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**The Portrayal of Female Sexuality and Sensuality in Selected Works of Anne Sexton
and Adrienne Rich**

Vyobrazení ženské sexuality a smyslnosti ve vybraných dílech Anne Sexton a Adrienne Rich

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

Vedoucí bakalářské práce (supervisor):
Mgr. Pavla Veselá, Ph.D.

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Zpracovala (author):
Sára Benešová

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Abstract

Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich stand among the most influential names of 20th century American poetry. Both writers' poetry is in its core feminine; Sexton's confessional verse, in which she delved into her personal experience and trauma, is tightly bound to her feminine experience. She opened the door to many then controversial topics for poetry, like sex, masturbation and female pleasure. Rich's poetry is a reflection of her journey to feminist awakening, as well as a continuous effort to bring the female oppression to the leading edge of literary discourse, making the personal political. They both not only tackled the topic of female sexuality and sensuality explicitly, but also through their language as female writers, by finding their own literary voices and establishing "women's writing."

Women's writing or *l'écriture féminine* is a concept coined by the French feminists in the 1970s, with Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva at its forefront. It explores writing which is outside the masculine and patriarchal discourse and essentially declares the western structure of language as phallogocentric. They drew important parallels between women's bodies and women's writing, arguing that female pleasure has been repressed and therefore denied expression. In their argument, once women learn to write their bodies, they will be sexually liberated. Through women's manifold sexual pleasure (*jouissance*), women will be able to explore the diffusion of female language. *L'écriture féminine* thus provides an ideal bridge between the female body and literary discourse.

The objective of this thesis is to examine selected poems of Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich through the theory of *l'écriture féminine* and explore each poet's respective portrayal of female sexuality in their writing. It is going to analyse the ways in which they explore *jouissance* and eventually, how their individual expressions and voices may differ.

Abstrakt

Anne Sexton a Adrienne Rich patří mezi nejvýznamnější postavy americké poezie dvacátého století. Poezie obou těchto autorek je v jádru ženská; konfesijní verš Sexton, ve kterém se noří do osobních zážitků a traumat, je úzce spjat s jejím ženským prožíváním. Poezie Sexton otevřela dveře řadě na svou dobu kontroverzních témat jako sex, masturbace a ženské potěšení. V poezii Rich se odráží její cesta za feministickým probuzením a nepřetržitá snaha přivést útlak žen do popředí literárního diskurzu a tím zdůraznit, že co je osobní, je také politické. Obě autorky se tématem ženské sexuality a smyslnosti zabývaly nejen explicitně, ale také prostřednictvím jazyka jako takového: tím, že jakožto ženské spisovatelky hledaly svůj literární hlas, ustanovovaly takzvané ženské psaní.

Ženské psaní neboli *l'écriture féminine* je koncept ukotvený francouzskými feministkami v popředí s Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray a Julii Kristevou v sedmdesátých letech dvacátého století. Jejich teorie zkoumá psaní, které se nachází mimo maskulinní a patriarchální diskurz, a ve své podstatě shledává západní strukturu jazyka falocentrickou. Francouzské feministky vyzdvihly důležité paralely mezi ženskými těly a ženským psaním s tvrzením, že ženské potěšení bylo potlačeno, a tím pádem mu bylo odepřena možnost se vyjádřit. Argumentují, že jakmile se ženy naučí psát o svých tělech, budou sexuálně osvobozeny. Skrz rozličnost ženského potěšení (*jouissance*) budou ženy schopny prozkoumat rozmanitost ženského jazyka. *L'écriture féminine* tudíž poskytuje ideální propojení ženského těla s literárním diskurzem.

Cílem této práce je prozkoumat vybrané básně Anne Sexton a Adrienne Rich za pomoci teorie *l'écriture féminine* a analyzovat vyjádření ženské sexuality v jejich díle. Práce bude zkoumat způsoby, kterými dané autorky objevují *jouissance*, a na závěr také, v čem se jejich individuální vyjádření a hlasy mohou lišit.

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1 *L'Écriture Féminine*

L'écriture féminine is a French feminist literary theory established in the 1970s. Its name was coined by one of its main figures, Hélène Cixous, in her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa,” which then became a manifesto of the theory. With two other representatives - Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva – they form a trio of theorists who became identified with the movement of French feminism.¹ *L'écriture féminine* is translated into English as “women’s writing” or “feminine writing” however, most non-French critical works concerning themselves with this theory use its original French form.

This chapter is going to outline the theoretical framework of this thesis. It is going to introduce the cultural and theoretical background of *l'écriture féminine* and characterize concrete texts of Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray which are going to be used for further analysis of the work of Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich.

1.1 Cultural Background

In the second wave of feminism, the United States Women’s Liberation movement and the French *Mouvement de libération des femmes* are often portrayed as concurrent. Dating from late 1960s, they were occurring simultaneously, as both politically independent movements which were leaderless and structureless. Both movements were heavily involved in the progression of female bodily autonomy and women’s reproductive rights. Regardless of their similarities and parallel existence, the movements had their important differences. Claire Goldberg Moses points out that the feminist struggle in France was substantially more class based, working closely with male-based Left. Approaches to certain issues also differed between the two movements, such as “reformism versus revolution, pressure on the state versus

¹ Claire Goldberg Moses, "Made in America: 'French Feminism' in Academia," *Feminist Studies* 24, no. 2 (1998): 254.

cultural politics, a gay/straight split, and a split among lesbians over lesbian separatism.”² Nevertheless, both of these movements have succeeded to bring women’s sexual and bodily autonomy at the centre of attention, and created atmosphere for expansion of the feminist literary discourse which led to the emerge of *l’écriture féminine*. The consequent intersection between French and Anglophone feminism has been crucial for deepening of the Anglophone feminist literary discourse.

As this thesis heavily relies on the English translations of the *l’écriture féminine* works, it is important to mention the American academic journal *Signs*, which played an essential role in the distribution of many key works of the French feminists into the Anglo-American literary theory. It published the first English language translations of works of Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva, thus it has since served as a vessel of intersection between European and American critical literary canon. The first issue was published in 1975 with the full title of *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. Its purpose was, in their words, to “publish the new scholarship about women from both the United States and other countries,” and its goal was to be interdisciplinary and to create “an accurate understanding of men and women, of sex and gender, of large patterns of human behavior, institutions, ideologies, and art.”³ Over the years, *Signs* has also published pieces of literary criticism concerning reactions to *l’écriture féminine*, such as works by Alicia Ostriker or Annette Kuhn, which further deepened the juncture between the French and Anglophone feminist discourse. Consequently, works of the mentioned critics are being used as key sources for this thesis.

This intersection of French and Anglo-American feminism has produced different approaches to the centres of interest of each movement. Mary Eagleton describes this dichotomy in *Feminist Literary Criticism*. Anglo-American feminism focuses on “women” as

² Moses, "Made in America: 'French Feminism' in Academia," 247.

³ Catharine R. Stimpson, Joan N. Burstyn, Domna C. Stanton, and Sandra M. Whisler. "Editorial," *Signs* 1, no. 1 (1975): v.

“biological entities who, at this moment in history, are forging politics based on shared experience and needs.” The focus of the French, she points out, converges onto “woman,” “who is not a person but a writing effect.”⁴ Correspondingly, *l’écriture féminine* asserts the “textuality of the sex instead of the sexuality of the text.”⁵

1.2 Theoretical Background

L’écriture féminine has developed as a response to Freud’s psychoanalysis, and subsequently Jacques Lacan’s “libidinal economies.” In his work, Lacan asserts the male phallus “as the ultimate signifier of desire which structures, determines, and limits how sexual life can be expressed.”⁶ Lacan genders human beings in relation to the Oedipal complex. According to Lacan, individual’s sexual difference is constructed by one’s relation to the phallus, the signifier, and is defined either by its presence or absence. Thus, male and female initial incorporation into the language is different, the female being inevitably defined by lack or negativity.⁷ This claim ultimately declares the language to be under the rule of the “transcendental signifier,”⁸ therefore highly phallogentric and an “emblem and agent of the patriarchal system.”⁹ The female lack is also accompanied by envy and defined by the castration complex. This essentially portrays female sexuality as inferior and permanently marks women as other and negative, asserting the father while repressing the mother. Lacan’s reworking of Freud serves *l’écriture féminine* as a platform for departure, to reassert the language as feminine through writing, with the female body as its foreground.

⁴ Mary Eagleton, ed., *Feminist Literary Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 9-10.

⁵ Eagleton, *Feminist Literary Criticism*, 10.

⁶ Elizabeth J. Ordóñez, "Inscribing Difference: 'L'écriture Feminine' and New Narrative by Women," *Anales De La Literatura Española Contemporánea* 12, no. 1/2 (1987): 46.

⁷ Annette Kuhn, "Introduction to Hélène Cixous's 'Castration or Decapitation?'" *Signs* 7, no. 1 (1981): 37.

⁸ Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Cornell UP, 1985), 52.

⁹ Luce Irigaray, *The Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985), 67.

1.3 Hélène Cixous

Hélène Cixous's reputation mainly rests on the coining of the concept of *l'écriture féminine* or "feminine writing," which first appeared in her essay published in 1975 called "The Laugh of the Medusa." As previously mentioned, *l'écriture féminine* spirals from the psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud and subsequently Jacques Lacan. "The Laugh of the Medusa," both in its title and content, can be viewed as a direct response to Freud's short essay "Medusa's Head" where he associates the head of Medusa with both castration and decapitation. The terror of Medusa, Freud writes, represents the terror of a male child when he is first confronted with the threat of castration – that is when he sees the genitals of an adult female. He links this terror to the first sight of Medusa's head, where one becomes "stiff with terror" and turns into stone. Further, he associates the stiffness with erection.¹⁰ In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous takes upon Freud's interpretation of the Greek Medusa as a symbol of horror and transforms it. In her essay, the Medusa is "not deadly," she is "beautiful and she's laughing."¹¹

Cixous's essay begins with an appeal to a woman to "write her self," to "write about women and bring women to writing."¹² She associates the separation of women from writing with the separation from their bodies, which resulted in "the same fatal goal."¹³ In her view, women must repossess their bodies from which they have been forcibly separated by patriarchy. She writes that what women have in common is essentially their diversity, "infinite richness of their individual constitutions,"¹⁴ and criticizes the uniform and homogeneous definitions of female sexuality by the phallogocentric discourse. Cixous continues to make

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, "Medusa's Head," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVIII (1920-1922): Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1955), 273-274.

¹¹ Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs 1*, no. 4 (Summer 1976): 885.

¹² Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 875.

¹³ Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 875.

¹⁴ Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 876.

correlations between female writing and the female body. She again appeals to women, saying “[w]rite! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it.”¹⁵ She asserts that the solution to women’s imprisonment in patriarchal structures is exactly through this parallel, reassessing the body through writing and vice versa. This will result in “female-sexed texts”¹⁶ which, according to Cixous, men are scared of.

By reclaiming their bodies through writing, women will be able to reclaim their sexuality. Cixous describes the process as such:

To write. An act which will not only ‘realize’ the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal;¹⁷

Cixous writes about writing as driven by libidinal and cultural economy, as women have always been deprived of the opportunity to speak, therefore writing and language are the perfect locus for female oppression. The aim of *l’écriture féminine* is to bring women out of the oppression, into the position of power, where they no longer have to feel “guilty of everything, guilty at every turn.”¹⁸ With access to their native strengths, women will revive the mother, which has been repressed by the phallocentry as the castrated father, and subsequently create the long overdue *écriture féminine*, written in “white ink,”¹⁹ the mother’s milk.

Another of Cixous’s significant pieces of work is the essay “Castration or Decapitation?” It is another title allusion to Freud’s “Head of Medusa.” In this text, Cixous asserts that if “masculinity is culturally ordered by the castration complex,”²⁰ then the threat posed on femininity is decapitation. She criticizes the narrative of history, tales and myths which always portray the female as the “sleeper,” while man is “obviously active, the upright,

¹⁵ Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 876.

¹⁶ Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 877.

¹⁷ Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 880.

¹⁸ Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 880.

¹⁹ Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 881.

²⁰ Hélène Cixous, “Castration or Decapitation?” trans. Annette Kuhn, *Signs* 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1981): 43.

the productive.”²¹ This opposition thus preconditions women in every aspect of culture. She is always the small and inferior and the same goes for her pleasure. Cixous directly criticizes Lacan and the psychoanalytic approach in this text:

Old Lacan takes up the slogan "What does she want?" when he says, "A woman cannot speak of her pleasure." Most interesting! It's all there, a woman cannot, is unable, hasn't the power. Not to mention "speaking": it's exactly this that she's forever deprived of. Unable to speak of pleasure = no pleasure, no desire: power, desire, speaking, pleasure, none of these is for woman.²²

She writes that Lacan proposes that women are “outside the Symbolic” which is “outside the language,” and that is because they lack any relation to the phallus, as they “do not have the advantage of castration complex.”²³ This proposes an interesting paradox that women find themselves in as they “lack Lack;” they lack the “Lack of the Phallus.” This paradox inevitably makes a woman “indefinable, nonsexed and unable to recognize herself.”²⁴ Ultimately, Cixous writes against the archetypal passive female represented as an imperfect male. She opposes the narrative that women are created to listen and not to speak. She calls for “de-phallocalizing”²⁵ the body, with female writing and speech to be used as the dismantling tool. However, as female writing is impossible through masculine language and structures, Cixous defines a whole new feminine textual body:

This is how I would define a feminine textual body: as a female libidinal economy, a regime, energies, a system of spending not necessarily carved out by culture. A feminine textual body is recognized by the fact that it is always endless, without ending: there's no closure, it doesn't stop, and it's this that very often makes the feminine text difficult to read.²⁶

The feminine textual body opposes the masculine myth and the trajectory of the linear, the phallus. It starts “on all sides at once” and “starts twenty, thirty times over.”²⁷ She describes

²¹ Cixous, “Castration or Decapitation?” 44.

²² Cixous, “Castration or Decapitation?” 45.

²³ Cixous, “Castration or Decapitation?” 46.

²⁴ Cixous, “Castration or Decapitation?” 46.

²⁵ Cixous, “Castration or Decapitation?” 51.

²⁶ Cixous, “Castration or Decapitation?” 53.

²⁷ Cixous, “Castration or Decapitation?” 53.

the feminine textual structures as cyclical, mirroring the female physical body and its cycles. She portrays the movement of the feminine text as “fantasy of blood, of menstrual flow.”²⁸

1.4 Luce Irigaray

The focus of Luce Irigaray in the theory of *l'écriture féminine* is much wider and extensive. In her first book, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974), she analyses phallogentrism in Western philosophies and psychoanalytic theories. In this study, she directly criticizes works of Freud, Plato, Aristotle, Kant and Descartes. Irigaray argues that because the Western philosophies define women as invisible and imperfect (castrated) men, women have been caught in man-centred structures, thus they had no way of representing themselves.²⁹ She writes that “female sexuality cannot be reduced to the categories developed to account for male sexuality,”³⁰ and that femininity for psychoanalysis remains a “dark continent.”³¹ Irigaray thus proposes a solution in the form of women’s sexual rediscovery and pleasure which will be defined by women’s language. She uses the speculum (a medical mirror used in gynaecology during a pelvic exam) as a metaphor for female self-discovery. This rediscovery, according to Irigaray, will result in metamorphoses.

In *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray concurs with Cixous on the female form which defies the phallogentric linearity. She writes that woman is “neither open nor closed. She is indefinite, in-finite, *form is never complete in her.*”³² She asserts that when woman touches herself, she reaches “the extension of the infinite.”³³ In her later book, *The Sex Which Is Not One* (1979), she argues against the unity of female sexual organs and pleasure. According to Irigaray, the sexual unity is the masculine parameter on the basis of which the

²⁸ Cixous, “Castration or Decapitation?” 53.

²⁹ Ann Rosalind Jones, “Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of ‘L’Ecriture Feminine,’” *Feminist Studies* 7, no. 2 (Summer 1981): 250.

³⁰ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 110.

³¹ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 110.

³² Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 229.

³³ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 223.

female sexuality has been conceptualized. In fact, “woman’s erogenous zones,” she writes, “are not clitoris *or* the vagina, but the clitoris and the vagina, and the lips, and the vulva...”³⁴ epitomized by the statement “woman has sex organs more or less everywhere.”³⁵ There is once again drawn a parallel between the female body and writing, as Irigaray views women’s language as equally diffusive and elusive, in defiance of symbols and fixed meanings.³⁶

Fundamentally, what Cixous and Irigaray regard as a product of “women’s writing” mimics the form of the female body as well as the female mind. The female consciousness and unconsciousness, as well as the female body are endless – “cosmic” and “worldwide.”³⁷ Thus, *l’écriture féminine* reaches for the essential human tool of language, to dismantle the patriarchal structures and introduce new feminine forms.

³⁴ Irigaray, *The Sex Which Is Not One*, 63-4.

³⁵ Irigaray, *The Sex Which Is Not One*, 28.

³⁶ Michaela Piňosová, “Unbinding the Female Prometheus: L’Écriture féminine in Selected Poetry of Sylvia Plath,” (MA diss., Charles University, 2017), 14.

³⁷ Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 889.

2 Female Sexuality and Pleasure

Just as the female sex is compared to the male as “other,” the classification of male and female sexuality follows a double standard. Luce Irigaray in *The Sex Which Is Not One* writes that female sexuality has always been “conceptualized within masculine parameters.”³⁸ Whereas males, as the transcendental signifiers, are encouraged to fully express their sexualities, the female sexuality merely functions in the phallogentric universe as subordination, resulting from relationship with men and their needs. The gender role distinction in society follows the same pattern of subordinacy. Patricia Miller writes on this issue in her essay "Social and Behavioral Constructions of Female Sexuality," in reaction to Alfred Kinsey's sexuality study *Sexual Behavior in Human Female*. She states that “Kinsey's determination that women are by virtue generally less capable of sexual autonomy” not only reinforces a double standard, but also suggests that “women should simply become more readily available to men for sex, on the terms that men determine, as a consequence of their dominant social roles.”³⁹ However, when the focus is shifted to the female physiological sex, their autonomy exceeds the male. The way women experience pleasure fulfillment was found to be reached directly through female sexual autonomy. W. H. Masters writes in *Human Sexual Response* that in women, “the maximum physiologic intensity of orgasmic response subjectively reported or objectively recorded has been achieved by self-regulated mechanical or automanipulative techniques.”⁴⁰ This is mainly possible because of what Miller calls the “multiple orgasmic potential,”⁴¹ which implies that in contrary to male unitary sexuality, female is multiple and diffusive.

³⁸ Irigaray, *The Sex Which Is Not One*, 23.

³⁹ Patricia Y. Miller et. al., "Social and Behavioral Constructions of Female Sexuality," *Signs* 5, no. 4 (1980): 786-7.

⁴⁰ W. H. Masters, and Virginia E. Johnson, *Human Sexual Response* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1966), 133.

⁴¹ Miller, "Social and Behavioral Constructions of Female Sexuality," 787.

2.1 *Jouissance*

When Luce Irigaray writes about female pleasure, she describes it as “far more diversified, multiple and more complex than is commonly imagined.”⁴² This multiple sexual pleasure is one of the main subjects of *l’écriture féminine*, represented by the term *jouissance*. The French form of the word is usually retained as its definition is deemed too transgressive, since it does not describe only a physical experience. The way it is used by *l’écriture féminine* offers such interpretations of the term: sexual pleasure and climax, metaphysical fulfilment of desire, “fusion of the erotic, the mystical, and the political.”⁴³ Both Cixous and Irigaray agree that the rediscovery of the repressed female sexuality is through female *jouissance*. The feminine *jouissance*, however, cannot be expressed through the phallogentric language, writing, and structures, where the female is repressed, therefore they call for the emergence of writing that is innately feminine.

The following chapters are going to explore the expression of female sexuality and sensuality in the poetry of Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich, using the mentioned works of *l’écriture féminine* as its theoretical foundation. It will focus on the parallel forms of female body and the body of the poem, tracing the feminine structures in the poets’ expression and the respective realizations of *jouissance* in their poetry. Firstly, the work of Anne Sexton is going to be introduced, followed by the analysis of three of her poems: “Her Kind,” “Rapunzel” and “In Celebration of My Uterus.” Next, the focus of the thesis is going to move onto the work of Adrienne Rich, analysing two of her poems: “Diving into the Wreck” and “(Unnumbered, The Floating Poem).” The last concluding chapter will examine the similarities and differences in the expressions of the two poets based on the selected poems which are going to be analysed.

⁴² Irigaray, *The Sex Which Is Not One*, 28.

⁴³ Hélène Cixous, and Catherine Clément, “The Newly Born Woman,” *Theory and History of Literature* 24, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986): xvii.

3 Anne Sexton

The confessional school of poetry has been described as a “misnamed and misapprehended movement”⁴⁴ among other things. Such attributes might have been fitting for its contemporaries who resonated with them. Misnamed and misapprehended, confessional poets exposed the intimate, the private, desires and pains. The blatant “I” at the forefront of their writing served as a marker of the poet’s emotional authenticity and the revelation of the “self.” Anne Sexton, as most of her contemporaries, was not fond of the label of “confessional poet” at first, but later in her career spoke of herself as “the *only* confessional poet.”⁴⁵ And her critics agreed. Laurence Lerner wrote, “no poet was more consistently and uniformly confessional than Anne Sexton . . . her name has almost become identified with the genre.”⁴⁶ She was regarded the most daring among her peers and received the Pulitzer Prize in 1967.

Popular expressions used when describing the content and background of confessional poetry are taboos and traumas. Sexton was one of the first to write about these experiences from the female point of view. But as any labels gradually become more restrictive than expansive, the confessional marker often prevents readers of Sexton’s poetry from a full comprehension and appreciation of her poetic range. Her work is always placed on the scale of confessionality; some poems deemed the most confessional, some less, but always confessional. The label thus presupposes a ubiquitous personal link between the author and their work, which leads the reader through the path of continuously searching for a part of the poet’s hidden consciousness. They are then more prone to dismissing broader themes which are, as a result, lost through the confessional lens. Sexton spoke about this paradox in an

⁴⁴ Diana Hume George “An Overview of Sexton’s Canon,” in *Sexton: Selected Criticism*, ed. Diane Hume George (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), xvi.

⁴⁵ Anne Sexton, *A Self-Portrait in Letters* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), 372.

⁴⁶ Laurence Lerner, “What Is Confessional Poetry?” *Critical Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (1987): 52.

interview: "I've heard psychiatrists say, 'See, you've forgiven your father. There it is in your poem.' But I haven't forgiven my father. I just wrote that I did."⁴⁷

The limitations which Sexton's poetry is faced with do not arise only from the genre labels. Sexton herself was unable to leave her inner turmoil completely behind and so were her readers. Alongside the confessional label narrowing the reading of her work, her turbulent personal life and her subsequent ending of it also played a part. She has been criticized for her self-indulgence, even narcissism, yet those critics kept looking for subtle and obvious hints in her poetry to feed their fascination with Sexton's private life, always anticipating another revelation.

3.1 Sexton as a Feminist

Anne Sexton's position in the feminist discourse is complex. Although her writing career occurred in majority alongside the Women's liberation movement, Sexton never identified as a feminist nor was her work officially classified as such. In an interview with Patricia Marx, she rejected the feminist label:

Sometimes I feel like another creature, hardly a woman. I can't be a modern woman. I'm a Victorian teenager at heart. We [American women] have much more freedom and we speak up [...] I like to speak up.⁴⁸

Sexton turned from a housewife into a well regarded artist, a metamorphosis unprecedented for her time, yet she felt divided in the dual conflict between the roles of a poet and a woman. And when it came to her work, Sexton chose to be a poet. The year Anne Sexton died, Adrienne Rich spoke to her students on Sexton's legacy. She addressed Sexton's rich spectrum of themes which enact her struggles with the female experience, alluding to abortion, masturbation, mothers and daughters. Rich states that she wrote on these themes "long before such themes became validated by a collective of consciousness of women," all while "writing and

⁴⁷ Anne Sexton, "Craft Interview with Anne Sexton," in *The Craft of Poetry: Interviews from the New York Quarterly*, ed. William Packard (New York: Doubleday & Company, inc., 1974), 21-2.

⁴⁸ Patricia Marx and Anne Sexton, "Interview with Anne Sexton," *The Hudson Review* 18, no. 4 (1965): 566.

publishing under the scrutiny of the male literary establishment.”⁴⁹ Rich viewed Sexton as an unconscious, early and innate feminist, writing before the emergence of feminist poetry as a genre. At her time, she was an example of a female poet trapped among the internalized patriarchal structures which pressured women to choose between the professional and what was then considered feminine. Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* covered the struggles of the post-war housewife phenomenon. She writes that women of that time were to “pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets or physicists or presidents,” and that “truly feminine women” do not want higher education or careers.⁵⁰ Rich at the end of her speech adds, “[Sexton’s] head was often patriarchal, but in her blood and her bones, Anne Sexton knew.”⁵¹

Although all of Sexton’s work occurs before *l’écriture féminine*, the work anticipates it as a precondition. Her writing is not only intimate but visceral. The female body and its sexuality often stand at the forefront of her work and are realized both through the content and the form. Stephanie Demetrakopoulos writes on Sexton’s reoccurring theme of sexuality, “Sexton acknowledges her own developing womanhood, her own desire for fuller sexual consummation. She recognizes her own sexuality and fertility, her own personal yet transpersonal eros.”⁵² With her sexuality, she also explores and expresses her sexual pleasure – *jouissance* – but as the theory of *l’écriture féminine* argues, *jouissance* cannot be expressed through the masculine language which dominates the Western culture, as female language is more diffusive. In *A Self-Portrait in Letters* Sexton writes about her discovery of “the language”:

⁴⁹ Adrienne Rich and Lynn Emanuel, "Anne Sexton: 1928—1974," *The American Poetry Review* 41, no. 6 (2012): 7.

⁵⁰ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, (New York: Norton, 1963), 11.

⁵¹ Adrienne Rich and Lynn Emanuel, "Anne Sexton: 1928—1974," 7.

⁵² Stephanie Demetrakopoulos, "Goddess Manifestations as Stages in Feminine Metaphysics in the Poetry and Life of Anne Sexton," in *Sexton: Selected Criticism*, ed. Diane Hume George (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 128.

It is hard to define. When I was first sick I was thrilled [...] to get into the Nut House. At first, of course, I was just scared and crying and very quiet (who me!) but then I found this girl (very crazy of course) (like me I guess) who talked language. What a relief! [...] [husband] Kayo has never once understood one word of language.⁵³

It is difficult to distinguish what exactly Sexton means by “language” in this excerpt however, what is obvious here, and concurs with *l’écriture féminine*, is that she found the shared language with another woman, which her husband was unable to understand. Diane Middlebrook interprets the “language” as such: “By ‘language,’ Sexton seems to mean forms of speech in which meaning is condensed and indirect and where breaks and gaps demand as much interpretation as what is voiced. [...] ‘figurative language’ is the term Sexton might have used here, [...] Being permitted to communicate in ‘language’ made her feel ‘real.’”⁵⁴

Figurative language served Sexton as a bridge to her unconscious. Hélène Cixous in “The Laugh of the Medusa” described the female unconscious as “limitless” and “the place where the repressed manage to survive.”⁵⁵ In the unconscious, then, resides the repressed which in a woman’s case is – to a certain degree – her sexuality. It thus implies that Sexton’s familiarity with psychoanalysis enabled her to access these repressions, which were consequently expressed through the themes of sexuality and womanhood in her poetry. Sexton herself once stated “poetry, after all, milks the unconscious,”⁵⁶ affirming the fact that her poetic consciousness and personal unconscious are intertwined. Sexton’s analogy of “milking” the unconscious is particularly compelling, as it is directly linked to the female body. She indicates an exclusively female form of communication which travels from the unconscious through the female body and is “milked” onto the page. By strongly connecting the unconscious with the maternal body, she resists Freud’s phallogentric portrayal of the female consciousness and

⁵³ Sexton, *A Self-Portrait in Letters*, 244.

⁵⁴ Diane Wood Middlebrook, “Housewife into Poet: The Apprenticeship of Anne Sexton,” *The New England Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (1983): 486-7.

⁵⁵ Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 879-80.

⁵⁶ Barbara Kevles, “Anne Sexton, The Art of Poetry No. 15,” *The Paris Review*, Summer 1971, <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4073/the-art-of-poetry-no-15-anne-sexton>.

unconsciousness which is fixated on the lack of the phallus. The focus of *l'écriture féminine* is alike. They both bring the feminine back to the mother's body, opposing the "lack" and "penis envy" embedded in femininity by the psychoanalytic discourse. Hélène Cixous asserts that it is through poetic language and writing that one can "realize the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality and give her access to her native strength."⁵⁷ Sexton thus accesses her native strengths, she revives the mother and writes in her language. She directly corroborates Cixous, "[t]here is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink."⁵⁸

This chapter is going to be looking at three poems of Anne Sexton: "Her Kind," "Rapunzel" and "In Celebration of My Uterus." They are going to be analysed in respect to women's writing with the main focus on Sexton's expression of female sexuality. Each poem has been chosen to represent different aspects of women's sexuality which Sexton embodies through her work, such as motherhood, reconstruction of the myth and the physical body. It is going to illustrate Sexton's inclination to non-linear structures and conjuring the female and textual body. Additionally, this chapter is going to demonstrate how Sexton's personal often transgresses onto the communal, as a result of themes explored as well as her choice of language, thus further pushing the boundaries of the confessional genre.

3.2 "Her Kind"

"Her Kind" counts among Anne Sexton's most recognized poems. It was included in her first published collection *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960), which almost did not survive the scrutiny of her then teacher John Holmes. "It bothers me that you use poetry this way" and "[d]on't publish it in a book. You'll certainly outgrow it,"⁵⁹ he wrote to Sexton in a

⁵⁷ Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 880.

⁵⁸ Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 881.

⁵⁹ Middlebrook, "Housewife into Poet: The Apprenticeship of Anne Sexton," (Correspondence of Anne Sexton with John Holmes, 11 February 1959 [misdated by Sexton 1958], Anne Sexton Archive, Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin; permission to quote courtesy of Linda Sexton.), 493.

response letter to *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*. Of course, against his advice, Sexton published her collection with a dedication to Holmes included. This collection then later became a hallmark of confessional poetry and the outset of Sexton's successful career.

Jo Gill in "Anne Sexton and Confessional Poetics" reads "Her Kind" as an account of Sexton's position among the poetry discourse and interprets the poem as the speaker embracing "her distinctive role as a poet of disorder, extremity, and excess,"⁶⁰ and as a punishment "for writing in a new distinctive way."⁶¹ However, "Her Kind" is one of Sexton's poems which accomplishes to tackle much broader themes outside of Sexton's personal experience as a poet. The three-stanza poem introduces three scenes, each opened with an "I," while altering between different personas. In the first, Sexton's narrator takes on a form of a witch. Sexton revisits her witch multiple times throughout her poetry. In *Transformations*, her prologue poem introduces "a middle-aged witch, me."⁶² This statement cannot go without the note of Sexton's self-identification with the witch character. Consequently, Alicia Ostriker associates Sexton's witch persona with a mother figure, she is one "who talks like a den mother."⁶³ The witch serves as a central image for the character's further development and through her, she tackles the role of a mother while still preserving her witch form.

The second stanza of "Her Kind" opens up with "I have found the warm caves in the woods,"⁶⁴ Sexton interchanges the safety of a home for a cave, a place more fitting for a witch. Through this image, she emphasizes the speaker's estrangement. She revisits the myth of the cave, which has accompanied women in the literary canon for centuries. The cave, a "warm den," is interpreted in the feminine reading as a symbol for the womb, the uterus. When Irigaray

⁶⁰ Jo Gill, "Anne Sexton and Confessional Poetics," *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, 55, no. 220 (2004): 437.

⁶¹ Gill, "Anne Sexton and Confessional Poetics," 438.

⁶² Anne Sexton, *The Complete Poems* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 223.

⁶³ Alicia Ostriker, "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionists Mythmaking," *Signs* 8, no. 1 (1982), 86.

⁶⁴ Sexton, *The Complete Poems*, 15.

reassesses the story of Antigone, on her imprisonment she writes, “alone in her crypt, her cave, her den, her womb.”⁶⁵ For Antigone, the punishment is turning her womanness against her. She is walled alive in the cave, punished for her *jouissance* and, by at least partially reclaiming it back, she takes her own life. Whilst Sophocles’s Antigone is imprisoned in her cave forcefully, Sexton’s speaker comes here voluntarily at first. Regardless of her intentions, she feels alien, “misunderstood,” to what she finds inside and is eventually imprisoned by its occupants, although in her case, only metaphorically. Just like Sexton’s speaker, Antigone is not ashamed to die. By voicing “woman like this is not ashamed to die,”⁶⁶ the speaker does not try to justify herself against the alienation of motherhood she feels. She is not only mothering these aliens in her cave, but perhaps is trying to stress that *she* is the alien to them and most importantly, to herself. Adrienne Rich in her work *Of Woman Born* writes that motherhood “has alienated women from our bodies by incarcerating us in them.”⁶⁷ Both Sexton’s speaker and Antigone are incarcerated in their caves, their wombs, but while Antigone is unable to fully liberate herself, the speaker of the poem finds her way.

The speaker is trying to reclaim her identity as a woman, unchaining the motherhood which steals the woman away and gives it to someone else – the child. Luce Irigaray in *Speculum of the Other Woman* writes that for men, motherhood is the only “access to woman’s sexual desire.”⁶⁸ This effectively reduces woman’s sexual pleasure into the role of mother and creates a steadfast knot which women have for so long tried to untangle. In the second stanza, Sexton’s speaker expresses an instance where “the mother, once again, will have masked the woman.”⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 218.

⁶⁶ Sexton, *The Complete Poems*, 16.

⁶⁷ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986), 13.

⁶⁸ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 107.

⁶⁹ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 117.

Detangled from the ropes of motherhood and other social constructs that confined her, the poem's speaker begins her last voyage in the third stanza:

I have ridden in your cart, driver,
waved my nude arms at villages going by,
learning the last bright routes, survivor
where your flames still bite my thigh
and my ribs crack where your wheels wind.⁷⁰

She is her witch again, riding to her death by torture and, at last, flames. Yet, there is no sign of distress in the speaker's voice. Through the witch trials allegory, which ultimately result in her death, the death might be only metaphorical too. As she is waving her naked arms proudly, one can notice a sense of liberation. She is almost flamboyant, an entertainer. Greg Johnson reads her behaviour as "embracing madness in order to domesticate it for the rest of the community."⁷¹ The speaker comes to terms with herself by rejecting the socially constructed duties thrust upon her. It is an illustration of an instance where "the resistance takes place in the form of" her rediscovered "*jouissance*."⁷²

By repetition of the final line "I have been her kind,"⁷³ Sexton introduces another example of what Cixous regards an essential feature of *l'écriture féminine*. As previously mentioned, Cixous asserts that feminine writing and *jouissance* is cyclical, rather than linear. It does not have a solid start nor end, "without ending: there is no closure."⁷⁴ Sexton hence visits those images only to return and make a full circle through the repetition of the line. However, the cycle is not necessarily personal. By stating "I have been her kind" she removes the perspective of her sole individual experience, and implies that this is not only her personal issue, she is merely a kind, a type, one of those who endure these experiences. With this simple repetitive line Sexton's cycle extends far beyond the personal and becomes social.

⁷⁰ Sexton, *The Complete Poems*, 16.

⁷¹ Greg Johnson, "The Achievement of Anne Sexton," in *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale*, ed. Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 176.

⁷² Jones, "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of 'L'Écriture Feminine,'" 248.

⁷³ Sexton, *The Complete Poems*, 15.

⁷⁴ Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?" 53.

Sexton relates the estrangement from her sexuality with the estrangement from motherhood. “Her Kind” embodies the journey of this realization. She addresses the issue of reducing women into their reproductive years, hence being forced into motherhood to validate their existence, while obliterating their identities. She tells a story of resisting this pattern while acknowledging the social consequences a woman will face: “A woman like that is not a woman, quite.”⁷⁵ Through the witch character, she hyperbolically emphasizes the fact that womanhood is confined within motherhood, denoting that a woman needs to be inhabited, otherwise she will stay empty. Sexton turns this concept and advocates that in order for women to claim their female and sexual identity, they need to inhabit their own bodies, move inward, to have their sexuality back at reach.

3.3 “Rapunzel”

“Rapunzel” is one of the 16 Grimm fairy-tales retold by Sexton in the collection *Transformations* (1971). Sexton modifies these tales, proposing a transgressive narrative of stories only possible because of their firm embedding in our collective consciousness since childhood. Sexton deconstructs these myths, only to put them back together, with her personal twist on their symbolic demeanour. According to Ostriker she “decodes stories we thought we knew” and “reveals meanings we should have guessed.”⁷⁶ In Sexton’s version of “Rapunzel,” she makes her objective to re-explore the relationship between older and younger women. The tropes of the wicked witches, old women, mothers and stepmothers are abundantly reoccurring throughout fairy-tales, myths and history. However, their relationship with their younger and fairer counterparts is most often reciprocally repulsive. Kay Turner argues that scholars rarely engage with the idea “that might impel readers to take account of attractions, rather than

⁷⁵ Sexton, *The Complete Poems*, 15.

⁷⁶ Ostriker, “The Thieves of Language,” 85.

repulsions, between witches and maidens.”⁷⁷ The model relationship of old and younger women is both archetypal and complex and most often, this relationship is demarcated by the mother/grandmother-daughter/granddaughter bond. Sexton remodels this relationship in “Rapunzel,” and while she maintains the family dynamics to preserve the original narrative of the tale, she explores the potential of female relationships between Rapunzel and Gothel, and thus transforms the typical narrative by allowing for a romantic bond between the two female characters to develop.

Matilde Martín González writes that Sexton’s retelling of the Grimm tales in *Transformations* “emphasizes the sexist and reductionist framework in which women have been cast and portrayed within configuration of two polarized archetypes.”⁷⁸ In “Rapunzel,” the transgression of this framework takes place in the form of homosexual relationship between Rapunzel and Gothel. González calls their relationship “explicitly homosexual,” and regards it “sufficiently transparent”⁷⁹ right from the opening prologue of the poem:

A woman
who loves a woman
is forever young.
The mentor
and the student
feed off each other.
Many a girl
had an old aunt
who locked her in the study
to keep the boys away.
They would play rummy
or lie on the couch
and touch and touch.
Old breast against young breast...⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Kay Turner and Pauline Greenhill, *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms*, Series in Fairy-Tale Studies (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012), 246.

⁷⁸ Matilde Martín González, “Fairy Tales Revisited and Transformed: Anne Sexton’s Critique of Social(ized) Femininity,” *REDEN: Spanish Journal of North American Studies*, no. 17-18 (1999): 7, <http://hdl.handle.net/10017/5023>.

⁷⁹ González, “Fairy Tales Revisited and Transformed,” 17.

⁸⁰ Sexton, *The Complete Poems*, 246.

Christa M. Joyce writes that the relationship of the two women “infuses each with sense of beauty and strength.”⁸¹ This is represented by the first lines: “A woman / who loves a woman / is forever young”⁸² which transforms the original narrative of the older witch parasitizing on the maiden’s youth and creates a reciprocal relationship where both women flourish. Subsequently, this line is repeated throughout the poem to emphasize the reciprocity and the nature of the two women’s relationship.

In the original tale, Gothel takes young Rapunzel and decides to step into the place of Rapunzel’s mother. Yet in Sexton’s poem, their relationship far exceeds that of a mother and a daughter. In “Rapunzel,” both the fairy-tale and Sexton’s poem, the two women are not biologically bound, yet Gothel is called “Mother Gothel.” Their relationship carries the aspects of what can be regarded as both maternal and amorous. “Hold me, my young dear, hold me, / and thus they played mother-me-do.”⁸³ Gothel wants to protect Rapunzel as much as to feel protected, held. This “mother-me-do” is thus reciprocal and many times over the narrator paints the two women as equal, rather than emphasizing their differences. “We are two clouds / glistening in the bottle glass. / We are two birds / washing in the same mirror. / We were fair game.”⁸⁴ What their affinity suggests is that the maternal aspects of their relationship supplant the elemental, primal female love and care, rather than incestuous relationship. In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich writes, “[t]he first knowledge any woman has of warmth, nourishment, tenderness, security, sensuality, mutuality, comes from her mother, [...] but institutionalized heterosexuality and motherhood demand that the girl-child transfer those first feelings of dependency, eroticism, mutuality, from her first woman to a man,”⁸⁵ unlike heterosexual men

⁸¹ Christa Mastrangelo Joyce, “Contemporary Women Poets and the Fairy Tale” in *Fairy Tales Reimagined: Essays on New Retellings*, ed. Susan Redington Bobby (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2009), 38.

⁸² Sexton, *The Complete Poems*, 246.

⁸³ Sexton, *The Complete Poems*, 248.

⁸⁴ Sexton, *The Complete Poems*, 246.

⁸⁵ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 218.

who then continue to rely on the female sex for fulfilment. The relationship of two women is thus explored via qualities of motherhood where both of the women carry those qualities. These traits are then released from being exclusively tied to motherhood and are rather viewed as nurturing and caring, and thus used to explore their respective sexualities and romantic relationship.

Although an explicit sexual relationship among them is not directly disclosed, Irigaray's theory that "woman has sex organs just about everywhere" and "finds pleasure almost anywhere"⁸⁶ proposes a deeper experience of female pleasure accessible not only through sexual intercourse, but through any physical interaction. Although, when the speaker encourages the addressee "[g]ive me your nether lips,"⁸⁷ the "lips" being nether and in plural points to the other lips on a woman's body. When Irigaray speaks of "lips," she speaks exclusively of the labia, which she regards as one among many sexual organs and mediums through which women experience sexual pleasure. These lines carry their softness yet propose a physical sexual exploration of their bodies. The poem then progresses in the usual course of the fairy-tale where the prince appears to the rescue.

Alicia Ostriker comments that relationship of Rapunzel and Gothel has been "ultimately doomed by heterosexual normality."⁸⁸ González also agrees on the poem's criticism of heteronormativity, as she suggests that the women's behaviour implies "the defiance of masculine rules" and "explicit resistance of disciplinary power, as they are dismissing heterosexuality and the social consequences involved in it."⁸⁹ Additionally, González views the consequent marriage in the poem as "patriarchal culture [trying] to silence the existence of lesbians."⁹⁰ The criticism of heterosexuality as normative is a topic widely

⁸⁶ Irigaray, *The Sex Which Is Not One*, 28.

⁸⁷ Sexton, *The Complete Poems*, 245.

⁸⁸ Ostriker, "The Thieves of Language," 85.

⁸⁹ González, "Fairy Tales Revisited and Transformed," 18.

⁹⁰ González, "Fairy Tales Revisited and Transformed," 18.

criticized during the second wave feminism. A term coined as “compulsory heterosexuality” is defined by Susan Birden in *Rethinking Sexual Identity in Education* as “an institution that both forcibly and subliminally imposes heterosexual ‘preference’ on women, ensuring males’ rights of physical, economic, and emotional access to women.”⁹¹ Birden relates to Adrienne Rich’s essay which popularized the topic titled “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” There Rich refers to heterosexuality as a “political institution”⁹² which has been used as a tool of male domination to subdue women in merely all aspects of their lives, from their sexual identity, pleasure, to motherhood and economical wage gap. As an ideology, Birden writes, it subdues homoerotic attraction as well as androgynous gender expression, which withdraws “from essentialized ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ social norms.”⁹³ In “Rapunzel,” Sexton creates a narrative which predicts the obligation of heterosexual normativity over homosexual attraction and uses the concept of compulsory heterosexuality to criticize it.

Sexton hints at Rapunzel’s involuntary fate throughout all her interactions with the prince. The prince passes by and hears Rapunzel “singing in her loneliness”⁹⁴ and assumes that such loneliness must only be caused by the absence of a man. She is eventually tricked into letting her hair down, under the impression that it is Gothel who is calling her. When she first sees him, she thinks “[w]hat is this beast,”⁹⁵ comparing his muscles to snakes and facial hair to prickly plant, but even against her reluctance, he “dazzled her with his dancing stick.”⁹⁶ At the end, Sexton implies irony in the fairy-tale happy ending “[t]hey lived happily as you might expect,”⁹⁷ emphasizing and criticizing the traditional bind of a heterosexual relationship as the only and right path to woman’s emotional fulfilment. Joyce adds that in this line, Sexton

⁹¹ Susan Birden, *Rethinking Sexual Identity in Education* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), 7.

⁹² Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” *Signs* 5, no. 4 (Summer 1980): 637.

⁹³ Birden, *Rethinking Sexual Identity in Education*, 7.

⁹⁴ Sexton, *The Complete Poems*, 248.

⁹⁵ Sexton, *The Complete Poems*, 248.

⁹⁶ Sexton, *The Complete Poems*, 248.

⁹⁷ Sexton, *The Complete Poems*, 249.

“leaves the relationship between man and woman flat,” by “creating a dichotomy between the beautifully described world of the women and the new life.”⁹⁸ In the next lines Sexton adds, “proving that mother-me-do / can be outgrown,”⁹⁹ which proposes the idea that heterosexuality is a learned behaviour that one can accommodate, and homosexuality is possible to outgrow, implying its connection to youthful, naïve behaviour. Nancy Chodorow states in *The Reproduction of Mothering* that “[l]esbian relationships do tend to recreate mother-daughter emotions and connections, but most women are heterosexual.”¹⁰⁰ This statement dismisses a possibility of mature lesbian relationships, displays them as invalid and implies that the heterosexual women are the “more mature, having developed beyond the mother-daughter relationship,”¹⁰¹ highlighting a heterosexual relationship as the goal towards which every woman should evolve. This point is hence criticized by Sexton as well, in the line quoted above.

Despite Sexton’s delicate reworking of the tale, the poem does not completely erase the power imbalance preconditioned by the original tale. This then poses a paradox to the loving and gentle relationship Sexton has created. In the fairy-tale, Gothel is a predator who locks Rapunzel in a doorless tower and parasitizes on her youth. This aspect of the original fairy-tale is easy to forget, because of Sexton’s tender portrayal of the women’s relationship and the subsequent satire of marriage which evidently criticizes heteronormativity. Paulina Korzeniewska-Nowakowska calls the relationship between Gothel and Rapunzel “[e]rotic and toxic” yet their “relationship is presented in a loving, almost tender, way.”¹⁰² Most critical works concerning themselves with Sexton’s “Rapunzel” do focus on the lesbian bond between the two women and interpret it as fulfilling and mutual, which has been obliterated in the

⁹⁸ Joyce, “Contemporary Women Poets and the Fairy Tale,” 39.

⁹⁹ Sexton, *The Complete Poems*, 249.

¹⁰⁰ Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), 200.

¹⁰¹ Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience,” 636.

¹⁰² Paulina Korzeniewska-Nowakowska, “Revisiting the fairy land: Anne Sexton’s transformation of the Grimms’ female characters,” *CROSSROADS: A Journal of English Studies* (January 2015): 19, <https://doi.org/10.15290/cr.2015.10.3.02>.

original fairy-tale.¹⁰³ Their interpretation thus suggests that Sexton's focus was also on depicting reciprocal romance between younger and older women whose relationship got doomed by heteronormative narrative, rather than depicting a story which portrays lesbian relationship as a predatory one. Regardless of the intention, it is important to remain aware of the problems which reworking of such tales faces.

Sexton through *Gothel* emphasizes the fact that the expression of sexuality in phallogocentric society is even more non-existent for older, mature women, as they have passed both their adolescent years of sexual exploration as well as their childbearing years. *Gothel* is no longer viewed as desirable. Sexton criticizes the traditional heteronormative narrative through purely female romance, where the witch and maiden rediscover themselves and their sexuality through mutual love. Sexton clearly recognizes that in order for the female sexual rediscovery to occur, she must start with the primal, first stories anyone is told and oppose the masculine narrative by articulating the female. She retells these myths "so that they no longer stand as foundations of collective male fantasy,"¹⁰⁴ but rather embrace *jouissance*, and create "female-sexed texts,"¹⁰⁵ to reclaim their sexual bodies.

3.4 "In Celebration of My Uterus"

"In Celebration of My Uterus" was first published in 1969 in the collection *Love Poems*. Diane Middlebrook wrote that the collection "gave American literature its first fully sexual heroine."¹⁰⁶ The collection effectively maps a woman's journey from redirecting the love that she gives onto herself. Poems of romance, rejection, pain and self-centred passion alternate to oppose the linear structures and accentuate the cyclical nature of this journey, thus marking it

¹⁰³ All pieces of criticism cited in this chapter which focus on analysis of "Rapunzel," that is: González, Joyce, Ostriker.

¹⁰⁴ Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 215.

¹⁰⁵ Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 877.

¹⁰⁶ Diane Wood Middlebrook, "Foreword" in *Love Poems*, by Anne Sexton (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), vii.

as essentially female. The poem “In Celebration of My Uterus” follows a similar pattern of form.

Structurally, in four stanzas Sexton moves from personal to communal and back to personal. The poem commences with a speaker addressing her uterus, “[t]hey wanted to cut you out / but they will not. / They said you were immeasurably empty / but you are not. / They said you were sick unto dying / but they were wrong.”¹⁰⁷ Her uterus becomes her addressee. She personifies what is already a part of the female multiple. This conversation introduces a narrative of a proposed hysterectomy procedure of a woman coming into a menopause or simply maturing over her childbearing years. Myra Stark describes the tone of the first stanza as “in denial of those who would claim her womb is sick, old, empty.”¹⁰⁸ In this stanza, Sexton implies the patriarchal definition of female sexuality and worth being delineated by her reproductive abilities and consequently, the hysterization of women. By ironically stating “[t]here is enough here to please a nation,”¹⁰⁹ Sexton also implies her body exists and functions in the favour of society rather than herself. She writes that “the populace own these goods,”¹¹⁰ emphasizing the limited choice a woman has over her body.

Although female sexuality is, according to *l'écriture féminine*, manifold,¹¹¹ it is also intertwined. Women's sexuality thus cannot be reduced nor separated. By being robbed of her uterus, by what can only be assumed are at that time male physicians, the same social group through which she is reduced onto one part of her visceral body, she is therefore robbed of her sexuality as a whole. Because paradoxically, Ostriker writes, “the biological condition which is conventionally seen as most imprisoning woman,” meaning the uterus, “may also be seen as

¹⁰⁷ Sexton, *The Complete Poems*, 181.

¹⁰⁸ Myra Stark, “Walt Whitman and Anne Sexton,” in *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale*, ed. Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 242.

¹⁰⁹ Sexton, *The Complete Poems*, 182.

¹¹⁰ Sexton, *The Complete Poems*, 182.

¹¹¹ Irigaray, *The Sex Which Is Not One*, 64.

empowering her.”¹¹² The poem’s speaker then argues for both her identity and sexuality to be unbound from the quality of reproduction, as she is still full of life she states: “You are singing like a school girl. / You are not torn.”¹¹³

In stanza three, Sexton uses her personal body analogy and expands it onto the woman that occurs universally, stressing the unifying power of womanhood. The speaker uses an anaphora of “one” to characterize the many shapes of a woman around the world:

Many women are singing together of this:
one is in a shoe factory cursing the machine,
one is at the aquarium tending a seal,
one is dull at the wheel of her Ford,
one is at the toll gate collecting,
one is tying the cord of a calf in Arizona,
one is straddling a cello in Russia,
one is shifting pots on the stove in Egypt,
one is painting her bedroom walls moon color,
one is dying but remembering a breakfast,
one is stretching on her mat in Thailand,
one is wiping the ass of her child,
one is staring out the window of a train¹¹⁴

The speaker uses the possession of the uterus as a collective female quality which they share as a uniting trait. Alicia Ostriker writes that this stanza does not only represent “[the] abundance and fertility of the poet’s imagination,” but also by “inventing her group of women of all types, from all regions of the globe” Sexton creates “an extension of her uterine health.”¹¹⁵ She thus assents to Cixous’s characterization of woman’s omnipresence, “[a]s a subject for history, woman always occurs simultaneously in several places [...] In woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well as national and world history...”¹¹⁶ Sexton geographizes female *jouissance* across time and space and its diverse multiplicity which the shared uterus provides. At the same time, the anaphora which occurs both here and in the fourth

¹¹² Ostriker, *Stealing the Language*, 113.

¹¹³ Sexton, *The Complete Poems*, 182.

¹¹⁴ Sexton, *The Complete Poems*, 182.

¹¹⁵ Ostriker, *Stealing the Language*, p. 112.

¹¹⁶ Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 883.

stanza once again demonstrates Sexton's opposition to linear structures, tracing the endless feminine textual body.

In the fourth stanza the speaker declares her longing for life and all its possibilities:

Sweet weight,
in celebration of the woman I am
let me carry a ten-foot scarf,
let me drum for the nineteen-year-olds,
let me carry bowls for the offering
(if that is my part).
Let me study the cardiovascular tissue,
let me examine the angular distance of meteors,
let me suck on the stems of flowers
(if that is my part).
Let me make certain tribal figures
(if that is my part).
For this thing the body needs¹¹⁷

By the repetition of "let me," her womanhood becomes limitless. The speaker describes her longing as a bodily craving, "[f]or this thing the body needs."¹¹⁸ Her desire can thus be interpreted as an embodiment of her libido which then multiplies. If her desire is the libido, her fulfilment is *jouissance*. However, *l'écriture féminine* does not characterize *jouissance* only as sexual pleasure, but as having "simultaneously sexual, political and economic overtones."¹¹⁹ When Sexton's speaker says "[l]et me study the cardiovascular tissue, / let me examine the angular distance of meteors, / let me suck on the stems of flowers"¹²⁰ she lists different realizations of her *jouissance* which she wishes to fulfil. She demonstrates that unlike male, female pleasure comes from numerous sources. Again, she refuses to set on one singular narrative, accentuating heterogeneity of the physical and textual body.

In "In Celebration of My Uterus," Sexton comes closest to writing the body as she possibly can. Ostriker describes it as a "poem which finds unity where the culture propagates division: between a woman's sexuality and her spirituality, her creativity and her

¹¹⁷ Sexton, *The Complete Poems*, 183.

¹¹⁸ Sexton, *The Complete Poems*, 183.

¹¹⁹ Mary Eagleton, ed., *Feminist Literary Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 227.

¹²⁰ Sexton, *The Complete Poems*, 183.

procreativity.”¹²¹ “In Celebration of My Uterus” thus represents a unity of a female form. Sexton “writes the body” with all its features, intertwining, creating a final form which mimics the female physical body, and subsequently creates the feminine textual body just as Cixous defines it; “a system of spending not necessarily carved out by culture, and “recognized by the fact that it is always endless, without ending: there's no closure.”¹²²

¹²¹ Ostriker, *Stealing the Language*, 111.

¹²² Cixous, “Castration or Decapitation?” 53.

4 Adrienne Rich

Adrienne Rich met recognition as a poet fairly early into her career. Her first published poetry collection, *A Change of World* (1951), won the Yale Younger Poets Award. Rich was just finishing her degree at the Radcliffe College when she was selected as a winner by the senior poet W. H. Auden. Auden chose to write a foreword to the collection, in which he states that “the poems a reader will encounter in this book are neatly and modestly dressed, speak quietly but do not mumble, respect their elders but are not cowed by them, and do not tell fibs: that, for a first volume, is a good deal.”¹²³ Auden’s tone, as Rich’s elder colleague, seems rather patronizing. However, he was right in the fact that Rich did, in her early poetry, follow the tradition of her seniors – Modernist poets, including Auden. Amy Sickles describes the poems of *A Change of World* as “tidy, metrical and quiet,” and an example of a work where Rich “had not yet discovered her own poetic voice.”¹²⁴ Rich, as a reaction to the reviews of the collection, declared that she hated when her poems were described as “neat” and from now on, she would “aim for extravagant messiness.”¹²⁵

The significant break from her neatness arrived with *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963). By this time, Rich was married and had given birth to three sons before the age of thirty. According to Sickles, *Snapshots* “was the first foreshadowing of what would become Adrienne Rich’s dramatic transformation from a housewife to a radical lesbian-feminist.”¹²⁶ In an essay “Split at the Root,” Rich wrote that “[t]he experience of motherhood was eventually to radicalize me.”¹²⁷ Rich got married and became a mother in the normative post-war 50s where the white nuclear family living in the suburbs, in a house with white picket fence, was the ultimate blueprint for a happy life. Women got married unprecedentedly young and took

¹²³ W. H. Auden, “Foreword to A Change of World” in *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose: Poems, Prose, Reviews, and Criticism*, ed. Barbara C. Gelpi, Albert Gelpi (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 278-9.

¹²⁴ Amy Sickles, *Adrienne Rich* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2005), 25.

¹²⁵ Hilary Holladay, *The Power of Adrienne Rich: A Biography* (New York: Doubleday, 2020), 201.

¹²⁶ Sickles, *Adrienne Rich*, 2.

¹²⁷ Adrienne Rich, *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979-1985* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), 117.

up the role of a housewife, leaving the prospect of a career in the realm of dreams, and furthermore, women who chose to pursue a career over the care for children, husband and household were pitied. Betty Friedan in *Feminine Mystique* gives an account of an accurate image of what life for white, middle-class women looked like at that time: “For the first time in history, American young women in great numbers are being faced with these questions: Shall I voluntarily prepare myself for a lifelong celibate career? Or shall I prepare for a temporary vocation, which I shall give up when I marry and assume the responsibilities of homemaking and motherhood? Or should I attempt to combine homemaking and a career?”¹²⁸ Friedan accounts for the women’s “great unfulfilled need to create, and achieve, and realize their own individuality.”¹²⁹

Hilary Holladay writes that Rich during her marriage became an “anonymous suburban housewife, alone much of the time with her young son and deprived of the intellectual camaraderie that was her lifeblood”¹³⁰ and that for her, “the roles of mother and poet were in direct conflict.”¹³¹ Rich’s struggle with motherhood is best recorded in her collection of essays called *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Institution and Experience* (1976). In this book, Rich examines the complexities of motherhood in the Western masculine, patriarchal culture which has made motherhood into an institution. According to Rich, motherhood “creates the dangerous schism between ‘private’ and ‘public’ life,”¹³² which corresponded with one of her broader arguments discussed throughout her work that “the personal is political.” She intertwined criticism with autobiographical passages to recall her struggles and allow for deeper relation to other women and mothers who would be reading it. However, at the time of its publication, the feedback the book was met with was not just positive. Helen Vendler, one

¹²⁸ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 120.

¹²⁹ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 213.

¹³⁰ Holladay, *The Power of Adrienne Rich*, 341.

¹³¹ Holladay, *The Power of Adrienne Rich*, 407.

¹³² Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 13.

of Rich's regular critics, has slated the collection as a "partisan writing" and "autobiography being retold by a convinced feminist, reinterpreting her past in the light of her present convictions."¹³³ Nevertheless, the collection has become one of the ground works for the development of Women's Studies and one of Rich's most significant pieces of non-fiction.

4.1 The Feminist Awakening

Evident from her past, Adrienne Rich was not born a radical feminist. During the 1960s, Rich, according to Holladay, "believed fighting racism and class divisions was more important than women's issues."¹³⁴ Her friend at the time, Robin Morgan, described her as "not a feminist," and "the last person to call herself a feminist at that point. She was one of those people who take great pains to say, 'I'm no feminist, but—'"¹³⁵ Yet Rich started to attend meetings of radical feminists with Morgan, where she observed and listened to like-minded women, which did not leave her unaffected. Holladay writes that she slowly "felt the tectonic plates of her interior life shifting."¹³⁶ After *Snapshots*, her following poetry collections *Necessities of Life* (1966) and *Leaflets* (1969) were overtly political, written as a reaction to the climate of the Civil Rights Movement and Vietnam War. But even while protesting war and racism, both in her poems and real life, Rich was questioning gender and sexual inequality. In an interview with David Montenegro, she said:

I was thinking about where sexuality belonged in all this. What is the connection between Vietnam and the lovers' bed? If this insane violence is being waged against a very small country by this large and powerful country in which I live, what does that have to do with sexuality and with what's going on between men and women, which I felt also as a struggle even then? I was married. I was trying to define myself in a number of ways. I couldn't fit into the ... I couldn't find a model for the way I wanted to be, either in a relationship with a man or as a woman in the world. So when the women's movement began to crystallize from the Left and the Civil Rights movement, that was another and certainly one of the most powerful connections for me.¹³⁷

¹³³ Helen Vendler, "Myths for Mothers," *The New York Review of Books*, Sept. 30, 1976, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1976/09/30/myths-for-mothers/>.

¹³⁴ Holladay, *The Power of Adrienne Rich*, 571.

¹³⁵ Holladay, *The Power of Adrienne Rich*, 571.

¹³⁶ Holladay, *The Power of Adrienne Rich*, 570.

¹³⁷ David Montenegro, "Interview with Adrienne Rich" in *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose: Poems, Prose, Reviews, and Criticism*, ed. Barbara C. Gelpi, Albert Gelpi (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 263.

In the year 1970, Rich became officially involved with the Women's Liberation movement. "I had been looking for the Women's Liberation movement since the 1950s" she wrote, "I came into it in 1970."¹³⁸ It was the same year she decided to leave her husband, Alfred Conrad. Later in the year, he committed suicide. Rich rarely ever publicly spoke about his death.

After such a shifting moment of her life, Rich's political activism as a feminist only increased. She published *Diving into the Wreck*, her most successful poetry collection, in 1973 and came out as lesbian in 1974. She started to identify as a lesbian-feminist, an "identity which informed her politics, her personal life, and her poetry."¹³⁹ Rich stressed that unlike many women of the feminist and lesbian-separatist movement, she did not identify as a lesbian out of "a political act, but out of powerful and unmistakable feelings."¹⁴⁰ Her first openly lesbian collection *Twenty-One Love Poems* (1976) followed, where she ultimately managed to merge the personal with political. In 1980, Rich published what is perhaps her most controversial and radical essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," which has been introduced in the earlier chapter when looking at Sexton's "Rapunzel." In this essay, Rich suggests that "heterosexuality, like motherhood, needs to be recognized and studied as a political institution,"¹⁴¹ which had been posed upon women by patriarchy to oppress and control them for centuries. She dismisses heterosexuality as a preference and proclaims it as an obligation. The work criticizes heteronormativity and speaks on lesbian visibility, and even critiques neglect of lesbian existence in the feminist scholarship.

After her feminist "awakening," Rich used poetry to convey stories of exclusively female experiences. She perceived "the lesbian experience as being, like motherhood, a profoundly female,"¹⁴² and her poetic development represents the realization of the need for

¹³⁸ Rich, *Blood, Bread and Poetry*, vii.

¹³⁹ Sickles, *Adrienne Rich*, 75.

¹⁴⁰ Rich, *Blood, Bread and Poetry*, viii.

¹⁴¹ Rich, "Compulsive Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," 637.

¹⁴² Rich, "Compulsive Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," 650.

language to describe these female experiences, as she considered the patriarchal language used thus far “with excision of the female.”¹⁴³ According to Carol P. Christ, Rich “is particularly conscious of the role of language in articulating the new vision of what is.” She writes that Rich “celebrates the strength of women, the power of female values, and the importance of women’s love for each other and for themselves.”¹⁴⁴ Rich’s work challenges the patriarchal, phallogocentric and heterosexual discourse and brings forward a truly female-focused writing. In many ways, it pursues *l’écriture féminine* and substantiates its concepts. Likewise, what *l’écriture féminine* strives for – the deconstruction of language, writing of the female experience through women’s bodies – Rich considers her goal. In *Blood, Bread and Poetry*, she states:

To write directly and overtly as a woman, out of a woman's body and experience, to take women's existence seriously as theme and source for art, was something I had been hungering to do, needing to do, all my writing life. It placed me nakedly face to face with both terror and anger [...] But it released tremendous energy in me, as in many other women, to have that way of writing affirmed and validated in a growing political community. I felt for the first time the closing of the gap between poet and woman.¹⁴⁵

The following analysis of “Diving into the Wreck” and “(The Floating Poem, Unnumbered)” is going to explore the intricate ways through which Adrienne Rich conceptualizes female sexuality and experience, and how the poems answer to the philosophy of *l’écriture féminine* and serve as its prime example – by transforming the language within purely feminine and feminist focused discourse, as well as realization of what Cixous identifies as “feminine textual body.” The chapter is also going to map Rich’s development as a feminist-lesbian poet.

¹⁴³ Rich, *Blood, Bread and Poetry*, 3.

¹⁴⁴ Carol P. Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 95.

¹⁴⁵ Rich, *Blood, Bread and Poetry*, 182.

4.2 “Diving into the Wreck”

Diving into the Wreck (1973) has been Adrienne Rich’s breakthrough poetry collection. It did not only distinguish a major step in her career, as her first collection to receive national recognition in the form of the National Book Award, but also marked a significant shift in Rich as a poet. Claire Keyes calls the collection “clearly transitional,”¹⁴⁶ as Rich’s focus significantly and pressingly shifted to allegiance with womanhood. Dianne Hallman in “Re-Mythologizing Women's Sexuality: A Spiritual Quest” writes that in *Diving into the Wreck*, Rich “leaves the old territory of patriarchal symbol and carves out new mythical ground.”¹⁴⁷ As well as political, this collection is a reflection of Rich’s personal, sexual awakening, that is why *Diving into the Wreck* is often described as Rich’s turning point. On the first hardback edition, Rich wrote that the poems in this collection embodied “a coming-home to the darkest and richest source of my poetry: sex, sexuality, sexual wounds, sexual identity, sexual politics: many names for pieces of one whole.”¹⁴⁸

“Diving into the Wreck” has been called “one of the great poems of our time”¹⁴⁹ and “one of the most beautiful poems to come out of the women's movement.”¹⁵⁰ It has surely become Rich’s most memorable poem which is often anthologized. It opens up with a statement “first having read the book of myths,”¹⁵¹ which is later characterized as one in which “our names do not appear.”¹⁵² The book of myths is one of the main symbolic subjects of the poem. The book is not exactly named and therefore functions as a symbol of old beliefs, history and philosophies which no longer satisfy the speaker who has decided to set on a quest to find

¹⁴⁶ Claire Keyes, *The Aesthetics of Power: The Poetry of Adrienne Rich* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 136.

¹⁴⁷ Dianne Hallman, "Re-Mythologizing Women's Sexuality: A Spiritual Quest," *Journal of Thought* 31, no. 4 (1996): 44.

¹⁴⁸ Hilary Holladay, *The Power of Adrienne Rich: A Biography* (New York: Doubleday, 2020), 654.

¹⁴⁹ Ruth Whitman, “On ‘Diving into the Wreck,’” *Modern American Poetry*, published February, 2016, www.modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/ruth-whitman-diving-wreck.

¹⁵⁰ Cheryl Walker, “Trying to Save the Skein” in *Reading Adrienne Rich: Reviews and Re-Visions, 1951-81*, ed. Jane Roberta Cooper (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984), 229.

¹⁵¹ Adrienne Rich, *Collected Poems: 1950-2012* (New York: Norton, 2016), 784.

¹⁵² Rich, *Collected Poems*, 790.

the truth. Erica Jong describes the myths as “old myths of patriarchy, the myths that perpetuate the battle between the sexes.”¹⁵³ The book of myths represents the patriarchal narrative of literature, even the phallogocentric structures which the speaker has recognized as a lie and therefore decides to uncover the “wreck.”

The wreck, as another major symbolic subject, stands for the truth long lost, forgotten and damaged, lying at the bottom of the sea. The speaker asserts, “I came to explore the wreck. / The words are purposes. / The words are maps. / I came to see the damage that was done / and the treasures that prevail.”¹⁵⁴ The speaker stresses that although there is an irreversible damage to the truth, there are still treasures that can be explored. Margaret Atwood notes that the wreck might be “beyond salvation though not beyond understanding.”¹⁵⁵ As the speaker dives deeper towards the wreck, they undergo a transformation. From an alien suit of “body-armor of black rubber / the absurd flippers / the grave and awkward mask”¹⁵⁶ they transform into the “mermaid whose dark hair / streams black, the merman in his armored body.”¹⁵⁷ They no longer feel crippled by their flippers as when they first entered the water, but rather “circle silently,” as they become accustomed to the water element as their native. The ungendered speaker is now proclaimed androgynous, as they “dive into the hold,” they say, “I am she: I am he.”¹⁵⁸

Androgyny is one of the main subjects accompanying both the poem and the collection. It comes as a difficult topic for this volume, as Rich denounced the concept later in her poetry. In *A Dream of Common Language*, published five years after, she acknowledges that “there are words I cannot choose again: / *humanism androgyny*.” She writes that although “such

¹⁵³ Erica Jong, “Visionary Anger” in *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry: The Poet on her Work, Reviews and Criticism*, ed. Barbara C. Gelpi, Albert Gelpi (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), 174.

¹⁵⁴ Rich, *Collected poems*, 788.

¹⁵⁵ Margaret Atwood, “Diving Into The Wreck,” *The New York Times*, December 30, 1973, 161, <https://www.nytimes.com/1973/12/30/archives/diving-into-the-wreck-by-adrienne-rich-rich.html>.

¹⁵⁶ Rich, *Collected Poems*, 784.

¹⁵⁷ Rich, *Collected Poems*, 789.

¹⁵⁸ Rich, *Collected Poems*, 789.

words have no shame in them, no diffidence, [...] their glint is too shallow.”¹⁵⁹ In *Of Woman Born*, Rich writes that “[a]ndrogyny’ has recently become a ‘good’ word (like ‘motherhood’ itself!) implying many things to many people, from bisexuality to a vague freedom from imposed sexual roles,”¹⁶⁰ and argues that radical feminism “is now speaking in terms of ‘post-androgynous’ society.”¹⁶¹ Even though such a realization speaks for Rich’s visible process of feminist evolvment, concerning her views on gender and sexuality which she actively reflects in her work, the first focus on androgyny in this volume leaves some of her critics puzzled. Claire Keyes writes that from *Diving into the Wreck* emerges “an angry feminist voice” and “Rich’s sense of herself as a sexual being – a woman who has been wounded” by the male domination.¹⁶² She calls her draw to androgyny “an old thinking.”¹⁶³ Carol P. Christ interprets the suggestion of androgyny in the poem as “a buried treasure, a centering vision of wholeness that might enable women and men to move beyond the deformed symbiosis of male power and female submission.”¹⁶⁴ She then comments on Rich’s later rejection of this concept, proposing it implies that “women accept that men have been part of the wholeness they seek,”¹⁶⁵ which is something Rich can no longer accept. So even though these critics do not consider the concept of androgyny in alignment with Rich’s politics or the nature of the collection, they do not strip it of meaning and importance, as the speaker of “Diving into the Wreck” clearly undergoes a significant and symbolic transformation.

Keyes speculates on the gender of the speaker in “Diving into the Wreck,” writing that one would assume the speaker to be a woman, as most of Rich’s speakers are women, yet emphasizes that “her handling of the speaker-diver persona defies any sexual

¹⁵⁹ Adrienne Rich, *A Dream of Common Language* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 66.

¹⁶⁰ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 76.

¹⁶¹ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 81.

¹⁶² Keyes, *The Aesthetics of Power: The Poetry of Adrienne Rich*, 133.

¹⁶³ Keyes, *The Aesthetics of Power: The Poetry of Adrienne Rich*, 135.

¹⁶⁴ Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest*, 81.

¹⁶⁵ Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest*, 84.

categorization,”¹⁶⁶ as during their descent they embody non-human forms, “[m]y flippers cripple me, / I crawl like an insect down the ladder.”¹⁶⁷ Keyes in the end concludes the speaker and diver as masculine, which stands opposite to the feminine element, the sea, which transforms as the diver descends deeper. She describes the descent as “entering into the eternal feminine as into the womb of a mother.” Keyes argues that as the poem progresses, it represents the fusion of powers, the masculine and feminine, resulting in androgyny.¹⁶⁸

Hélène Cixous in “The Laugh of the Medusa” introduces the concept of “universal bisexuality.” The way she defines it is not in the terms of “[making] love with both a man and a woman, it doesn’t mean she has two partners,”¹⁶⁹ but in the form of blending expression and possibility of extending into the other. This concept is then often understood as interchangeable with androgyny. The *bisexuality* which Cixous introduces is, in her words, “each one’s location in self of the presence-variously manifest and insistent according to each person, male or female-of both sexes, nonexclusion either of the difference or of one sex, and, from this ‘self-permission,’ multiplication of the effects of the inscription of desire, over all parts of my body and the other body.”¹⁷⁰ Cixous views bisexuality as a result of men freeing themselves from the fear of castration and women from the fear of decapitation. It will allow to “de-phallocalize” the body. This will result in unblocking of sexuality which is just as much feminine as masculine.¹⁷¹

Rich’s mermaid/merman, as they get closer to the wreck, thus represents the destruction of the myth which is the gender binary and phallogocentric narrative of history and symbolizes the ultimate blend of powers and the “possibility of extending into the other, [...] without

¹⁶⁶ Keyes, *The Aesthetics of Power: The Poetry of Adrienne Rich*, 152.

¹⁶⁷ Rich, *Collected Poems*, 786.

¹⁶⁸ Keyes, *The Aesthetics of Power: The Poetry of Adrienne Rich*, 152-3.

¹⁶⁹ Annette Kuhn, “Castration or Decapitation?” 55.

¹⁷⁰ Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 884.

¹⁷¹ Cixous, “Castration or Decapitation?” 51.

destroying the other.”¹⁷² The speaker in the 7th stanza states that they came for “the wreck and not the story of the wreck / the thing itself and not the myth,”¹⁷³ right before they transform into “the mermaid whose dark hair / streams black, the merman in his armored body.”¹⁷⁴ This metamorphosis represents the destruction of the castration – decapitation myth and discovery of the truth; “the thing itself,” where everyone is free of the fear and allows the synthesis of sexualities. Erica Jong writes that Rich through the androgynous figure proposes the idea that “it is not only the artist who must make the emphatic leap beyond gender, but any of us who would try to save the world from destruction.”¹⁷⁵

As well as the exploration and rediscovery of the stories of the marginalized; those “whose voices have gone and still go unheard in a patriarchal world,”¹⁷⁶ “Diving into the Wreck” is also read as an exploration of the inner world of an individual. As already mentioned, Rich described *Diving into the Wreck* as “a coming-home to the darkest and richest source of my poetry: sex, sexuality, sexual wounds [...]” Rich would not call herself a lesbian until 1974,¹⁷⁷ however, with *Diving into the Wreck* being published in 1973, the poem and the collection are relevant for studying the processes of exploring one’s sexuality. Hillary Holiday in Rich’s recent biography writes that while Rich was “writing the poems in this volume and going deep into feminist politics, lesbianism began to feel more possible for her.”¹⁷⁸ Therefore, the book of myths might as well be the recognition of heterosexuality as a myth and part of the patriarchal discourse. She is thus mending the “damage that was done” and healing her sexual wounds caused by the old traditions.

¹⁷² Annette Kuhn, “Castration or Decapitation?” 55.

¹⁷³ Rich, *Collected Poems*, 788.

¹⁷⁴ Rich, *Collected Poems*, 789.

¹⁷⁵ Erica Jong, “Visionary Anger,” 174.

¹⁷⁶ Holladay, *The Power of Adrienne Rich: A Biography*, 706.

¹⁷⁷ Holladay, *The Power of Adrienne Rich: A Biography*, 90.

¹⁷⁸ Holladay, *The Power of Adrienne Rich: A Biography*, 654.

By labelling the phallogocentric discourse “a myth,” Rich acknowledges that female discourse is the truth (the wreck) which needs to be explored. The descent into the ocean as a downward movement is itself feminine, as it opposes the linear masculine structure of ascent, “there is no one / to tell me when the ocean / will begin,”¹⁷⁹ marking its indefinity and vastness, as well as concurring the free verse of the poem. The poem lacks firm structures or rhyme schemes, and can be viewed as Rich’s final farewell to phallogocentric structures of the old tradition. As mentioned in the previous chapter, in her early poetry, Rich was most influenced by her older male peers. Rich, by her own admission, “had at first consciously imitated the bearers of the Modernist tradition in poetry, been somewhat influenced by them, and then outgrown them.”¹⁸⁰ Her identification with the older, formalist tradition and the subsequent retraction from it resonates in the poem. In the first stanza, the speaker is preparing for their quest as in a style of a male warrior for a battle. They have “read the book of myths,” the patriarchal narrative, “checked the edge of the knife blade” and put on “the body-armor of black rubber.”¹⁸¹ In this stanza, Rich accentuates her initial position in the discourse as a poet. She has followed the masculine aesthetics set by her male predecessors as that was what she was familiar with and taught, but even so, she expresses a certain discomfort she feels within that discourse, as she calls the flippers “absurd” and the mask “awkward,” acknowledging she was never able to fully accommodate to the delineated structures. The following descent into the water portrays a release from the tradition she used to follow, the immersion into the ocean is both cleansing and transformative and can be read as a metaphor for Rich’s journey from “an apolitical formalist poet to that of an intensely politicized feminist poet writing in open forms.”¹⁸²

¹⁷⁹ Rich, *Collected Poems*, 786.

¹⁸⁰ Cheri Colby Langdell, *Adrienne Rich: The Moment of Change* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 14.

¹⁸¹ Rich, *Collected Poems*, 784.

¹⁸² Mary S. Strine, “The politics of asking women’s questions: Voice and value in the poetry of Adrienne Rich,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 9, no. 1 (1989): 28.

In “Diving into the Wreck” Rich discovers the feminine structures while abandoning the masculine, marking the phallogocentric tradition a myth. She sets on a quest to “break” women “out of the snare of silence,”¹⁸³ out of the “dark continent,” and writes in order to revive women’s discourse – a feminine text that “as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust.”¹⁸⁴ Through the dive, she depicts a deeply rooted realization that masculine forms no longer serve her to articulate her experiences. Rich unconsciously reflects Cixous’s call for *écriture féminine* and produces “Diving into the Wreck” and its whole collection which became an epitome of Rich’s poetic, feminist and personal rebirth.

4.3 “(The Floating Poem, Unnumbered)”

Twenty-One Love Poems was published as an independent collection in 1976 and later became a part of Rich’s collection, *A Dream of Common Language*. Hilary Holladay calls *Twenty-One Love Poems* Rich’s “literary coming-out as a lesbian.”¹⁸⁵ The poems tell a story of an exclusively female love, women’s affinity and experiences of a lesbian relationship within the heterosexual conventions. Rich’s portrayal of the love is freeing, sensual and boldly antipatriarchal. Adrian Oktenberg writes that this is exactly “what makes *Twenty-One Love Poems* new, not the fact that the lovers are women. Women have always loved each other, in literature as in life, but they have usually accepted, and done so within, patriarchal forms.”¹⁸⁶

Twenty-One Love Poems are written in a looser form of a sonnet, which is anchored in our poetic tradition as the classical and supreme form of a love poem. Hayden Carruth even argues there should be no devaluation of the poems as “real sonnets,” as “they certainly come from the same lyrical conception that made the sonnet in the first place,” and maintains it is

¹⁸³ Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 881.

¹⁸⁴ Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 888.

¹⁸⁵ Holladay, *The Power of Adrienne Rich: A Biography*, 732.

¹⁸⁶ Adrian Oktenberg, “Disloyal to Civilization” in *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose: Poems, Prose, Reviews, and Criticism*, ed. Barbara C. Gelpi, Albert Gelpi (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 336.

“long past time to liberate the old term from its trammeling codes of technique.”¹⁸⁷ The classical sonnet is bound within a strict format of fourteen lines and set rhyme schemes however, Rich loosens both the format of the poems as well as queering the heterosexual and patriarchal tradition with their content. By accommodating this traditional poetic form, which has been dominated by men for centuries, and implementing a theme of erotic lesbian romance, Rich makes a statement not only for visualizing and normalizing homosexual relationships, but also against the literary tradition of patriarchy and the portrayal of “pseudolesbian images in media and literature;”¹⁸⁸ by what Rich calls “the institution of heterosexuality.”¹⁸⁹

But Rich defies the convention of structure even further. *Twenty-One Love Poems*, in fact, includes twenty-two poems with “(The Floating Poem, Unnumbered)” as the unclassified poem, floating above the remaining twenty-one. According to Alice Templeton, the poem “resists being systematized even within the structure” of the collection and “keeps the collection from being facilely subsumed into a heterosexual system or being received as a mere trope of that system.”¹⁹⁰ This poem is thus intentionally unique and transcending part of the collection. It is “Rich’s most overtly erotic poem to date”¹⁹¹ and certainly most erotic among the remaining twenty-one. Lynda Koolish explains that by floating above the rest, the poem “allows the sexual aspect of the relationship to touch all the other poems in the book, without attaching itself to any one of them.”¹⁹²

A noticeable aspect of “The Floating Poem” is Rich’s focus on the mutuality of the speaker and her lover. She begins the poem with “[w]hatever happens with us,”¹⁹³ which right

¹⁸⁷ Hayden Carruth, “On ‘Twenty-One Love Poems,’” *Modern American Poetry*, published February 4, 2016, <https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/hayden-carruth-twenty-one-love-poems>.

¹⁸⁸ Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience,” 638.

¹⁸⁹ Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience,” 642.

¹⁹⁰ Alice Templeton, *The Dream and the Dialogue: Adrienne Rich's Feminist Poetics* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994), 72.

¹⁹¹ Cary Nelson, *Our Last First Poets: Visions and History in Contemporary American Poetry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 174.

¹⁹² Lynda Koolish, “The Incendiary Feminism of Lesbian Poetry,” *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, March 23, 1976.

¹⁹³ Rich, *Collected Poems*, 967.

from the start stresses the affinity and involvement of both women equally, which is unlike the traditional sonnet where the focus resides on the addressee. Whenever she mentions her lover, she expands it onto herself too: “[Y]our body / will haunt mine,” “[y]our traveled, generous thighs / between which my whole face has come and come—” or “dance of your nipples in my mouth—.”¹⁹⁴ This physical connection, which she explores through sexual passion, is essential to Rich. In a sense, the mutuality and likeness become emblematic as a difference, when set among the heterosexual consensus. Rich said in an interview that “a lot of those poems [in *Twenty-One Love Poems*] are about looking at sexual passion and, instead of saying: yes, love is like this, it's saying: no, love is not like this. This is something different, a female and lesbian sensuality and sensibility that has not been in poetry before.”¹⁹⁵ The lesbian love does not narrow the focus of these poems, but rather expands it.¹⁹⁶

When the speaker describes her lover, she uses adjectives which amplify the intimacy of the relationship onto feminist statements, which serves as an example for Rich's characteristic “personal is political.” In the poem, she writes “[y]our traveled, generous thighs [...] the innocence and wisdom of the place my tongue has found there [...] your touch on me, firm, protective.”¹⁹⁷ She uses adjectives typical for a woman or a female body that are then extended by another, powerful modifier which then stresses the potential of her female lover, above the patriarchal expectation. In the innocence *and* wisdom, the protective *and* firm touch she provides, Rich stresses that lesbian love far exceeds conventional gender stereotypes of a heterosexual relationship, but also unbinds women from fulfilling exclusively female stereotypical roles. The attributes which she uses also function as a representation of the multiplicity of female *jouissance*, as the “fusion of the erotic, the mystical, and the political.”¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁴ Rich, *Collected Poems*, 967.

¹⁹⁵ Montenegro, “Interview with Adrienne Rich,” 271.

¹⁹⁶ Keyes, *The Aesthetics of Power: The Poetry of Adrienne Rich*, 170.

¹⁹⁷ Rich, *Collected Poems*, 967.

¹⁹⁸ Cixous, and Clément, “The Newly Born Woman,” xvii.

This makes the poem feminist, not only because it is “woman-identified” and “recognize[s] the connection, the primary bond, between women as a source of integrity and strength,” but also because it “constitute[s] a critique, a re-vision, of patriarchal notions of love” and therefore the experience of it in patriarchal forms.¹⁹⁹

Rich begins the poem as she ends it, and encloses the love making in an envelope verse: “Whatever happens with us, your body / will haunt mine [...] whatever happens, this is.”²⁰⁰ The final line of the poem, according to Craig Werner, expresses the “specific and untranslatable actuality”²⁰¹ of lesbian sexuality. This repetition accentuates the poem’s focus on the female body and its pleasures, as it follows their shape and what Cixous regards as feminine textual body, “a system of spending not necessarily carved out by culture [...] always endless” and starting “on all sides at once.”²⁰² This form intensifies its female-focus even further. The poem openly describes the realization of *jouissance* outside of the patriarchal-heterosexual parameters. It represents independence of masculine linearities, where the female pleasure is reciprocally satisfied and thus fulfils the female creative power to its full potential. In “The Floating Poem,” Rich obliterates the “lack of the lack,” and creates an environment where the phallus as the “transcendental signifier” is purely redundant.

Werner writes that the poem “provides an emblem of a process of communication denied by received languages.”²⁰³ The received languages being what Rich calls “the oppressor’s language.”²⁰⁴ That is the language of phallogentric and heterosexual tradition through which the female experience cannot be truthfully described. Rich forms a whole new language which speaks of experiences which were previously silenced. Carol P. Christ writes

¹⁹⁹ Oktenberg, “Disloyal to Civilization,” 342.

²⁰⁰ Rich, *Collected Poems*, 967.

²⁰¹ Craig Hansen Werner, *Adrienne Rich: The Poet and Her Critics* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1988), 95.

²⁰² Cixous, “Castration or Decapitation?” 53.

²⁰³ Werner, *Adrienne Rich: The Poet and Her Critics*, 95.

²⁰⁴ Adrienne Rich, *Poems: Selected and New, 1950-1974* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974), 151.

that Rich creates “a language in which women’s connections to each other are named and celebrated, a language that may transform the patterns of violence and domination perpetrated by the language of men.”²⁰⁵ Rich thus creates, restores, fully feminine writing by bringing onto a page “the physical passion of woman for woman which is central to lesbian existence: the erotic sensuality which has been, precisely, the most violently erased fact of female experience.”²⁰⁶

²⁰⁵ Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest*, 84.

²⁰⁶ Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience,” 653.

5 Conclusion

Despite being one of the most influential feminist literary theories, *l'écriture féminine* lacks a firm definition. According to Mary Eagleton, Cixous is concerned with openness and plenitude of such writing and to define is to control and limit.²⁰⁷ However, based on the key texts of the theory, it is possible to distinguish several major concepts which the theory pursues. They are best understood when illustrated on concrete pieces of literary work of female authors, such as Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich.

Sexton and Rich share an initial position from which they entered the poetic discourse. Both native to the East coast of the United States, born only a few months apart, their early life followed the same transformative trajectory; from a housewife into a poet. Yet, their succeeding careers turned out to bear little resemblance. Sexton is remembered as *the* confessional poet, defining the genre alongside Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell, while Rich is defined as the poet-lesbian-feminist, whose career was bordered within her radical activism. Sexton never had much to say on feminism, as was discussed in an earlier chapter, yet the direct intersection between these two poets shows that they might have shared similar values, and most importantly, experiences. However, they both wrote about them from slightly different perspectives, and within the boundaries of different genres, which undoubtedly more amplified their differences rather than similarities.

Sexton wrote about the female experience as a personal issue. When she wrote about female subjects and themes, it was because she viewed them primarily as her own. But as was shown in the analysis above, her themes and ideas transgress the borders of her intimacy. Even when she writes about herself as a witch, as she feels alien in her position within society and as a mother, the personal female experience becomes a feminist argument. In a sense, Sexton is an unconscious activist whose poems more often became confined within the confessional

²⁰⁷ Eagleton, *Feminist Literary Criticism*, 226.

genre, thus stripped of the possibility to bear any political significance. In “Rapunzel,” she explores widely politically discussed topics of compulsory heterosexuality and potentiality of lesbian relationship, the same themes which appear in a great amount of Rich’s work. Rich’s poetry is much more obviously activist and political. She uses personal experiences, such as the lesbian love in “(The Floating Poem, Unnumbered),” to make a broader statement as a part of her feminist ideology.

Both poets explore the subject of a myth in their poetry. Sexton chooses particular stories from a collectively known discourse, such as the Grimm’s fairy-tales in *Transformations*, which she retells from a changed perspective to amplify the myth within. Rich, on the other hand, first acknowledges the existence of the “book of myths,” but does not specifically define it. Rather, she chooses to explore it first, and find the truth. The metaphor of individual exploration expands to assert a political point. In both cases, the myth is identified as the patriarchal thought dominating the culture in which the female voice – and the stories it tells – are silenced.

As this thesis has shown, the portrayal of female sexuality and pleasure by Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich, in many ways, reflects the notion of *l’écriture féminine*. The poets start with the primal and most powerful tool – the language, which they deconstruct and discard its masculine attributes to introduce new forms. Those are then inscribed with the female experiences through a feminine language. Their poems, either consciously or unconsciously, criticize the patriarchal discourse into which they refuse to fit. Through their writing, they revive the sexuality from the repressed, which allows them to articulate the multiplicity of female *jouissance* as women experience it – as an inexhaustible source of creativity: Cosmic and worldwide.²⁰⁸ The writing is sexual in the sense that it both creates and procreates, and their bodies became the richest source of their creation.

²⁰⁸ Jones, “Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of ‘L’Ecriture Feminine,’” 251.

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