (1978) and "Last Poems."⁴

For Oates and other critics influenced by New Criticism and the discourse of the Great Divide, Sexton's late work fails because it stops "translating emotion into art," slowly declining in quality until it becomes "painful" to read. Whereas the poet ought to have "compelling authority" over emotion and audience, in Sexton's late work "emotions are flicked before us like playing cards." Sexton's refusal to control the reader's experience of her work by carefully "translating" emotion, Oates suggests, trivializes the instructive potential of the artistic medium, debasing poetry to a form of play akin to a commercial card game. Poetry ought not to "flick" but sustain and control affect and emotion, edifying the reader as it does. Oates's view represents her time's denigration of Sexton's late work for its subversion of what White has called the "common understanding of lyric as a genre expected to master psychological and phenomenological muddle in controlled language" (White 126). It also makes it especially clear that part of what makes Sexton's affective disorientation so disconcerting to the critic is that it obscures the moral distinction between poetry and commercial entertainment.

⁴ <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/10/18/books/the-rise-and-fall-of-a-poet.html?pagewanted=all>

In the third stanza of “Red Riding Hood,” Sexton foregrounds her affective disorientation’s amoral, anti-interpretive character. The stanza’s first thirteen lines describe how “two seemingly respectable women” rob “an old Jenny” of her life savings: the women promise to share “an envelope/full of money” if she gives them “ten thou/as an act of faith,” but then they “take the money and disappear.” In these lines, Sexton rapidly alternates between eliciting the reader’s worry, humor, pity, and disgust. That Sexton so rapidly changes the emotion she evokes weakens the intensity of each affective state and further disorients the reader, as does the puzzling nature of the stanza’s jarring tonal contrast to the preceding stanza’s description of the “suburban matron.” After Sexton thoroughly affectively disorients her reader, she writes:

Where is the moral?
 Not all knives are for
 stabbing the exposed belly.
 Rock climbs on rock
 and it only makes a seashore. (*CP* 268)

Sexton forces the reader to question, if only performatively, “Where is the moral?” in the stanza; Sexton taunts the reader, daring her to make moral, interpretive sense of the stanza’s nihilistic story. As is often the case with Sexton’s late work, however, Sexton’s chaotic mixing of muddled affects makes it nearly impossible for the reader to formulate a coherent moral interpretation of the stanza, as it reads too disjointedly. The pair of absurd non-answers that Sexton subsequently offers to the reader only intensifies the

reader's disorientation, further stressing the impossibility of answering the question.

As Oates's comments suggest, then, Sexton's affective disorientation destabilizes her New Critical-influenced poetic culture's fantasy that poetry functions as an edifying artistic medium autonomous from commercial culture. In Sexton's late refusal to sustain affect or "control" emotion, Sexton renders many of her poems unable to morally instruct, or teach, the reader; equipped only to entertain, or delight, her. Not unlike the way in which Sexton's anti-interpretable sequencing frames the reading of poetry as pleasurable rather than edifying, Sexton's affective disorientation obscures the New Critical moral distinction between poetry and commercial entertainment: it demystifies poetry, integrating the experience of reading poetry into everyday social and cultural life. In doing so, Sexton's late poetry undermines the white male university critic's attempt to confine poetry within the postwar university under the control of his ostensibly edifying interpretation; to the extent that Sexton's affective disorientation attracts and entertains new readers, it also facilitates the development of mass communities of women readers. In both regards, Sexton's affective disorientation can be viewed as helping to comprise what Karen Alkalay-Gut calls Sexton's late work's "redefinition of culture," joining the way in which its "substantive use of the popular arts obfuscates the distinctions between levels and degrees of culture" (Alkalay-Gut 69; 52). The anarchic way in which Sexton's late poems bewilder and astonish her reader affectively is a critical component of their subversion of her time's hegemonic standards of taste.

As this chapter has argued, Sexton's messy aesthetic facilitates her late work's subversive project of integrating poetry and everyday social and cultural life, overcoming her time's dominant model of poetic production. Sexton's messiness undermines the role

in the handling of poetry afforded to the white male university critic by New Critical models of reading, while it also helps to develop consciousness-raising communities of women readers. Sexton's messiness foregrounds the social character of the reading and writing of poetry, fostering convention-defying reading experiences that force the reader to approach her poems not only textually but also socially and culturally. Sexton's messy aesthetic, then, leads not only to messy poems but also to messy reading experiences.

While this chapter has explored some key features of Sexton's messiness, it has necessarily left many others untouched. Beginning with Sexton's 1971 *Transformations*, this chapter has argued, Sexton's poems messily start to interrogate and transform patriarchal cultural forms and narratives; refer to each other in dynamic ways that nevertheless make it (or paradoxically cause it to) resist interpretation; and affectively disorient the reader. These three features are key to the way in which Sexton's late aesthetic subverts the critical demand for poetry to function as orderly craft that transforms the poet's personal experiences and emotions into easily interpretable autonomous works of art with universal appeal. Note, too, the messy ways in which Sexton's late poems collapse levels of culture; expose lyric as staged, as the product of a particular writer's labor; and foreground the challenges that Sexton's celebrity poses to reading her work. The kinds of social and cultural work accomplished by these and other forms of Sexton's messiness might be explored in depth in another project.

Ch. 2: Messy Reception

If Sexton's late poetry subverted the aesthetic standards of her poetic culture, as I have argued, her subversion has provoked critical ire. Posthumous critics have routinely launched misogynistic attacks on her messy work. Echoing the complaints of her earliest critics, these critics accuse Sexton of having written naïve, narcissistic poems, and they uphold her as a confessional anti-ideal to be avoided or scorned. Uncomfortably aware of the many charges against Sexton, favorable critics' attempts to take her poetry seriously in academia consistently have tended to read as self-conscious defenses. In contrast to early critics, however, recent critics have viewed the confessional label so attached to Sexton with skepticism. Responding to the decay of the 'confessional' as a critical category, these critics uneasily try to situate Sexton's work in broader cultural contexts without the aid of a neat category under which to place her poems. The messiness of these readings suggests that sympathetically assessing Sexton's work within academia today can help scholars rethink the ways in which they categorize and understand the work of postwar poets, as well as the work of their literary predecessors.

At the start of her career, Sexton's unfavorable critics framed her poetry as ill formed and self-obsessed. In poet-critic James Dickey's review of *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, Dickey writes that, "Sexton's poems so obviously come out of deep, painful sections of the author's life that one's literary opinions scarcely seem to matter" (Dickey 63). Dickey imagines Sexton's poetry to "so obviously" be a kind of written form of psychotherapy, conducted in solitude and centered on her emotional troubles, that the critic's public literary opinions become irrelevant. Dickey accuses Sexton's earliest work of having failed to refer to the world outside of herself, a fact made even more apparent

in his review of *All My Pretty Ones* in which he slanders Sexton for dwelling “insistently on the pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experience” (qtd. in “Confessional Poetics” 430). Once again, in explicitly gendered terms, Dickey frames Sexton’s poetry as the embarrassing publication of her artless recording of her life, particularly her bodily experience. Dickey’s blistering attacks, however, were anomalous for the time.

For much of her life, Sexton enjoyed a generally favorable critical reception much at odds with that faced by most women poets of the time. As Artemis Michailidou explains, quoting William Drake, women artists faced a bleak professional landscape during the postwar period:

Following the failure of women to emerge as a political force after 1920, “pro-women’s legislation and political activism declined steadily until the 1950s.” Women’s gradual recession from the public sphere was also reflected in the diminishing numbers of poetry books published by women in the 1930s, as well as in the limited numbers of literary awards given to female poets. (Michailidou, “St. Vincent and Anne Sexton” 70).

Facing such adversity and lacking the advantages of a university education, it seems astounding that within a decade of Sexton’s transformation from “housewife into poet,” as Diane Middlebrook writes, she should have won the Pulitzer Prize and been one of the best-paid poetry performers in the nation (Middlebrook 271-2). Another project might explore in depth the reasons behind Sexton’s meteoric trajectory, but here, it suffices to note that, for much of her career, Sexton faced an unusually favorable critical reception.

As Jo Gill points out, contemporaneous critics such as C.B. Cox and A.R. Jones celebrated what they perceived to be Sexton's "compulsion to confess" in hyperbolic, oft-gendered language, exalting the "confessional" character of her verse (qtd. in Gill, "Anne Sexton and Confessional Poetics" 428). Not until the publication of her late collections, which I have suggested more emphatically subvert the aesthetic standards of her time's white male literary tradition, did critics begin to overwhelmingly turn against her work.

At that point, critics began to echo Dickey's accusation that Sexton wrote selfish poems. Mirroring the views of many, Joyce Carol Oates critiques Sexton's late poems for having failed to create "a structure that would contain her own small despairing voice amid many other voices" (qtd. in *Lyric Shame* 126). Oates links her late work's disinterest in "structure" to an accusation of narcissism, implying that she became egotistical and, thus, failed as a poet. Although Oates discusses Sexton's late work, her critique parallels Dickey's: both critics read Sexton's deviation from critical ideals as embarrassingly impulsive and self-obsessed, as the naïve outpouring of emotion. Oates exemplifies the way many posthumous critics have read Sexton, who, as Miranda Sherwin details, "has suffered more than any other confessional poet from readings of her work as self-revelatory and nakedly autobiographical" (Sherwin 29). Attached to the order-oriented aesthetic standards that Sexton challenged, unfavorable critics have tried to neutralize the threats her poems pose to the dominant cultural hierarchy by recasting her work as merely confessional, the negligible result of laziness and egotism. That is, Sexton's mediation as 'confessional,' which once guided critics' adulation of her early poems, increasingly has been used to discredit the value of her work as a whole, especially her collections of the 1970s.

The critical mediation of Sexton's work as confessional since the time of her death has tended to frame her work as narcissistic and repellent. Writing in 1987, Lawrence Lerner claims Sexton's work is "consistently and uniformly confessional," concluding that Sexton herself "has almost become identified with the genre" (Lerner, "What Is Confessional Poetry?" 52). Like many posthumous critics, Lerner implies that Sexton as a cultural icon "almost" can embody the abstract category of the confessional, which for critics increasingly signifies the sloppy voicing or expression of private troubles. As Gill points out, poetry read as "confessional" becomes "habitually and negatively associated with an authorial self-absorption verging on narcissism" (Gill, "Textual Confessions" 60). Testifying to the legitimacy of Gill's claim, Patricia Meyer Spacks in her review of Sexton's *45 Mercy Street* questions how the reader might "properly respond to lines as grotesquely uncontrolled as these," and she later insists that "art requires more than emotional indulgence" (qtd. in Gill, "Confessional Poetics" 430). Spacks, as with many critics, reads Sexton as emblemizing the worst of the confessional: self-indulgent, indecorous, uncontrolled, naïve.

Guided by what Gillian White has called practices of lyric reading, these critics have represented Sexton's "confessional" work as a kind of "grotesquely uncontrolled" hyper-lyric. In her 2014 *Lyric Shame*, White sketches the criteria upon which most critics have based their interpretation of poems during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries:

[T]he dominant conception of lyric, and of poetic interpretation, derived from New Critical theories and established in American universities in the late 1930s (and so influential, many poets and scholars argue, as to produce a "canon of

taste” thereafter) contributed to a view of lyric poems as expressive objects that “speak” to the reader without, paradoxically, the reader’s need to understand anything of the history of the work’s production, reception, or circulation. (2)

For her unfavorable critics, Sexton’s work fails precisely because they read it as *too* expressive: her self-obsessed poems “speak” too much, only about herself, and without enough artistry. From James Dickey’s early vilification to Joyce Carol Oates’s posthumous criticism, unfavorable critics have read Sexton’s varied levels of resistance to her time’s hegemonic aesthetic standards only as a sign that the “housewife into poet” must have been too selfish or ignorant to adhere to those standards consistently. Her work’s resistance to conventional practices of reading becomes her personal inability to have written poems that successfully balance “expression” and “art.” This is especially true in the case of her late poetry, which, as Karen Alkalay-Gut highlights, “defies traditional methods of reading [. . .] because they initially appear raw, associative, and replete with ostensible nonsense” (Alkalay-Gut 51). If mainstream critics have interpreted Sexton’s turn from aesthetic order as nothing more than a sign of decline in mental health, a regrettable artistic failure that discredits the whole of her work from receiving sustained critical attention, oppositional avant-garde critical cultures within academia have noticeably not defended her work—likely for a few reasons in particular.

Most notably, late twentieth-century ‘avant-garde’ critics upheld a distinction between the popular and the prestigious. Widely influential upon the criticism of her time, critic Marjorie Perloff in 1976 helped define the parameters upon which poetry was to be judged as avant-garde and, thus, as worth defending and analyzing:

[T]he case of [Frank] O’Hara has convinced me that the avant-garde is precisely what it always was – art that is so far ahead of its time that it takes years – sometimes decades – for its audience to catch up.” (“Frank O’Hara and the Aesthetics of Attention” 782)

Arguing against O’Hara’s minor status, Perloff later celebrates his poetry on the basis that it is “anti-doctrinaire, anti-programmatic” and values “openness, quickness, immediacy,” features to be associated with the experimental or postmodern (786; 794). Despite usefully helping to elevate O’Hara’s reputation, Perloff replicates the modernist assumption that art worth analyzing necessarily is undervalued by “its audience,” a critical gesture that conveniently conflates the general public with the academic establishment. The elitism guiding Perloff’s thought is made especially clear at the end of her book on Frank O’Hara, in which she favorably contrasts “the consciousness of the urbane, witty, sophisticated, skeptical, agnostic O’Hara” with that of “the prophetic, expansive, religious Ginsberg, who wants his poetry to *change* the world” (Perloff, *Poet Among Painters* 186). For Perloff, as with many avant-garde critics in academia, the best poetry is not only that which circulates amongst a small group of non-commercial readers, as O’Hara’s poetry did within his coterie, but also that which disavows the idea that poetry might “*change* the world,” or rather serve subversive social uses.

Sexton’s initial critical acceptance, her commercial success, and her popular mode of poetics all are antithetical to the category of the avant-garde, then, as conceived by late twentieth-century American critics. The work of a poet who won the Pulitzer within a

decade of beginning to write poems, toured the country with a chamber rock group in order to perform her work before commercial audiences, and treasured her ability to move her readers is not easily placed within a critical category centered on mainstream critical rejection, aversion to commerce or entertainment, and intellectual austerity (Middlebrook 271; 286; 273). However much Sexton's late poems might adopt features challenging mainstream aesthetic standards—features that would be otherwise labeled as postmodern, experimental, or avant-garde—her disruption of the distinction between the popular and the prestigious, or rather everyday life and art, left her abandoned to the unfashionable critical category of the confessional. In their insistence on poetry's separation from mass culture, as well as their tacit gatekeeping of who gets read as avant-garde along classed, gendered, and racialized lines, late twentieth-century avant-garde critics revive the “elitist desire for aesthetic autonomy” Huyssen frames as endemic to the postwar period (Huyssen viii-ix). They do so in the late 1970s, the moment when the ‘Great Divide’ seemed weakest.

Like the critics who helped perpetuate that divide, these critics also idealize poetry that encloses the reader's attention. Another late twentieth-century critic, Charles Altieri, conceives of the ideal poem in terms that stress its immediacy, suggesting that poetry ought to be a “direct habitation, a directly instrumental rather than contemplative use of language” (Altieri 477). Later, Altieri expands:

What matters is the present—not as some metaphysical absolute but as the locus of minute processes of judgment that simply go into neutral if they are forced to deal with large questions. (488-9)

Like Perloff's fixation on O'Hara's "aesthetics of attention," Altieri's preoccupation with "the present" in John Ashbery's work reflects the view that poetry ought to foreground "minute processes of judgment" at the expense of considering "large questions." For these critics, as with their modernist predecessors, poetry must authoritatively command the reader's attention: the poet, ideally, refers the reader's attention not to the messiness of her time's "large questions," but keeps it contained in "minute processes of judgment" that are tidily confined within and limited to the present moment.

Once more, Sexton's work resists the standards of the avant-garde critics who might have defended her from mainstream critics' charges of confessional laziness and narcissism. In addition to Sexton's scattering of her reader's attention, as I discussed in the first chapter, her emphasis on devalued kinds of female experience violates a misogynistic model of poetry that resists attempts "to deal with large questions" extending beyond the realm of immediate aesthetic experience. Sexton's poetry typically deals with what Elizabeth Gregory calls "experiences generally prohibited expression by social convention": "mental illness, intra-familial conflicts and resentments, childhood traumas, sexual transgressions and intimate feelings about one's body" (Gregory 34). Such subjects chaotically interweave the past, present, and future, and they force the reader to confront, if not answer, "large questions" in non-idle ways. In both regards, Sexton's poems disrupt the standards of the avant-garde critical culture of the late twentieth century, helping to explain why critics within that culture did not object to the way in which mainstream critics demonized her late work's well-known aesthetic shift.

Dismissed by mainstream and avant-garde critics alike, Sexton remained stigmatized as confessional.

Recent scholars have critiqued the misogyny that lies behind the reductive biographical readings that help mediate a poet as confessional, which tend to represent the work of women poets as unself-aware. Writing of Sylvia Plath, Tracy Brain regrets that, “to treat Plath’s writing as invariably self-dramatising is to belittle it. The implication of such an exercise is that the ever-confessional Sylvia Plath was too unimaginative to make anything up, or too self-obsessed to consider anything of larger historical or cultural importance” (Brain 28). Guided by poststructuralist thought that questions the unambiguous identification of writer and text, Brain’s argument easily applies to Anne Sexton, who even more so than Plath has been read as writing in a naïve confessional mode. Many critics’ biographical or expressive readings of Sexton have caused them, as Brain suggests of such readings in general, “to misread that writing, or blind [them] to the other things that are happening in it” (20). If the mediation of Plath’s and Sexton’s work as ‘confessional’ caused mainstream critics first to celebrate their work as unflinchingly honest and then, increasingly, to denigrate it as self-absorbed, both approaches have oversimplified the complexities of their work, reducing it to the level of solipsistic autobiography. Since the early twenty-first century, however, a growing number of critics have sought to explore the many things “happening” in Sexton’s writing that past critics have ignored because of her work’s mediation as confessional.

As with early favorable critics, recent critics have registered Sexton’s low level of status in academia. Writing in 1983, Alicia Ostriker opens her analysis of Sexton by regretting that “[c]ritics get in line for the pleasure of filing her under *N* for *narcissist* and

announcing that she lacks reticence” (Ostriker 251). Ostriker’s flagging of her subject’s infamy positions her own work as not merely analysis but rather a self-conscious defense; risking her reputation, Ostriker forfeits the fantasy of critical objectivity by taking seriously the work of a poet whom critics charge with narcissism and naïveté. If the future of Sexton’s reputation in academia seemed bleak in the early 1980s, the situation has only gotten worse. Writing in 2014, White begins her book’s chapter on Sexton by calling attention to Sexton’s status as “*everybody’s* least beloved lyric poet” (White 98). Sexton’s notoriety as the quintessential confessional poet compels White to justify her reading of Sexton at her chapter’s start in much the same way that Ostriker did at her article’s start thirty years earlier. As with many early and recent favorable critics, Ostriker and White spotlight Sexton’s fall from critical favor.

In contrast to recent critics, however, early critics accepted and even encouraged readings of Sexton’s work that framed her as confessional, or rather as exclusively autobiographical and lacking in craft. In his 1978 defense of Sexton, McClatchy summarizes what he calls the “essentially epistemological concern of confessional poetry”:

[S]ince all that can be meaningfully be known is my individual self, how is that self to be known and communicated except through the honest precision of its cumulative experience? (35)

Echoing M.L. Rosenthal’s initial definition of the confessional in his 1959 review of Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies*, McClatchy premises his essay on the idea that Sexton’s

poetry is “the honest precision of [Sexton’s] cumulative experience,” as further demonstrated by his claims that confessional poetry “is therapeutic” and that its value derives from the poet’s purging of her “impulses behind the [act of] expression” (McClatchy 32). McClatchy unhesitatingly describes Sexton’s work as confessional, which for McClatchy signifies the “honest precision” of the poet’s life. Like many early favorable critics, he engages with the category of the confessional only as it was theorized in the late 1950s and early 1960s at the height of its critical favor. His work suppresses the changes in the connotations of ‘confessional’ that were already underway by the late 1970s, as attested to by Spacks’, Oates’, and Lerner’s unfavorable evaluations of Sexton. If McClatchy and other critics of the 1970s and 1980s could ignore the increasing stigma of the confessional label, as well as assume that Sexton’s poems could be read as her life’s “honest precision,” critics of the 2000s and 2010s have found themselves trapped in a far messier critical situation.

These critics find themselves questioning how best to read the work of the emblem of a critical category that can no longer be used without extreme qualification, if at all. As early as 2004, Jo Gill summarized the perplexing situation that entangles contemporary critics’ attempts to favorably read Sexton, writing, “it is necessary not simply to reassess the relationship between Sexton’s writing and confessionalism, but to re-evaluate confessionalism as a whole” (Gill, “Anne Sexton and Confessional Poetics” 427). Influenced by feminist and poststructuralist thought of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the critique of the confessional as a misogynistic and reductive critical category thwarts the possibility of defending Sexton’s work by ahistorically invoking the positive connotations initially associated with that category. Recent critics

find themselves in a double bind. Unlike early favorable Sexton critics, they cannot invert the negative connotations of the confessional by referencing its initial critical prestige, which has since been exposed as having been based on a problematic, oft-sexist reduction of text to author. In the absence of the confessional, however, there is no readily apparent alternative category under which to neatly place and understand Sexton's work.

Many recent critics have responded to this absence by radically redefining the confessional as a critical category so that it accounts for the complexities of Sexton's work, while continuing to use it as a term. Miranda Sherwin's *'Confessional' Writing and the Twentieth-Century Literary Imagination*, for instance, places Sexton's work in the context of what Sherwin figures as an anti-sexist tradition of American confessional writing spanning decades, the works of which "conceal even as they purport to reveal, endlessly deferring guilt, shifting blame, and resisting closure" (Sherwin 166). As a part of this tradition, Sexton's subversive work is not a "private, apolitical art, but rather one that demonstrates a deep engagement with the politics of literary influence, of gender relations, of psychoanalysis, and of American culture more broadly" (15-6). Even as Sherwin retains 'confessional' as a term, she functionally discards it as a category, supplanting it with one that is more historically expansive and aesthetically complex. In other words, Sherwin places Sexton's work in conversation with ostensibly disparate texts and writers, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Emily Holmes Coleman, and she then conceptualizes a new multifaceted critical category by stressing common features shared by those texts on the levels of discourse, theme or subject, and kinds of resistance to enduring hegemonic social values.

Sherwin's nuancing of what constitutes the confessional through her sympathetic reading of Sexton calls into question the orderly division of postwar poets into oppositional schools. Throughout her chapter on Sexton, Sherwin stresses how past critics' classification of Sexton as simply confessional, the antithesis of her sophisticated contemporaries, has depended on not only "leav[ing] unexplored the formal qualities of [her] poems" (27), but also upholding the misogynistic depiction of Sexton as "negative, obsessed by the past, narcissistic, unstable" (44). Sherwin's thoughtful consideration of Sexton's work, by contrast, refuses to replicate the way in which past critics have reduced Sexton to the tidy status of a confessional ideal or anti-ideal. Helping to dislodge the critical perception of Sexton's poems as aberrant and neurotic, Sherwin instead frames them in the context of a long, elaborate tradition of women's 'confessional' writing: she concludes that her work, as with that of her predecessors, "challenges autobiographical readings and argues against an easy identification of the poet with the persona" (50). The historical, wide-ranging scope of Sherwin's reassessment of Sexton rejects as myopic the division of postwar poets into oppositional schools or modes of writing. Such a masculinist approach to literary history, Sherwin suggests, obscures continuity amongst women writers, erasing their shared aesthetic tendencies and defining their work by its relation to their time's white male literary tradition.

While Jo Gill's reading of Sexton takes a more local approach to redefining the confessional, Gill also problematizes the sexist representation of Sexton as the naïve counterpart to her time's learned poets. Referring to mainstream critics such as Harold Bloom, as well as avant-garde critics such as Marjorie Perloff, Gill redefines the

confessional not by expanding its scope, as Sherwin does, but by stressing its similarity—suppressed, in her view, by many critics—to the aesthetic tendencies of the postmodern:

For self-reflexivity to be identified as characteristic of Ashbery's writing (and of the work of a number of other postmodern writers) it has been necessary to deny its presence in Sexton's work—to reduce confessionalism to this emergent poetry's other [. . .] [T]he vehemence of these rejections of the confessional other reveals—while it attempts to deny—a profound commonality of poetic interests. (Gill, "Textual Confessions" 82)

Throughout her article, Gill draws attention to the many ways in which Sexton's 'confessional' poetry shares "a profound commonality of poetic interests" with the work of 'postmodern' poets like John Ashbery: the denial of authorial responsibility (70), the tendency to conclude poems on "an open-ended and conditional note" (71), the fragmentation of the subject through "multiple and proliferating images of fracture and dissipation" (74), the exposure of poetic mimesis as fraught with "error and uncertainty," "distortion and imprecision" (78-9). In underscoring similarities between Sexton's work and that of Ashbery, whose opaque poems critics have long praised as postmodern, Gill compels her reader to question why the subversive facets of Sexton's so-called confessional poetry have been read as sloppy and failed rather than experimental and avant-garde. As with Sherwin's reevaluation of Sexton, Gill's favorable reading also challenges the dominant critical understanding of Sexton as a confessional egotist who wrote trashy poems that refer only to her private ails. If Sherwin approaches Sexton's

poems as the foundation upon which to build a new historically expansive critical category, however, Gill approaches her anarchic work as an instrument through which she might smudge the sharp boundaries of preexisting critical categories used to describe postwar poetry, casting doubt upon their accuracy and usefulness.

At the same time, Gill's smudging also makes clear the difficulty of reading Sexton's work without reference to those well-established categories, insufficient as they are. Summarizing her redefinition of the confessional, Gill concludes that "the profound self-reflexivity, the language play, and the undermining processes of representation that are thought to characterize avant-garde and postmodernist poetic forms alone are, in fact, central to Sexton's poetics" ("Textual Confessions" 83). If the aesthetic features that past critics have celebrated as definitive of postmodern work easily can be found in work they have denigrated as confessional, though, knowing these critical categories to be misleading and oversimplified does not in itself lead to a more nuanced understanding of how best to categorize postwar poets. That is, Gill's blurring of the clear distinction between the confessional and the postmodern noticeably does not offer an alternative way of differentiating or grouping the work of postwar poets. It instead leaves the reader only with a heightened, self-conscious awareness of the difficulty of differentiating the work of postwar poets in ways that do not rely on those culturally entrenched categories, which Gill has exposed as faulty but difficult to replace or think outside of.

Gill's local focus on the connections between Sexton's postwar work and that of postmodern poets contrasts and complicates Sherwin's attempt to situate her poems in a historically expansive tradition—and vice versa. As with Sherwin, Gill critiques the critical tendency to reduce Sexton's work to postmodern poetry's confessional anti-ideal

(Gill, "Textual Confessions" 80). Unlike Sherwin, however, Gill foregrounds the historical particularity of Sexton's work: she emphasizes the high degree to which Sexton's work still can be read as very much of its time—as similar to the work of her 'postmodern' contemporaries, if not as merely 'confessional.' As demonstrated by her reference to the way in which Sexton's "fragmentation of identity" connects to the concerns of "postmodern aesthetics," Sherwin also registers the specifically postwar character of Sexton's work, even if she suppresses it (Sherwin 36). Sherwin's emphasis on Sexton's place in a longer tradition of writing, however, forces her to overlook or underplay the interesting similarities between Sexton's work and that of her postmodern contemporaries, which Gill's narrower critical gaze can detect and explore in depth. Conversely, Sherwin's broad scope helps her read Sexton's work in ways that are not as confined within the limits of outmoded patriarchal categories as those that structure Gill's argument, in spite of her skepticism. The differences between each critic's methodology gestures toward the heterogeneity of the ways in which contemporary critics might use Sexton's poetry to reassess how they categorize the work of postwar poets.

Sexton's distinctively contentious reception within academia, as well as her poems' subversive aesthetic tendencies, makes her work an ideal vantage point from which to reexamine the flawed critical categories used to describe and understand the work of postwar poets, as well as that of their literary influences, within academia. Given the category's tumultuous history within academia, any writer conventionally identified as confessional might prove a useful means through which scholars might complicate the simplistic logic of critical categories used to describe postwar poetry and its literary antecedents. Sexton's work in particular is especially useful in that her work has so

dramatically suffered from what White has called “the bill of the preseeded, clear text that its Confessional reputation foists on it” (White 141). As the differences between Gill’s and Sherwin’s readings imply, the multifaceted, genre-bending character of Sexton’s work also lends critics a great deal of space in which to roam and explore alternative ways of approaching postwar poetry. Continuing to test the assumptions of our time’s dominant critical categories through sympathetic reevaluations of Sexton’s work will lead only to a more nuanced appreciation of postwar poetry.

If this chapter has sacrificed depth for breadth, many facets of Sexton’s reception still might be explored in detail: I now turn to identifying a few points of interest that have fallen outside the scope of this project due to limits of space. Most notably, Sexton’s fall from critical favor can be seen as a single part of much larger shifts in cultural attitudes toward lyric, sincerity, prestige, popularity, and more. Her initial rise to critical success, too, can be read as embedded within these historical processes. The reception of Sexton’s 1966 *Live or Die* and, especially, her 1969 *Love Poems* also helps bridge the gap between critics’ celebration of her first two collections and their denigration of her collections of the 1970s. I, too, have focused nearly exclusively on the ways in which professional or academic critics have read Sexton, leaving her popular reception generally unmentioned. Exploring any one of these areas might develop recent scholarship’s attempt to nuance the ways in which we read Sexton, helping to elevate her work’s critical reputation and draw attention to the complexities of her work.

I initially had planned to structure this project as a contrastive analysis of the works of Anne Sexton and Frank O’Hara, assuming that the logic behind the pairing would be self-evident. I always have viewed my two favorite midcentury poets as sharing

several aesthetic tendencies: a resistance to formalist interpretation, a whimsical mixture of tones and affects, a frenetic pace, an interest in collapsing disparate levels of culture, a tendency to distort everyday objects in surrealist ways, an exploration of historically silenced kinds of experience, an intimate address of the audience, and so many more.

I had planned to contrast the poets' similar aesthetics with the quite different ways in which they composed and circulated their poems. O'Hara wrote his poems in the wake of the Lavender Scare's destruction of gay male urban social networks, haphazardly circulating them amongst the members of his coterie in an oft-covert attempt to rebuild local community. Conversely, Sexton began to write her poems in the context of women's pronounced recession from the public sphere during the postwar period, rigorously circulating her poems amongst academic and popular readers in a fairly explicit attempt to build communities of women readers on a first regional and later national level. I had hoped to analyze the different kinds of social and cultural work accomplished by the poets' shared aesthetic tendencies. After surveying the poets' starkly different critical receptions, however, I felt so thoroughly repulsed that I narrowed this project's scope to focus on Sexton's work.

To my surprise, I discovered that critics have tended to frame O'Hara's poems in terms antithetical to those in which they have framed Sexton's work. Such a finding, I understood, made bringing the poets' poems into close critical conversation impractical, especially within the confines of sixty double-spaced pages. More than that, though, I felt disheartened and disgusted that so many critics have misread Sexton's dynamic, subversive work, representing it as unself-aware and narcissistic; I aspired to analyze facets of Sexton's work that past critics had overlooked, underexplored, or denied. While

I have been able to consider Sexton's work only in the briefest of terms, I hope that I at least have drawn attention to the troubling fact that the dominant critical representation of Sexton's work as grotesque, failed, and self-obsessed reveals far more about our culture's misogynistic assumptions about women's writing than it does anything about the poems that Sexton actually wrote.

Conclusion

If I have argued for considering Sexton's later work as disruptive to the aesthetic standards of her time and the critical categories of ours, I have risked underemphasizing the degree to which Sexton's subversive poetry of the 1970s should be read as embedded within broader social and cultural contexts. I now turn to identifying a few salient areas of interest relevant to the reading of Sexton that another project might explore in depth: her poetry readings, her commercial success, and her work in the light of work by feminist poets of the late 1960s and 1970s.

The emphasis Sexton's later poetry places upon entertainment, as well as the ways in which it is experiential and participatory, might be brought into useful conversation with her poetry readings, be they those given within academia or outside of it. Sexton's theatrical poetry readings, Susan Rosenbaum suggests, "allowed her to cultivate literary celebrity but also to insist on her sincerity by challenging distinctions between good versus bad poetry, proper versus shameful conduct, public versus private drama" (Rosenbaum 3). Another project might juxtapose the ostensible sincerity of Sexton's highly orchestrated performances against what I have called the messy aesthetic of her late poetry, comparing and contrasting the ways in which each blurs or sharpens distinctions between good and bad poetry, proper and shameful conduct, public and private drama. Alternatively, it might explore Sexton's literary celebrity in relation to her poetry and performances, considering how her work registers and responds to her increasing fame or how her fame complicates the position of her audiences.

Intertwined as Sexton's commercial success is with her poetry readings and celebrity, another project might focus on her commercial success's relationship to her

work. By the publication of *Love Poems*, Middlebrook notes, Sexton “produced in the atmosphere of celebrity, and ‘Sexton’ was now an established brand name. Certain effects were trademarks of the product” (Middlebrook 293). Another project might situate Sexton’s late messy aesthetic in the context of her commercial success. Sexton’s changing relationship to the literary marketplace could serve as a lens through which to view her earlier and later collections’ aesthetic differences, or her status as a “brand name” could be set in opposition to her later poetry’s increasingly anti-interpretive, whimsical character. The way in which Sexton’s posthumous elevation to the level of cultural icon has mediated popular reading experiences and studies of her work within academia also might be considered in detail.

So, too, might the connections between Sexton’s messy aesthetic and the aesthetics of politically radical feminist poets of the 1960s and 1970s. Although Sexton exercised some forms of political consciousness, such as writing poems protesting the escalation of the Vietnam War, she neither participated in the radical political movements of her time nor foregrounded their presence in her work as much as some of her peers (Sexton, *A Self-Portrait in Letters* 326-7). Still, her messy aesthetic in many ways parallels the aesthetics of those feminist peers who did, such as those of Marge Piercy, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, and Bernadette Mayer. Different as these writers’ aesthetics are, their poems share an interest in resisting academic practices of reading, leveling disparate forms of culture, foregrounding the reader’s role in the handling of poetry, eschewing aspects of aesthetic control, and more. Another project might take the form of a contrastive analysis of Sexton and her peers, differentiating the ways in which their work challenges the postwar university’s status as the locus of the handling of poetry.

Conversely, it might develop the concept of messiness as it relates to postwar art and poetry in general and feminist arts in particular, thinking through the term's limits and possibilities as a lens through which to analyze the period's seismic cultural shifts.

Promising as these topics might be, however, there exists a wide range of other useful directions that future work on Sexton could take. Critics typically have either denigrated or ignored her poems, leading to a rather narrow critical understanding of one of the twentieth century's most popular poets. Any project that disputes or complicates the conventional reception of Anne Sexton's multifaceted work as naïve and self-obsessed is well worth developing, however messy that endeavor might be.

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