Woman as Witch in Anne Sexton's "Her Kind"

Who sees me here
this ragged apparition
in their own air
sees a wicked appetite
if they dare.

The poem that would become "Her Kind" began life as "Night Voice on a Broomstick" in December1957 and underwent several transformations before Anne Sexton settled on the twenty-one line poem that served as her signature piece and with which she began her readings from the time the final version took form. It was also the vehicle with which she "made her debut as witch" (Middlebrook *Biography*). The earlier ending lines that appear above deliver a message that is latent but compelling in the poem as it came to be; to whit, the witch Anne Sexton embraces for herself is one inherent in all of us, particularly females. The line, "in their own air" is a challenge to all women to recognize their "wicked appetite" – "if they dare." These lines changed significantly, as Diane Wood Middlebrook points out in *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (1991), but in them lies a key to unlocking meaning in the final version of the poem, one that moves beyond interpretations that rely heavily on the argument that the poem is a comment on Sexton's "madness," (a too facile word and one that ignores the readers' ready identification with Sexton's sentiments,) and the alienation it produced in her. Rather the poem speaks of the reclamation of female power and the idea that women can rightly claim a different identity for themselves than the one patriarchal western society imposes on them, one that validates the various facets of woman and rejects the sanitized bourgeois stereotype.

If Sexton had kept her demons at bay long enough, she might have read authors like Leonard Shlain who, in his book *Sex, Time and Power* (2003), laments the fact that modern Western women have rejected the power they formerly embraced in the role of the *crone*; he writes that throughout history and even today in many third-world countries both men and women "value the crone's forthrightness and valor, and nearly all fear her potency" (174). In this third and final phase of life, one to be welcomed, not avoided through plastic surgery and cosmetics, the crone is "feared and respected for her sorcery and power" (176). Aggression, dominance wanderlust and even a heightened virility are to be welcomed, not hidden as dark secrets. Or she might have recognized in Camille Paglia's audacious look at Western culture, *Sexual Personae* (1990) that the dark undercurrents she recognized in her own nature were in fact a legacy of biology and culture, something common to all people and to women in particular as beings closer to the chthonian realities that Apollonian man with his intellect has tried to defeat. She would have resonated to Paglia's assertion that *daemons* as the Greeks conceived of them were not evil but rather "they were both good and evil like nature itself" (17) and she would have recognized that she was not the only one to "descend to the dream world where nature reigns, where there is no law but sex, cruelty, and metamorphosis" (21).

Alas, in the words of her daughter and a close friend, Sexton "took herself quickly and quietly" in 1974 (McCartan), and we can only imagine what she would have made of the societal changes wrought by post modern developments of the last three decades. In this essay though I will take the position that, while Sexton indeed suffered from poor

mental health, “Her Kind” is not so much a comment on the isolation her condition created, as Middlebrook suggests (Stephy), but rather an exploration of the roles of women and a recognition of the dual capacities for good and evil, security and risk, and domesticity and freedom. Or as Sharon McCartan expresses it, Sexton struggled with “the nuances of balancing the ‘betweens’: between ‘living’ and ‘dying,’ between ‘the absurd’ and ‘the ordinary,’ between ‘sane’ and ‘insane,’ between literary ‘popularity’ and ‘importance.’” Diana Hume George recognizes Sexton’s penchant for opposing elements, too, in her book *Oedipus Anne: The Poetry of Anne Sexton* when she asserts that “Her poetry presents multiplicity and simplicity, duality and unity, the sacred and the profane, in ways that insist on their similarities – even at times, their identity.”

In her essay, “Anne Sexton: Poetry as Therapy,” and following Middlebrook’s model, Sarah Stephy explores the three roles of woman depicted in the poem, one for each stanza: the ‘possessed witch,’ the “housewife persona” and the “adulteress.” Stephy writes that in the image of the “possessed witch” Sexton suggests “that she is controlled by an external force, possibly her own depression, and that its results are inherently evil.” She interprets the first stanza to mean that Sexton feels “feared and opposed by society” and equates the line “lonely thing, twelve fingered” to Sexton’s feeling like an outcast. While this is plausible enough, the overall tone Sexton achieves is less forlorn than this interpretation allows for. While the image of the “lonely thing…out of mind” evokes solitariness, it is one of power and individuality, “the self unconstrained by society” (Paglia 5), a kind of individualism that Paglia says even leads to “the courser servitude of nature” (7). Indeed Paglia goes on, “Every road from Rousseau leads to Sade” (13). Sexton’s witch is a thing of nature, and while “out of mind” can be taken with a twentieth century reading of mental illness, it can also be construed as just what it says, that is, not of the mind but of the dark, chthonic world close to the earth, a world Paglia feels woman is uniquely connected to by her biology, a biology of internal tides in sync with the moon, of blood and hidden places. She is not of society but opposed to it since “Society is an artificial construction, a defense against nature’s power” (Paglia 11). Greg Johnson’s interpretation of the poem comes closer to this idea when he asserts that Sexton replaces “self-loathing with an open acceptance of evil….she is a kind of perverse entertainer” who “rejects anger in favor of humor, flamboyance, and self-mockery.” As for madness, “if she seems cast in the role of a martyr, embracing madness…it is nevertheless a martyrdom which this aspect of Sexton accepts with a peculiar zest” (Johnson). Sexton’s reading of her own poem seems to support this (Harper Audio); though Stephy can argue that her voice insinuates “the weight of bother her depression and the hardships of being a woman” (sic), others might just as well hear in her slow, heavy reading a love of high drama and the power of the poet onstage – characteristics Middlebrook described as “flippant, glamorous, crafty” (*Biography*).

The second stanza of the poem with its evocation of “warm caves in the woods” where the first “I” in the poem fixes “suppers for the worms and the elves” accommodates Stephy’s housewife interpretation where “the housewife persona goes about making her home more comfortable by filling the cave with ‘skillets, carvings, shelves, closets, silks, innumerable goods.’” Stephy equates the witch’s attempt to “try and fix and rearrange what is conflicting in the cave” with Sexton’s struggle “with internal issues and problems with her personal relationships.” This is an adequate interpretation but it stays on the surface of things. To carry this idea to a deeper level, a

biological level, let's turn again to Paglia's idea of the chthonic nature of women. "Women, like female dogs," she says, "are earthbound squatters. There is no projection beyond the boundaries of the self" (20). Down on the earth, woman is unafraid of nature's real face with its blood and ooze, its "worms and elves." Sexton's witch is the poet's female nature, an earth-cult being hidden within her social self, one defined by her biology. Further, the cave is the female body, "a secret sacred place…the prototype of all sacred spaces" (Paglia 22), here filled with the charms and totems, the amulets and talismans of woman's magic. Sexton would have understood Paglia when she (Paglia) says, "The taboo on woman's body is the taboo that always hovers over the places of magic" (22).

The last stanza of "Her Kind" is the most perplexing and Stephy's and Middlebrook's assertion that the final persona is the adulteress, based on the lines referring to "nude arms," is hard to carry very far. Certainly it is understandable that one might read into Sexton's poetry references to her well-known infidelity and marital problems, but in this stanza other interpretations assert themselves. "I have ridden in your cart driver, / waved my nude arms at villages going by," works well as a reference to society (the driver) in whose cart a passive and persecuted outsider rides. But it also suggests a duality, a conflict between the ego, or super ego, and the id. In this case, the driver is the ego who must conform to society's expectations, one who must act as judge and executioner when taboos are broken. The id, the repository of instincts and biological drives, the erotic and sexual being who waves her "nude arms" in an act of defiance, strives to know herself, to learn "the last bright routes," to be a "survivor" even while the "flames still bite" her thigh. This is not far from Stephy's view where the "wheel could be symbolic of the constraints Sexton faced as a woman in society set upon her by traditional views," but goes a step further in suggesting the part conflicting elements in a person's own nature play in the infliction of pain.

The metaphor of the witch and the imagery that conjures up the trials and persecution of witches in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is underscored by a structure of threes and sevens, numbers traditionally thought to hold significance in the world of the arcane. The three stanzas of seven lines each are illustrative of her earlier poetry, which, as Diana Hume George points out, "was preoccupied with form and technique." While "Her Kind" shows some variety in meter, it is largely tetrameter with varied feet, and makes use of both run-on lines - "dreaming evil I have done my hitch / over the plain houses, light by light," and end-stopped lines – "I have gone out, a possessed witch." The predominant use of anapestic feet moves the lines at a faster pace: "have gone out," the black air," "out of mind," "the warm caves," "where your flames," and yet Sexton introduces a tension by choosing for her accented syllables words that have long vowel sounds or diphthongs that the voice hangs on to: "out," "air," "caves," "mind," "flames," the effect of which is to slow down the lines. It is slowed down even more by intermittent use of spondaic feet, "her kind,' bright routes," "wheels wind." Arp and Johnson could be speaking of this poem when they write in *Sound and Sense* "The result is an extremely effective use of the movement of the verse to accord with the movement suggested by the words" (217). This is especially apparent in the last stanza in which sound and meaning combine in perfect unison in lines such as "I have ridden in your cart driver," or "and my ribs crack, where your wheels wind," lines where the reader can almost physically perceive the uneven motion of wheels in ruts.

It is not only in meter that Sexton employs a more traditional approach in this poem. Though the meter is somewhat irregular, she carries it through all three stanzas and makes liberal use of "musical devices" such as rhyme, alliteration and assonance. The rhyme scheme is fairly rigid, with an ending rhyme pattern identical in the first and third stanzas and only slightly varied in the second, from 1/2/1/2/3/2/3 to 1/2/1/2/3/1/3. Sexton avoids any monotony though by contrasting the end words of all three stanzas so that in the first stanza, the ending rhymes have short or long vowels and sharp ending consonants as in "witch" and hitch" or , light" and "quite;" in the second she moves to longer drawn-out vowels and softer ending consonants as in ""woods" and goods," shelves" and "elves;" and in the third she dispenses with ending consonants altogether and lets the long-drawn out ending vowels produce the sense of melancholy that the meaning evokes, as in "waved my nude arms at villages going by," and "where your flames still bite my thigh." This adherence to traditional poetic devices combined with pronounced grammatical pauses and the repeated refrain at the end of each stanza, in the hands of a less talented poet, could make for an overly mechanical poem. But Sexton's command of "metaphorical structures at once analytic and synthetic" (George), and her ability to explore archetypes and myth in a way that makes them meaningful to modern readers, has made this poem one that serves as a primary representation of her art.

While "Her Kind," like much of Sexton's poetry, is "accessible, challenging, richly textured, and culturally resonant" (George), it is perhaps the unusual use of what Middlebrook calls "an undifferentiated but double 'I'" that has made it one of her more representative pieces. In her definitive biography of the poet, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (1991), Middlebrook asserts that "'Witch' is spoken through a mask by a dramatic persona and offers a psychological portrait of a social type." She explains that in using this double "I", "the poem sets up a single persona identified with madness but separated from it through insight." Middlebrook is admittedly an expert on Sexton and while the oft-reiterated point that "Her Kind" is about the poet's "madness" can be debated, Middlebrook is accurate and insightful when she analyzes the way "two points of view are designated 'I' in each stanza," the first "I" of the various personas in each stanza (i. e. the witch, the housewife, and the adulteress) and the second "I" of the refrain " A woman like that…I have been her kind," who "steps through the frame to…to witness, interpret, and affirm her alter ego." This double subjectivity allowed Sexton to step from person to persona and back again, and, as Middlebrook writes, "insists on a separation between a kind of woman (mad) and a kind of poet (a woman with magic craft): a doubleness that expressed the paradox of Sexton's creativity" (*Biography).* Moreover "It calls attention to the difference between pain and the representation of pain," and as Middlebrook pointed out in an earlier essay, "Poets of Weird Abundance" (1985), at the end of each stanza, 'I' is displaced from sufferer onto storyteller." In ending each stanza thus, "Sexton conveys the terms on which she wishes to be understood; not victim, but witness and witch."

It is nearly half a century since Sexton conceived the lines that she would mold into "Her Kind" and those early lines, like the finished poem itself, still challenge readers to explore the too-close-for-comfort world of women's experience and by extension the capacity all humans hold for good and evil, hope and despair, oppression and survival. Despite the success of contemporary artistic efforts like "The Vagina Monologues," themes and language that deal too intimately with women's experience are still shrouded in taboo. And yet, the need to acknowledge those hidden places in our nature compels us

to search out poets like Sexton who, as George points out in her book "*Oedipus Anne: The Poetry of Anne Sexton* (1987), "speak the unspeakable for us." When we read poems like "Her Kind" we feel that Sexton has indeed "seen into our darkest selves" (George). And once we have thus been exposed along with the poet, just as Sexton can say of her alter ego, the witch, "I have been her kind," so we can likewise say of her, we "have been her kind."

Works Cited

"Anne Sexton (1928-1974)." Ed. Diana Hume George. English Lit. Dept., Georgetown U.
13 Mar 2005. <www.college.hmco.com/english/heath/syllabuild/iguide/sexton.html>

Arp, Thomas R., and Greg Johnson. *Perrine's Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry.* Fort Worth: Harcourt, 2001.

George, Diana Hume. "On Sexton's Career." From *Oedipus Anne: The Poetry of Anne Sexton* (1987). Modern American Poetry. 13 Mar 2005. www.english.uicc.edu/maps/poets/s_z/sexton/career.htm

Johnson, Greg. From "The Achievement of Anne Sexton." *The Hollins Critic* (1984). Modern American Poetry. 8 Mar 2005. http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/s_z/sexton/herkind.htm>

McCartan, Sharon. "Anne Sexton." The Poetry Empire Webring. 13 Mar 2005. <http://Empirezine.com/spotlight/sexton/sex1.htm>

Middlebrook, Diane Wood. "On "Her Kind.'" From *Anne Sexton: A Biography (*1991). Modern American Poetry. 8 Mar 2005. http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/s_z/sexton/herkind.htm>

… "On 'Her Kind.'" From "Poets of Weird Abundance." *Parnassus* (1985). Modern American Poetry. 8 Mar 2005. http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/s_z/sexton/herkind.htm>

Paglia, Camille. *Sexual Personae.* New York: Vintage, 1991.

Sexton, Anne. "Her Kind." *Perrine's Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry.* Fort Worth: Harcourt, 2001.

… "Her Kind." Read by Anne Sexton. Harper. 5 Mar 2005. <http://www.town.hall.org/radio/HarperAudio/053094_harp_ITH.html>

Shlain. Leonard. *Sex, Time and Power.* London: Viking, 2003.

Stephy, Sarah. "Anne Sexton: Poetry as Therapy." The American Poetry Web. 15 Mar 2005. <http://titan.iwu.edu/wchapman/americanpoetryweb/sextonbio.html>