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“This Unique Empire” : Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton’s Embodied Poetry as L’Ecriture Feminine

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ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to place the poetry of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton within a larger discussion of contemporary feminist thought regarding corporeality and H el ene Cixous' idea of *l'écriture feminine* from her 1976 essay "The Laugh of the Medusa." Beginning with the basic premise of the mind/body dichotomy that was the basis for western philosophy, this thesis argues that contemporary feminist discourse shies away from viewing women's bodies as a source of empowerment, hoping to avoid exposure to bioessentialist critiques, and instead focusing on women's access to areas of intellectual power. This thesis posits that rather than uphold the power dynamics imbued within the mind/body dichotomy, feminist theory has much to gain from refiguring this restrictive binary in a way where women's bodies are viewed as a locus of power and strength, rather than a site of weakness.

To achieve these aims, this thesis discusses poetry of Sylvia Plath ("Edge" and "The Applicant") and Anne Sexton ("Menstruation at Forty" and "In Celebration of My Uterus") as examples of *l'écriture feminine*. Plath's poetics utilize images of women's bodies as sites of violence and brutality to demonstrate the dangers for women inherent within patriarchal systems. In Sexton's poetics, she utilizes both form and content to move towards a feminine writing that mirrors the biological processes of the body, as argued in "Laugh of the Medusa." While Plath's poetics figure women's brutalized bodies as what is left in the wake of patriarchal power structures, Sexton's poetics go a step further, and move towards *l'écriture feminine* as a Cixous understood it: a reconfiguring of language that mirrors women's bodies, as a way out of the insidious hegemonic power structures that ensnare, brutalize, and eventually destroy women as collateral damage.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

“This Unique Empire”: Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton’s Embodied Poetry as *L’Ecriture
Feminine*

by

Theresa Kircher

A Master’s Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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“THIS UNIQUE EMPIRE”: SYLVIA PLATH AND ANNE SEXTON’S EMBODIED
POETRY AS *L’ECRITURE FEMININE*

A juxtaposition of Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath and their respective poetry illuminates much about both women and the preoccupations that they both shared. Both women navigated through the world with their corporeality informing much of their identity as poets and human beings, and they used their physicality as a vehicle in their poetry to share insights and criticism of the patriarchal systems they found themselves living and writing within. Writing in the 1950’s, an era when the domestic and professional spheres were very much divided along the lines of sex, Plath and Sexton rejected these expectations and shed a blindingly bright light on the dangers wrought on women as a result of these heteronormative expectations, and the oppressive systemic structures and social beliefs that attempted to continually reaffirm these binaries and categorizations.

For Plath, these rigid and demeaning expectations placed on women became the impetus for poetry that used women’s dead and lifeless bodies as metaphors for the ways in which women’s physicality was considered by these patriarchal systems. In “Edge,” she returns to early Greek understandings of perfect beauty, arguing that the most beautiful woman in the eyes of a patriarchal system is one that poses no threat, no agency of her own: a woman who is lifeless, dead. In “The Applicant,” she dissects a woman’s body through her poem within the parameters of an interview to demonstrate the ways in which women’s use value lies within the particular parts of their physicality, rather than the whole. Like Plath, Anne Sexton also utilizes the female physical form within her poetry. In “Menstruation at Forty,” she considers the use-value of the body of a woman

once she is no longer able to produce children. In “In Celebration of My Uterus,” however, she bucks the social mores of her time, instead reimagining her uterus as a source of strength and vitality outside of, and regardless of, its reproductive functions.

Plath and Sexton’s exploration of embodiment within their poetry is both highly personal and visceral, pushing their readers to understand the darkest realizations of patriarchal power structures via metaphors of women’s bodies. Their poetry anticipated the writings of the French feminist philosopher Hélène Cixous, who published *Laugh of the Medusa* in 1976, about twenty years later. *Laugh of the Medusa* is a philosophical call to arms that took Plath and Sexton’s very goal and concretized it into a battle cry for women everywhere: return to writing by returning to your body. In her essay, Cixous argues for the necessity of what she calls *l’écriture féminine*, or feminine writing. I argue that both Plath and Sexton’s poetry are examples of the very writing that Cixous envisions—both through their content and the very form of their poetry, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton’s poetry can be seen as textual answers to Cixous’s call. Writing twenty years before the publication of Cixous’s famous essay, their poetry anticipates her argument for the necessity of *l’écriture féminine* in two ways: Plath’s poetry functions as a version of *l’écriture féminine* that shines light on the darkest realities of patriarchal power structures and the language systems that perpetuate them. Ensnared within these structures, Plath’s poetics literalizes the damage done to women’s bodies, and forces her readers to come to terms with the dangerous and deadly aims and goals of patriarchal power structures. Sexton’s poetry aligns more closely with Cixous’s description of women’s writing within her essay: resisting linear structures and linking both the content

and the form of her poetry to women's bodies, her poetry effectively anticipates *l'écriture féminine* before Cixous's essay was first published.

It is important to consider Plath and Sexton's return to the female body in service of feminist arguments alongside the long tradition of essentialist and naturalist arguments employed by the patriarchy. The true subversive nature of their poetry is illuminated when examined alongside the centuries' worth of patriarchal hegemony that pointed to women's bodies as the inescapable cause of their weakness. As Elizabeth Grosz explains, "Misogynist thought has commonly found a convenient self-justification for women's secondary social positions by containing them within bodies that are represented, even constructed, as frail, imperfect, unruly, and unreliable, subject to various intrusions which are not under conscious control"¹. Patriarchal oppression seeks to culturally define women by their reproductive capabilities, and in turn, punish them for displays of sexuality that are not deliberately aligned with reproductive goals; by placing the body/mind and female/male dichotomies in parallel with each other, the patriarchy seeks to make women somehow *more* corporeal, *more* biological, *more* natural than males. As Grosz explains: "The coding of femininity with corporeality in effect leaves men free to inhabit what they (falsely) believe is a purely conceptual order"². By structuring the body/mind components of human beings as a binary and granting power to the mind over the body, the patriarchy relegates women to a position that is lesser than, weaker, more tied to nature. This determination of the power relations between both ends of the binary are baseless. Rather than to challenge this parallel, feminists have tended to challenge women's subversion under such male definition by arguing for equality for women on intellectual grounds. Wary of falling into the pitfalls of the essentialist argument at all,

feminist thought has tended to stay away from claims linking women's social positions and subjectivities to their corporeal selves.

This naturalistic justification is considered in the first section of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Published in 1949, and ultimately considered "the feminist bible," de Beauvoir begins this very first chapter of the very first section of her book by trying to explore the biological reasoning given in defense in women's "natural" subjection to men. "What does the female represent in the animal kingdom," de Beauvoir asks, "And what unique kind of female is realized in women?"³ This section reads almost like a biology textbook, where she moves from single celled organisms that experience parthenogenic reproduction, to hermaphroditic species and ultimately to an exhaustive discussion of animals with heterogenetic gametes that rely on sexual reproduction for the continuance of their species. Much of this chapter reads as a scientific text, detailed, scientific considerations of the similarities, differences, roles, and understanding of ovum and sperm, and the ways in which their biological functioning has been extrapolated and misappropriated to describe the "natural" roles of women and men: "female's passivity," and men's "explosive" existence.⁴ "One should not get carried away with allegories,"⁴ de Beauvoir writes, and argues that both female and male gametes lose their individuality when they eventually meet – they "cancel each other out in their totality,"⁵ and together, they are both equal parts responsible for the new life created from their merging. The ovum becomes the site of the new life, nourishing it, remaining a stable and safe environment. Here, de Beauvoir seems to make the clearest, boldest move between her biological cataloging and the social stigmas of the sexes: "it would be rash to deduce from such an observation," referring to the ovum's role in developing the newly created

life, “that woman’s place is in the home: but there are rash people”⁶. Drawing this parallel seems almost absurd – which is de Beauvoir’s point. The utilization of biology as a firm and factual basis upon which to ground the argument of differences between sexes is undermined both by the myriad of scientific evidence that refutes such a claim, as well as the almost ridiculous nature of extrapolating social roles from the functions of cells. De Beauvoir’s wildly popular and influential book was published just one year before Plath began her college career, in 1950, at Smith. If de Beauvoir ran the first leg of the race in *Second Sex*—addressing the naturalistic argument for women’s inferiority that had lived and reigned in Western philosophy and thought for centuries—then it was poets Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton who took the baton to continue the advancement.

In his book *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words*, Gould traces Plath’s entrance into language back to her experiences of severance from her parents, particularly her mother. When Plath’s brother was born, she experienced a profound shift in understanding the “*separateness* of everything” where “[her] beautiful fusion with the things of this world was over.”⁸ In her memoir, “Ocean 1212-W,” from which Gould takes these quotes, Plath terms this moment the “awful birthday of otherness.” Plath’s preoccupation with the ocean and ocean life in this essay sheds light on the way in which this distancing from her mother precipitated her understanding of her entrance into the linguistic order: on this particular trip to the beach, Plath throws a starfish at a rock. In earlier years, Plath would capture these echinoderms and watch in amazement as they regenerated lost arms. Framing the starfish thrown against a rock as a metaphor for her rejection from her mother, Plath begins to understand the way in which she, too, can regenerate herself: writing can give Plath the same feelings of “warmth and union”⁹ that

she felt she had lost at the birth of her brother. In a 1962 interview, Plath describes poetry as “water or bread, something absolutely essential to me.”¹⁰ For Plath, the essential connection to her mother was severed, which opened the door for language and poetry to become the very nourishment that sustained her.

This shift from natural maternal love to a reliance upon language for the same support dramatically changed the way in which Plath understood humanity. Her very understanding of herself and those around her were as “inherently linguistic” beings¹¹ in which the understanding of the natural order of maternal love and care was replaced by the search for those same feelings of support through language and her poetry. It is not surprising then, that Plath’s poetry was tied consistently tied to the body and this preoccupation can be traced back to this definitive moment in which she turned to text as a refuge from her feelings of physical and emotional rejection. “Between the sheets of Plath’s own texts,” Marilyn Boyer argues, “she runs back and forth across the passage of the body into words.”¹² For Plath, the self and the text became fused, the line between them, blurry. In conceiving of the self as fundamentally linguistic, one must acknowledge the dangers that come with such an understanding: text as signifier is always unable to exactly replicate and describe what it seeks to illuminate, always a step away from the signified. Because “the ontological being is always in excess of the linguistic marker,” Boyer notes, “she ‘fades away’ with the onset of language.”¹³ Because of Plath’s understanding of her subjective self through and within language, it becomes of utmost important to consider the poetic devices that she employs as meaningful and deliberate, as well as the content of the poems.

Form and substance work hand in hand for Plath, and in many of her poems, the female body is “inebriated, poisoned, broken, assaulted, depressed, shocked, overdosed, bled,”¹⁴ according to Boyer, and, I would add, disjointed. In Plath’s poetry, it is no coincidence that the bodies of these women are often violated at the hands of men, and as Boyer argues, “the agency, however indirect, is male, which gives one license to say that in the Plathian worldview, the disabled female body is a phenomenon brought about by a hegemonic, patriarchal system.”¹⁵ Plath’s mastery of word and content do not seek to simply paint a macabre portrait of a violated woman for the voyeuristic pleasure of her reader. These bodies work to function towards a large discussion, in which they are situated as a statement regarding the patriarchal system that uses, abuses, and disposes of them as unimportant and insignificant beings. As Elaine Scarry notes “...the reality of the body—the body in pain, the body maimed, the body dead and hard to dispose of—is separated from its source and conferred on an ideology or issue or instance of political authority.”¹⁵ These women in Plath’s poetry—brutalized, dead, violated—are symbolic for Plath. These women’s bodies become representative of the damage left in patriarchy’s wake, the discarded and disposed of leftovers of the patriarchal political system. In one of Plath’s last poems, “Edge,” she makes the claim that the only way a woman could be truly perfect is in death. Cold, lifeless, inactive and completely unthreatening to the patriarchal system, she relies on images of classic Greek mythology and the woman’s body to demonstrate that from the vantage point of a political system that, at best, discards women as collateral damage, and at worst, requires them to submit to the point of abuse and death, the only perfect woman is a dead one.

The first two lines of the poem clearly set the tone the remainder of the poem: “The woman is perfected./ Her dead...”¹⁶ The very first line, a complete sentence, focuses on the perfection of “the” woman – not “a” woman, or even “women,” but rather “the woman” who appears to be a stand in for women at large. Plath pulls no punches here: the first line of the stanza is an assertive remark: the woman *is finally* perfected, we might read into that sentence. The first descriptor Plath gives us to further clarify or understand that beauty? The image of death. The woman’s body, which is given additional importance here due to the word’s capitalization at the beginning of the third line of the poem, “wears the smile of accomplishment,”¹⁷ as though the ultimate end, the light at the end of the tunnel for women seeking to obtain absolute perfection, is not really a light at all – it is the complete and total cessation of light, of life.

The fourth line of the poem, “The illusion of a Greek necessity”¹⁸ ties back to ancient Greek ideals of physical beauty that are not only harmful, and Plath argues, in fact, they are deadly, but they are not grounded in anything substantial or concrete. This line can be read two ways: first, this dead woman is an illusion of the classically beautiful Greek woman, found in myths and Greco-Roman mythology, and secondly, that the very necessity of the classically beautiful woman in Greco-Roman culture and mythology was in and of itself an illusion. The classic beauty is a standard to which women are held up against within patriarchal societies, and the standard is illusory, fleeting, unsubstantial and unsubstantiated. Women then, have been compared to and held up and measured against an illusion of an ideal – this comparison, doomed from the start, results in only one outcome: the closest women can come to meeting this ideal, illusory or not, is through death.

Plath also draws upon the idea of motherhood as a physical strain and drain on a woman. “Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,/ One at each little/ Pitcher of milk, now empty”¹⁹ Bohandy notes that “serpents are commonly regarded in Western culture as a threat to human life and thus are often feared or loathed”²⁰ imparting an insidiousness about the very nature of the woman’s children. These dead children are located at each “pitcher of milk,”²¹ or breast. Plath’s imagery here of children lying dead at their mother’s empty breast raises questions of the children’s reliance upon the mother, and whether her death created a domino effect that then caused their death as well. Their location – immediately at her empty breast – suggests that they may have been complicit in her death, by literally draining her.

Plath describes the “folding” of the children back into the woman’s body as “petals/ Of a rose close when the garden/ Stiffens and odors bleed/ From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower.”²² She moves here into deeply sexual imagery, where the rose can be read as a symbol for the vagina, and the word “stiffens” suggests both rigor mortis as well as male sexual arousal. The rose’s closure indicates a move away from this highly sexualized imagery, this conflation of sex with death.²³ The woman pulls back, away, folding her children up within her and closing herself completely. This idealized, classically beautiful woman is one that rejects, argues Plath: cold, lifeless, drained by her children and withdrawn from sexuality. This sexuality which is integrally tied to the body for Plath, is illuminated in her poem, “The Applicant.”

Scarry notes that “the moment [pain] is lifted out of the ironclad privacy of the body into speech, it immediately falls back in.”²⁴ Unlike “Edge,” “The Applicant” focuses on a woman’s body who is not cold and lifeless, but rather intensely focused on

the parts of the body as greater than the sum of the whole. If, in “Edge,” Plath sought out to show what a perfect woman looks like within an oppressive patriarchal system looks like, then in “The Applicant,” she seeks out to demonstrate what the most useful woman would look like. In considering each part of the woman’s body via its use value, it brings a heightened awareness to the subjects’ corporeality, her physicality. Even more so than “Edge,” it seems that Plath’s language is even more deeply rooted within the body of the woman in “The Applicant,” or, as Scarry describes, falling back into the body.

Within the opening lines, “First, are you our sort of person?”²⁵ it becomes clear that the speaker of the poem is an interviewer, who immediately seeks to know whether or not the person he is speaking to is a conforming member of the interviewer’s social group. The speaker continues to establish the applicant’s status: “Do you wear/ A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,/ A brace or a hook,/ Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch,/ Stitches to show something’s missing? No, no? Then/ How can we give you a thing?”²⁶ This line of questioning, meant to consider anything defective about the applicant, is noticeably focused upon the applicant’s physicality. In the context of determining whether something is wrong or flawed with the applicant, the interviewer lists “rubber breasts” and a “rubber crotch,” as if to signify that possession of these specifically female sexual body parts are to be seen as a flaw. “Stitches to show something is missing” could be seen as a biblical allusion to the Adam and Eve story in Genesis: the stitches referenced could be an allusion to the stitches that Adam needed after God took his rib to create Eve. If the applicant does *not* have stitches to show that a rib has been taken – then the interviewer asks, “how can we give you a thing?” Reading it in the context of the

Adam and Eve story, it is clear that the “thing” refers to a woman, a wife – clearly objectified here.

The poem continues with the interviewer asking, “Open your hand./ Empty?”²⁷ he answers his own question: “Empty. Here is a hand// To fill it and willing/ To bring teacups and roll away headaches/ And do whatever you tell it./ Will you marry it?”²⁸ the objectification continues here, as it becomes very clear that the interviewer is interviewing a male applicant, who is seeking a wife not only to assuage any emotional loneliness he may feel, but primarily to take on the responsibility of domestic chores and responsibilities. Not only is the woman guaranteed to perform these chores, but “it is guaranteed// To thumb shut your eyes at the end/ And dissolve of sorrow.”²⁹ Not only will this woman take on the role of a domestic servant for her – and the applicant’s – lifetime, but once he dies, she will “thumb shut” his eyes and “dissolve” in her mourning. Plath’s comment is clear here: the woman is so completely dependent upon her husband, that she is unable to exist without him as an individual; once he dies, there is nothing left for her to do, to achieve, to strive for. Her existence is dependent upon and defined by his. The next line: “We make new stock from the salt,”³⁰ is particularly chilling. Once the woman has dissolved, *she is recycled*. It is particularly pertinent to note at this point in the poem that it seems the interviewer is a stand in for society at large – it is the standard, accepted, social structure speaking to this man: laying out the expectations in a heterosexual relationship, or marriage, in which a male with no noticeable failures or flaws is to *apply* for possession of a woman, objectified and servile.

The poem continues with the interviewer addressing the applicant:

I notice you are stark naked.
How about this suit –

Black and stiff, but not a bad fit.
 Will you marry it?
 It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof
 Against fire and bombs through the roof
 Believe me, they'll bury you in it³¹

The poem takes a turn here, with the applicant being faced with the dark realities of the contract he is entering into. Just as the woman who is available for purchase, the applicant is “stark naked,” exposed and vulnerable without the doll-woman by his side. Interestingly, Plath is interested not only in the physical body of the of the woman, but the applicant himself as well. Her comment on his suit is a play on a groom’s suit in a wedding and also a burial suit—she makes the point here that they can be seen as one and the same.

Even though the suit is “waterproof, shatterproof, proof/ Against fire and bombs through the roof,”³² which alludes to the anxiety of the times in which Plath was writing during a post-world war period. Even though the suit can protect the applicant from bombs and fire, it will inevitably also be his burial suit, which intimates that even though the applicant is protected against the violence of war, there seems to be yet a greater threat that will eventually kill him. The suit is being sold to the applicant as “black and stiff,” which leads the reader to question whether or not the narrator’s judgement that it is “not a bad fit” is indeed accurate. The interviewer, a stand in for the patriarchal society at large, seems to suggest in his address to the applicant here that these conventional roles are just as damaging to the men that participate in them as well as women.

The cure for the applicant’s ails, however, is presented: “Come here, sweetie, out of the closet”³² the interviewer breaks to say. The term “sweetie” here, although used as an endearment, comes across as condescending and demeaning. The woman is kept in the closet, put away as a child would put away their toys when they are finished playing.

“Well, what do you think of that?”³³ the interviewer continues on, “Naked as a paper to start// But in twenty-five years she’ll be silver/ In fifty, gold./ A living doll, everywhere you look./ It can sew, it can cook.”³⁴ These lines demonstrate Plath’s drive to link women’s use value to their body as a commodity here: her body is compared to paper, silver, and gold, as a demonstration of the value it will accrue over time to the applicant. Paper, silver and gold also double here as references to anniversaries, with the paper anniversary being the first year of marriage, silver being the twenty-fifth year of marriage, and gold representing the fiftieth year of marriage. The comparison between the woman and these objects are made as drawing the comparison across two similar commodities: the interviewer is drawing a parallel between these inanimate objects and the woman as similar things without any agency.

The next line, “A living doll, everywhere you look” sums up the interviewer’s entire sales pitch to the applicant: this woman is a plaything, and her use value is determined only by what she can do and what she provides to the applicant himself. “It can sew, it can cook” the interviewer continues, and again, Plath continues to drive home the imagery of the use value of this woman as being derived only from individual parts of her body, or specific actions it can complete so as to serve the applicant. “It works,” the interviewer begins in the next stanza, yet again selling the value of the woman to the applicant as a service product whose very job is to serve him. “You have a hold, it’s a poultice./ You have an eye, it’s an image”³⁴ the interviewer continues, again demonstrating here that the ultimate purpose of the woman as a commodity is to meet every desire of the applicant. She is completely devoid of any agency on her own.

Just as in “Edge,” Plath paints a portrait of a woman who is completely unthreatening to the patriarchy within “The Applicant.” She is devoid of any agency, her sexuality is nonexistent, and her only use value is through her ability to serve as a “living doll.” Both “Edge” and “The Applicant” serve as examples of the ways in which Plath understood women’s disposable corporeality within the patriarchy. At best, their bodies were seen as trivial and expendable, commodified for their sexual use-value. At worst, they were the recipients of violence, and ultimately their greatest value for the patriarchy lied in their death: lifeless, their objectified beauty preserved, without any threat to the very hegemonic power structures that killed them in the first place.

Plath’s use of images of violence and death are one way to respond to women’s dangerous position within the patriarchy, and she uses their bodies to paint the portrait of the violence inflicted upon them emotionally and mentally. Plath’s contemporary and friend, Anne Sexton, also took up these themes in her poetry; although Sexton also sought to use women’s bodies in her poetry as a means to illuminate women’s position, she approaches it from a different angle. Unlike Plath’s “violent straining” and “unquenchable desire to examine what was most unthinkable in herself” and women’s place in history, “[Anne] Sexton’s propensities are similarly violent and suicidal, but she convinces herself, and her reader, that she has something to live for.”³⁵ Whereas Plath’s poems deny her reader a feeling of hope after darkness and despair, Sexton “enlarge[s] and enhance[s] the possibilities of endurance”³⁶ within her poetry.

In comparison to Plath’s early interest in language and poetics, Sexton’s approach to a career as a professional poet was much more truncated, and began later in her life. Scholar Erin Singer suggests that Sexton “[emerged] almost fully formed.”³⁷ Whereas

scholars point to feelings of separation from her mother as a young child as Plath's initial impetus to writing and poetry, Sexton tried her hand at poetry as a young girl in preparatory school in Massachusetts, but this introduction did not carry on consistently throughout her early life. She came back to poetry in December of 1956, after she had married, and had two children. By 26, she suffered from two episodes of significant emotional distress, which were the impetus for suicide attempts, and resulted in two hospital admissions for her mental and emotional instabilities. In a 1968 interview with Barbara Kevles, Sexton explained: "Until I was twenty-eight I had a kind of buried self who didn't know she could do anything but make white sauce and diaper babies. I didn't know I had any creative depths [...] All I wanted was a little piece of life, to be married, to have children [...] but one can't build little white picket fences to keep nightmares out"³⁸. During her second admission to a psychiatric hospital, Sexton shared with her doctor that she felt "[she was] no good; [she couldn't] do anything; [she was] dumb,"³⁹ and he recommended listening to Boston's educational television station, in the hopes that she might be inspired. After hearing I. A. Richards reading a sonnet on an evening program and explaining how to write one, Sexton was intrigued, and began to write. She found that her writing "gave [her] a feeling of purpose, a little cause, something to *do* with [her] life, no matter how rotten [she] was"⁴⁰. Sexton came to use poetry as an integral tool in her therapy sessions, "milking her unconscious" (Sexton) and gaining access to deeply-rooted psychological experiences and traumas. For Sexton, then, poetry started as an outlet for her own psychological turmoil and distress, and from 1956 until her death in 1974, she sought to hone the craft and gain greater control over her verse.

The link between Sexton's own trauma and her poetry served as the springboard to her "meteoric rise to fame"⁴¹.

Sexton's poetry has an undeniable visceral quality that has translated across the depth and breadth of her readers both in time and across the spectrum of poetic expertise. She was described by Robert Lowell after meeting her in 1958, as having the "gift to grip, to give words to the drama of her personality,"⁴² which was in and of itself, tragic, histrionic and constantly in turmoil. As recently as 2018, radio host Lulu Garcia-Navarro introduces Anne Sexton's poetry to the listeners of her show on *NPR* as being "like blood on the page, the most intimate kind of writing about depression and death, motherhood and sex, religion and family."⁴³ Whereas Sexton wrote on many of the same dark themes as her good friend and fellow poet, Plath, there is a distinct undercurrent to Sexton's poetry that is not found in Plath's: a feeling of perseverance, of hope for continuity, of poetry as a lifeline for the poet herself.

In her interview with Peter Orr in 1962, Sylvia Plath remarked on Sexton's poetry: "I think particularly the poetess Anne Sexton, who writes about her experiences as a mother, as a mother who has had a nervous breakdown, is an extremely emotional and feeling young woman and her poems are wonderfully craftsman-like poems and yet they have a kind of emotional and psychological depth which I think is something perhaps quite new, quite exciting"⁴⁴. The theme of motherhood and resultant anxieties are epitomized in Sexton's poem "Menstruation at Forty," published in 1966.

"Menstruation at Forty" ties together themes of female sexual desire, longing for motherhood, and guilt at aging past childbearing years, as well as a rejection of the bio-essentialist attitude of Sexton's time, arguing that her use-value does not lie solely in her

reproductive capabilities. “The womb is not a clock/ nor a bell tolling,/ but in the eleventh month of its life/ I feel the November/ of the body as well as of the calendar,”⁴⁵ Sexton writes. Her reference to “clock” here can be seen as a connection to the commonly used idea of the “biological clock,” referring to the passing of time in a woman’s life where her eggs are no longer viable. As with the clock, Sexton rejects the parallel to a bell tolling, instead settling on a parallel between the female body and the calendar. Unlike the clock and the bell, change throughout the year comes incredibly slowly, and the passing of time renders the changes almost indistinguishable. It is difficult to point to a particular day of the year during which the season suddenly changes – change is gradual, fading. Sexton is not only discussing this slow and gradual change of her womb, but also the passing of time in her *body*, not just her *womb*; she specifically considers both as separate entities, not body *as* womb, as a single fused entity, but rather body *and* womb. This delineation is vital for Sexton: womb is part of body, as other organs are, she is not one walking womb, defined by her reproductive organs. Sexton also considers the sex of the child, mixing traits from both male and female – which hearkens back to de Beauvoir’s resistance to any sort of scientific and factual basis to privilege one sex over the other—Sexton seems to envision a child that is both male *and* female:

Will I give you my eyes or his?
 Will you be the David or the Susan?
 (Those two names I picked and listened for.)
 Can you be the man that your fathers are—
 the leg muscles from Michelangelo,
 hands from Yugoslavia,
 somewhere the peasant, Slavic and determined,
 somewhere the survivor, bulging with life—
 and could it still be possible,
 all this with Susan’s eyes?⁴⁶

In these lines, Sexton is considering the child as enmeshed within several different situations: genealogically, where she refers to “your fathers,” as in your forefathers, the lines of those that have come before the child; geographically, as she mentions Michelangelo from Italy, and “hands from Yugoslavia;” lastly, applying this idea of the body of the child as a position within greater frameworks, as opposed to a binary, to the sex of the child as well. The child can have masculine *and* feminine characteristics: the overtly muscular legs painted by Michelangelo, the rough, strong, masculine hands of the peasants in Yugoslavia, “determined,” “bulging” with life – the adjective clearly harkening back to de Beauvoir’s consideration of female as “passive” and male as “active,” and yet—the child will have feminine eyes.

Sexton also speaks of the “unmaking of the crib”—as menstruation is described in de Beauvoir – when she writes:

Two name tags,
 blood worn like a corsage
 to bloom
 one on the left and one on the right—
 It’s a warm room,
 the place of blood.
 Leave the door open on its hinges!⁴⁷

She is referring to her ovaries, “two name tags,” “one on the left and one on the right.” For Sexton, menstruation is a “red disease,” coming “year after year.” The “warm room,” her uterus, is filled with blood as the body prepares for the possibility of a child, yet “unmakes the crib,” each month that she does not conceive. The words “bloom,” “room,” “blood,” and “door” all share the double o, the look and feel of two ovaries, and the additional words “to,” “one,” “on, open,” etc., with the repetition of the letter “o” call into mind the imagery of an egg, or ovum. It is not only in the content of the poem that

Sexton imparts the feelings of longing for childbirth, but also in the specific wording chosen, adding a visual element to the poem.

Three years later, “In Celebration of My Uterus” was published in *Love Poems*. Both the title of the poem as well as the title of the collection speak to Sexton’s unmistakably positive intention in her approach to the female body: this poem is a love song to her uterus. Rather than a source of weakness, Sexton views it here as an immutable source of strength, and the very first stanza of the poem is a clear pushback on the suggestion of a hysterectomy:

They 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.⁴⁸

Here, Sexton again pushes back on the thought that a woman’s use value lies in her reproductive capabilities, conceptually echoing de Beauvoir’s arguments in *Second Sex*. Sexton argues in these lines that “they” – presumably physicians, who are, in all likelihood, male – suggested she have a hysterectomy because she was unable to bear children anymore. In their view, the “sick unto dying” uterus is one that is barren, a determination made by valuing, or devaluing, a woman’s biology in terms of her ability to bear children. Sexton’s disagreement couldn’t be more clear: “You are singing like a school girl./ You are not torn”⁴⁹. Sexton finds value and strength in this part of her biology, seen by her male physicians as “torn,” she instead sees it as:

Sweet weight
in celebration of the woman I am
and of the soul of the woman I am
and of the central creature and its delight
I sing for you. I dare to live.⁵⁰

In these lines, Sexton's celebrations move beyond the celebrations of just her uterus, and finding unity in the value and strength of her uterus and of herself as a whole. In the following stanza, the longest of the poem, Sexton yet again transitions. Moving from a celebration of herself, she broadens her scope: "many women are singing together of this".⁵¹ Utilizing anaphora, Sexton repeats the first words in twelve consecutive lines of the poem:

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 train
 in the middle of Wyoming and one is
 anywhere and some are everywhere...⁵²

Sexton's use of anaphora here serves as a link. By repeating the first two words in these lines, "one is," Sexton creates a chain of examples of women that are linked by this strength found within them, tied to their bodies. These examples encompass a tremendously wide breadth of female experience: socioeconomic (from a worker in a shoe factory to a cellist), geographic (Arizona to Egypt), professional (a mother to a toll collector). Even with all of these variations, Sexton links them in her verse as part of a chain. Sexton's use of anaphora also serves a secondary purpose, in addition to the linking of women from all walks of life. She uses anaphora to resist landing on a singular image or option, rather, she keeps all possibilities open:

“anaphora qualifies comparisons. It is not used to create the harmony of parallelism, but to revise comparisons [...] She records a number of possibilities, without choosing the best one, so the poem loses its linearity. The effect of phrases under erasure, edited, revised, but not erased. The poem retains the imperfections from the process of writing”.⁵³ Sexton again uses anaphora in the last stanza of the poem, which begins with a repetition of two lines from the second stanza:

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).⁵⁴

Just as Sexton used anaphora in the third stanza of the poem to link women from classes, geographic regions, and socioeconomic status, she employs the effect here as well; in this instance, Sexton uses the effect to suggest that she does intend to commit completely to any of these experiences or responsibilities, but rather, commit to *all* of them. She wishes to engage in a religious life and experience (“let me carry bowls for the offering”) *and* educational (“Let me study the cardiovascular tissue”) *and* professional (“let me examine the angular distance of meteors”) *and* natural (“let me suck on the stems of flowers”). Within these seven lines, she refers to musical, academic, emotional, mathematic, scientific, natural, and historic modes of knowledge. Rather than committing to one, Sexton instead leaves all these doors wide open.

Sexton's rhetorical choices serve to further her point in "In Celebration of My Uterus," where she actively defies both the commonly held viewpoint of women's bodies, finding strength in sexual organs that the patriarchy view as "torn" or "dying" once they are no useful to procreation; in terms of the rhetoric she employs, she also pushes back against a linear, binary, "either/or" commitment to images or aspirations. Rather, she employs language that suggests a "both/and," non-linear understanding and valuation of both her body and ambitions.

In 1976, almost a decade after "In Celebration of My Uterus" was published in *Love Poems*, French philosopher Hélène Cixous published "The Laugh of the Medusa" in *Signs*. The essay sought to shatter millennia of misogynist depictions of women and their bodies and sexuality as described in Grosz's book, mentioned in the introduction to this paper. Cixous puts forth a call to arms: women are to return to their bodies, to "write her self: [write] about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement."⁵⁵ Cixous is responding to the very same violence that Plath writes of in her poetry, and urges women to view their bodies as Sexton does: full of power, a dynamic source full of vitality and strength.

Cixous is not only talking about the *content* of women's writing needing to be subversive, but also—and perhaps, more importantly—the *form* of women's writing must also "break" the "arid millennial ground" that has "kept them in the 'dark'"⁵⁶. This writing, which Cixous titles *l'écriture féminine*, will break through centuries of patriarchal, misogynistic thought and resultant language by returning to women's bodies:

“a world of searching, the elaboration of a knowledge, on the basis of a systematic experimentation with the bodily functions, a passionate and precise interrogation of her erotogeneity.”⁵⁷ For Cixous, women returning to their sexual experiences within their bodies is the *only way* by which they can reclaim their power. It is not enough to begin a discourse within the very systems of language created and governed by the patriarchy, rather a completely new methodology must be rigorously applied.

Cixous writes of the dangers of women’s induction into the order of language, of what it teaches women: “As soon as [women] begin to speak, at the same time as they’re taught their name, they can be taught that their territory is black: because you are Africa, you are black. Your content is dark. Dark is dangerous. You can’t see anything in the dark, you’re afraid. Don’t move, you might fall. Most of all, don’t go into the forest. And so we have internalized this horror of the dark.”⁵⁷ It is this very darkness, this very horror that Plath seeks to show to the reader within her poems. Boyer notes that Plath “has lost the contiguity with the text of her own body. She can be located within the nuances of language, the meaning beneath the words, the things unspoken, difficult to comprehend, sometimes violent. The body that she inhabits is the result of violence imposed upon [her body] [...] and identifies within writing a violence which belongs inside the body.”⁵⁸ Plath’s poetry proves to be a crystal-clear look at this violence, from the lifeless dead woman’s cadaver in “Edge” to the cold, emotionless valuation of a woman’s body in “The Applicant.”

As described in Gould’s recounting of her childhood, Plath took to language from the time she was a child—a system of “antilove”⁵⁹ that reinforced feelings of self-hatred and fear, essential to patriarchal aims to subdue and dominate women. Not only did Plath

turn to this insidious system for comfort, it was *essential* to her, something she “couldn’t live without”⁶⁰ that sustained and nourished her. It is no shock, then, that that “the meaning and function of language, especially in relation to the body, are constantly at the core of Plath’s writing”⁶¹. For Plath, these scenes of violence and death are a type of *l’écriture féminine* generated from within this system; “creativity involves painful wounding”⁶² in the form of self-reflection from within a system that consistently reiterated self-hatred. As Cixous explains:

...far more extensively and repressively than is ever suspected or admitted, writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural—hence political, typically masculine—economy; that this is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over, more or less consciously, and in a manner that’s frightening since it’s often hidden or adorned with the mystifying charms of fiction [...] where women has never *her* turn to speak...⁶³

Boyer argues that “the bodies in Plath’s work(s) can be read as metaphors for a language that is interfered with, interrupted, manipulated, and deadened,”⁶⁴ although I would argue that the representation of women’s violated, damaged, dead bodies in Plath are *not* metaphors for a language that Plath has interfered, interrupted, or manipulated, but rather they shine a clear and deliberate light on Plath’s understanding that women’s bodies cannot be understood or depicted in *any other way* within the system of language that she has available to her. The brutalized, cold bodies of women in Plath’s poetry epitomize the crucial and fundamental problem that Cixous elucidates: “insidiously, violently, [men] have led [women] to hate [themselves], to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves”⁶⁵. While Plath’s poetry is an example of a type of *l’écriture féminine* that seeks to make the underlying “antilove” of

patriarchal thought and rhetoric seen clearly for what it is, it is Sexton's poetry in both content and form that embodies *l'écriture féminine* in an active and dynamic way.

For Cixous, the key to a revolutionary methodology of writing lies in the form: "our blood flows and we extend ourselves without ever reaching an end; we never hold back our thoughts, our signs, our writing; and we're not afraid of lacking"⁶⁶. This understanding of writing as more than just stream of consciousness, but rather a break from "masculine rationality, that has always privileged reason, order, unity, and lucidity"⁶⁷ is the true hallmark of the most disruptive form of feminine writing. While Sexton's poetry utilizes women's bodies as much as Plath's does, her rhetorical devices point towards a more active break from a system of language that values a linear, orderly argument built upon premises that lead to a conclusion. In the same way that Cixous points to *l'écriture féminine* being based upon women's sexual experience, so too does this masculine marked writing find its roots in the male sexual experience: a linear, successive buildup that leads to a final conclusion, or climax. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Sexton's poetry, specifically "In Celebration of My Uterus" resists such formalities, and her use of anaphora within that poem to continually suggest possibilities without ever landing on one, can be seen as Cixous's description put into practice: "here they are, returning, arriving over and again"⁶⁸ as opposed to "antiquated relation—servile, calculating—to mastery."⁶⁹ The point, for both Cixous and for Sexton, is the *avoidance* of such mastery by following a linear path. For both Cixous and Sexton, this line of thinking presupposes engagement with a system of thinking and language that is littered with the very corpses seen in Plath's poetry. Her use of anaphora to not only resist a final decision regarding her interest and access to various modes of knowledge,

but also in the way she uses it to link women from all walks of life together mirrors Cixous's description of *l'écriture féminine*: "As 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..."⁷⁰

In "Menstruation at Forty," Sexton also takes on a more literalized understanding of Cixous's call to "write the body." Her use of the double "o" in multiple words: "blood," "bloom," "room," "door" to represent the ovaries she is referring to are a coopting of language's visibility and physical form. In both poems, Sexton resists the valuation on both her ovaries and her uterus which have both been devalued, unable to produce children, and instead views them as essential parts of herself as a woman, separate and apart from their use value in the creation of children. Her active resistance at internalizing the patriarchal views of her body—it's value determined by her capability to reproduce, just as the woman in "The Applicant"—demonstrates the power of Cixous's feminine writing, where such writing "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..."⁷¹.

It is interesting to note that while Cixous believes "there has not yet been any writing that inscribes femininity"⁷² in the ways in which she envisions within this essay, she specifically mentions *male* poets, "capable of [...] imaging [a] woman who would hold out against oppression and constitute herself as a superb, equal, hence 'impossible subject'" because, she argues, "poetry involves gaining strength through the unconscious and because the unconscious, that other limitless country, is the place where the repressed

manage to survive: women...’’⁷³. Sexton’s unique entrance into poetry from a place of psychotherapy may have also, then, doubled as a door into *l’écriture féminine* as Cixous understands it. Sexton’s poetry, in content as well as in form, resists the privileged binaries that de Beauvoir seeks to dismantle in *The Second Sex*, and “arrives, vibrant, over and again’’⁷⁴ through the refusal to conform to writing that mirrors a “unifying, regulating history that homogenizes and channels forces, herding contradictions into a single battlefield’’⁷⁵; rather, her poetry embraces and celebrates possibilities, historical and geographical links between women, and refuses to conform to a language from which she will never be able to free herself.

Returning back to one of the most influential works ever published on feminist theory, and the text from which this paper began, Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*, this year marks 70 years since its first publication. De Beauvoir’s section on “Biological Data” has not garnered much attention from feminist scholars, rather, its long biological cataloging seems to be summed up enough in the book’s most often quoted phrase: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.’’⁷⁶ There is no doubt that the emphasis on gender, rather than sex, has opened up countless avenues of consideration for feminist and gender theorists alike. This emphasis has allowed feminist theorists to move away from arguments where biology determines destiny, and instead locate the value and potential of women outside of their sexed bodies, and therefore out of the reach of such bioessentialist arguments. In the past seven decades since *Second Sex* was published, feminist theory has seen great victories, and as far as critical theories go, it is unique in that it has the power and ability to eclipse our classrooms and critical theory readers and ultimately impact the lives of millions of women every day. It is a line of

inquiry that does not remain siloed, but has the capability to transcend out of hypothetical and abstract considerations and generate, guide, and encourage change in areas of political, social, and everyday life. The very bodies that these theories seek to understand are impacted by the results of this work in a very real sense.

It is understandable, therefore, that feminists have remained concerned about moving the body from its current peripheral location in contemporary feminist thought, and instead give it a central focus in current theoretical work. This hesitancy, however, has only served to maintain the very privileged binary that feminist theory and activism seek to undermine. Looking the other way for fear of returning to old battles is akin to “adopting [...] philosophical assumptions regarding the role of the body in social, political, cultural, psychical, and sexual life and, in this sense at least, [current feminist theory] can be regarded as complicit in the misogyny that characterizes Western reason.”⁷⁷ Returning to women’s bodies to challenge these assumptions advocates, instead, for a greater understanding of the human being as a whole: body *and* mind, sex *and* gender. Reducing the human to only the mind negates as much as the argument that reduces it solely to a body. Rather than returning to reductionist arguments, a feminist theory that takes both women’s bodies *and* minds into account continues to open up new avenues for critical thought and exploration, viewing bodies as “materialities that are uncontainable [...] the centers of perspective, insight, reflection, desire, agency”⁷⁸ and instead pushes feminist thought to understand the way that both sex *and* gender function within structures of power, because the reality is that we experience these hegemonies as physical subjects, not just mental and emotional ones.

It is with this framework that the poetry of Plath and Sexton, and philosophical call to arms of Cixous remain ever relevant. Plath's poetry provides a dark reminder of the limitations of language within power structures that view women as commodified, disposable objects. Her writing, while it shines a light on bodies of women that haunt the lines and verses of her poetry, is unable to free them. Her poetry makes visible that which the patriarchy seeks to hide. "Edge" and "The Applicant" epitomize the darkest and most fundamental views of women—their value lies in their abilities to reproduce, and the embodiment of the truest beauty is a dead woman—the ultimate commodity, devoid of all agency, in death.

Sexton's unique entrance into poetic language was, as much as can be, unmediated. Circumventing language's implicit reproductions of patriarchal power structures, she approached poetry as a voice to her deepest and darkest experiences. She wrote first and foremost from her body, even though her poetry was initiated by psychological therapy, because it was the experiences within her body that her therapy sought to elucidate and clarify. Her rhetorical methods served to anticipate Cixous's understanding of *l'écriture féminine*, exemplifying the ways that content *and* form must function together to create a truly unique approach to revolutionary writing within the language of your oppressor.

Forty-three years after Cixous's essay was published, her call remains relevant. Women must return to their bodies, to their experiences as embodied subjects, in order to forge new paths of understanding and action from within patriarchal societies. If, as Sexton once stated, "one writes of oneself [...] in order to invite in," then one "finds the way out through experience."⁷⁹ Writing, and *l'écriture féminine* especially, becomes a

truly revolutionary and *active* tool for feminist theory in a time where we still regularly engage in discussions of sexual assault, victim blaming, access to birth control, abortions, and transgender rights. Let us continue to answer Cixous's call, as Plath and Sexton, to return to our bodies and engage in an active writing that we may then use as the impetus and sustained fuel to effect meaningful change in the lives of millions, men and women alike.

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