This Business of Words: Reassessing Anne Sexton, ed. Amanda Golden (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2016), 292 pp.

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I was gated. I played
with my Anne Sexton
action figures. . . . –Randall Mann, *Straight Razor*

Fittingly, my most memorable encounters with Anne Sexton's poetry each involved a live audience: first, in my AP English classroom, where her Caedmon recording of "The Rowing Endeth" astonished me with its full-blooded, irreverent reverence; second, in my own classroom where I played a recording of "Her Kind," and Randall Mann exclaimed: *She sounds like John Wayne in drag!* (He was right. Sexton knew how to *werk.*) My third was a recent antiphonal performance with a young musician who responded to my readings of Sexton poems with organ improvisations. More *event* than text, a Sexton poem provokes a response. If Sylvia Plath is an icon, Anne Sexton is an action figure. No Barbie—action figure Anne comes with a swag-bag of similes, a cigarette, and a knockout punch.

Sexton has waited patiently for a forward-minded generation of readers—one steeped in popular culture, queer theory, fan studies. Waited for readers of archives and everyday life. Waited for parsers of performance and connoisseurs of camp, who are also *tired of the gender of things.* These readers find more interest in Sexton's YouTube videos than her fallopian tubes. And they now have a vital resource in Amanda Golden's essay collection, which moves beyond Second Wave acclaim and belle-lettres disdain to reactivate Sexton in all her incarnations.

There's Saint Anne for the suffering that need her.
There's "Bad Anne," the alleged bottom-feeder.
Right-on Anne's femme *and* queer;
Her performance career
Endears drag fans and digital readers.

Rejecting inherited knockoff versions of Anne, the contributors to *This Business of Words* remap the extraordinary constellation of her career. The poet of "The Starry Night" had star power. Golden highlights Sexton's professional success and celebrity in her Introduction, insisting that we credit the poet "for collecting and curating her own fame and opportunities" (4). Untutored by the academy like the rest of the so-called confessional poets, unschooled by PoBiz protocols, this maverick was "a reader without a clear curriculum," as Golden puts it (9). So Sexton invented her own.

Uncannily, her ventures into publishing, publicity, and performance anticipate emergent curricula in the humanities. Offering perspectives on Sexton's poems, letters, photographs, scripts, vocal inflections, network, and fan base, the essays in *This Business of Words* reflect the material and methodological diversity we now expect in next-generation literary studies. Added bonus: poets join their academic colleagues in reassessing an important poet and performance artist. Victoria Van Hyning's essay compels us to consider how Sexton rebelled against establishment conventions for spoken word recordings, drawing inspiration from Bob Dylan and Janis Joplin—and forming her own rock band, Her Kind. A decade after Langston Hughes's jazz collaborations with Leonard Feather and Charles Mingus, Sexton brought her own beat to American poetry.

Sexton has confounded the canon's gatekeepers for decades--even in women's poetry anthologies. Barbara Segnitz and Carol Rainey gave her considerable attention in their 1973 *Psyche: The Feminine Poetic Consciousness*, praising her frank attunement to women's experience. Cora Kaplan dedicated her 1975 *Salt and Bitter and Good* to Sexton. In England, Fleur Adcock confessed a change of heart about Sexton in her 1987 *Faber Book of 20th Century Women's Poetry*, snubbing her poems for allegedly being derivative. Twenty years later in *Anne Sexton's Confessional Poetics*, Jo Gill intervened with a poststructuralist makeover that brought new attention to the poet's television appearances. (In *This Business of Words,* Gill offers a makeover of Sexton's domestic interiors, drawing on Gaston Bachelard's poetics of space.)

Sexton can still raise the hackles of hidebound critics, triggering creative chronology and posthumous diva wars in literary accounting. Some of Golden's contributors push back against the anachronistic narrative that Sexton merely copied Robert Lowell and/or Plath—the literary establishment's preferred confessional poets. Focusing on Sexton's institutional voices of the academy and the asylum, Kamran Javadizadeh reminds us that *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* was already in press before her workshop teacher Lowell published *Life Studies;* moreover, his prior student W. D. Snodgrass was the greater influence on her debut work. David Trinidad disregards the persistent myth that Plath's *Ariel* (1963) somehow shaped Sexton's earlier volumes, charting the poets' mutual respect for each other's work within their professional rivalry. An admitted "Sexton- and Plath-oholic" (155), Trinidad nimbly diverts the kind of dueling divas narrative that we see in the recent FX series *Feud: Bette and Joan*.

Given Sexton's status as "the prettiest, most glamorous, and most successful poet around," as contributor Kathleen Ossip puts it (187), Joan Crawford and Bette Davis make cameos in *This Business of Words*. Ossip relishes Sexton's Crawford intonations in the TV documentary *Anne Sexton at Home,* and Jeffery Conway likens the poet's late career

to Crawford's *and* Davis's, throwing in a touch of "Auntie Mame chutzpah" for good measure (213). Sexton embodies more than enough shades of fabulous. Trinidad reminds us that her shoe doubled as her ashtray in Lowell's workshop, and a fan's poem that contributor Christopher Grobe recovers hails Sexton's "furcoat height" and "Stanwyck aloofness" (147). Whether femme fatale or diva, Camp Anne is much more than her staginess. Sexton may have moved beyond poetic propriety, but she *moved* people with her performances. She was, in Grobe's words, "a Method actor of the self" (131). His essay considers fans' letters and poems as memorials of "Sexton's presence, the social and emotional charge these readings held" for the men and women who attended them (135-36).

Anita Helle's wide-angle essay on Sexton's "photographic self-fashioning" also highlights the poet's dances with affect and authenticity, including the collaborative and transactional nature of her "videated life" in photographs, television, and digital cultures (38, 65). Helle opens up the cultural dynamics of Sexton's famed *glamour*, an attribute that several contributors notice. From her family photo albums and early fashion shoots to online postings of her image in the "beauty-gate" scandal of 2012, Sexton is an active emblem for what I have termed the image-text of women's poetry studies. Helle points out Sexton's vanguard status "in her awareness of changing literacies and shifting boundaries of word and image" (42). It's as if Sexton prepared her archive for the coming of digital humanities.

My only quarrel with *This Business of Words* is some contributors' sense that her later work is all of a piece—and a uniformly bad piece at that. *Not So. Not So.* As Jeanne Marie Beaumont asserts in her essay on *Transformations* (1971), "there is often a subtle method to Sexton's mania for simile"—a judgment that also applies to her subsequent and posthumous volumes (226). Uncovering an unpredictable and posthumanist lyric *I* in the "Bestiary U.S.A." part of *45 Mercy Street* (1976), Dorothea Lasky finds this voice "so wild it may not be a self at all" (251). For me, the wild ride of *The Awful Rowing Toward God* (1975) remains one of Sexton's most forceful works (a position the audience of my antiphonal performance confirmed). If Sexton's riveting recordings and performances made her heir to Edna St. Vincent Millay and Dylan Thomas, her late religious poetry made her heir to Christopher Smart (a male muse she acknowledges in her 1974 volume *The Death Notebooks*). But count me with Conway and Mann: Sexton also had me at "Her Kind."