Ovid, Plath, Baskin, Hughes

by Holly Ranger

Ann Skea records a conversation with Ted Hughes in 1995, in which he comments that he is currently translating more of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and writing 'about 100 poems about things I should have resolved thirty years ago. Should have written then, but couldn't't'.[1] After the publication in January 1997 of the translations as *Tales from Ovid*, a letter to Keith Sagar in August suggests that this 'vast pile of pieces about SP & me [...] Written at odd times since the early seventies' have coalesced into the collection that would appear in 1998 as *Birthday Letters* (*LTH* 692). The exact dates of composition of the *Birthday Letters* poems remain contested (a letter to Sagar in July 1998 suggests that Hughes began 'writing the last few ones' after the publication of *Winter Pollen* (*LTH* 720)); but Hughes certainly begins to compile and edit the poems to Plath while he is translating Ovid and working on his translation of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*: the poet describes how the psychic energy freed by writing poetic letters to Plath 'went into Ovid, then the Oresteia, Phèdre maybe – and parts of Alcestis' (*LTH* 720). Critics have noted the seepage between the autobiographical poetry and the classical translations. Michael Silk has discussed Hughes's explicit figuration of Plath-as-Electra in both *Birthday Letters* and *Oresteia*.[2] Anne Whitehead, Lynda Bundtzen, and Leslie Cahoon have all scrutinised Hughes's self-figuration as Ovid's Orpheus in *Birthday Letters*.[3]

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[1] Transcription included in Ann Skea, 'A Timeline of Hughes' Life and Work', in *The Laughter of Foxes: A Study of Ted Hughes*, 2nd edn., Keith Sagar (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), p. xxxii. This paper is an extended version of a paper presented at the conference Sylvia Plath: Letters, Words and Fragments, Ulster University, 10 November 2017. I wish to thank the Ted Hughes scholars I met on the Hughes panel for their warm welcome and intellectual generosity, and I thank Mark Wormald for his comments and suggestions for developing the conference paper. Thanks are due to Greg Woolf and the Institute of Classical Studies for the postdoctoral funding which has enabled this research.

[2] Michael Silk, 'Hughes, Plath, and Aeschylus: Allusion and Poetic Language', Arion 14:3 (2007), pp. 1–34.

[3] Anne Whitehead, 'Refiguring Orpheus: The possession of the past in Ted Hughes' Birthday Letters', *Textual Practice*, 13:2 (1999), pp. 227–41; Lynda Bundtzen, 'Mourning Eurydice: Ted Hughes as Orpheus in Birthday Letters', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 23:3/4 (2000) pp. 455–69; Leslie Cahoon, 'Haunted Husbands: Orpheus's Song (Ovid, Metamorphoses 10) in light of Ted Hughes's Birthday Letters', in *Defining Genre and Gender in Latin Literature*, eds. William Batstone and Garth Tissol (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), pp. 239–67.

Bundtzen has also argued that Plath's spectral presence in the translated tale of Myrrha – an incest narrative that culminates in the birth of the boy Adonis – is used by Hughes to comment on the father–daughter narrative that proved so generative for Plath's late poetry.[4]

Yet the presence of Plath in *Tales from Ovid* has not been fully explored. The examples above illustrate how references to Plath – in the tale of Pyramus and Thisbe, for example, two lovers fated to be reunited only in death – are consistently read biographically as representations of Plath-the-woman.[5] This paper aims to explore some implications of reading the presence of Plath in *Tales from Ovid* as literary allusions to Plath's engagement throughout her body of work with the Roman poet Ovid and his epic poem of bodies changing forms, *Metamorphoses*.

Margaret Uroff, Ekbert Faas, and Diane Middlebrook, among others, have explored the 'call and response' between the work of Plath and Hughes; and Erica Wagner and Heather Clark remind us of the caution necessary in any attempt to establish a definitive chronology or direction of allusion between two poets who lived and worked so closely together.[6] Yet many critical treatments of their poetic interaction have overlooked *Tales from Ovid*, and my argument here is that the connections between Hughes, Plath, and Ovid that erupt in Hughes's final two collections of poetry are similarly complex and longstanding. I begin by considering Hughes's 1988 essay 'Sylvia Plath: The Evolution of "Sheep in Fog"', in which he becomes the first critic of Plath's work to note her engagement with Ovidian figures. Building on Hughes's argument that the mythic figures of Phaeton and Icarus provide the interpretative key for understanding Plath's *Ariel* poems, I provide further examples of Ovidian figures in Plath's poetry. To focalise the allusive nexus between Ovid, Plath, and Hughes, I compare Plath's poem 'Sculptor' (1958) – dedicated to Leonard Baskin and in which Baskin is cast as Ovid's Pygmalion – to the tale of Pygmalion as translated by Hughes in *Tales from Ovid*. I present some further evidence for Plath's presence (or conspicuous absence) in *Tales from Ovid*, before discussing some implications of Hughes's (re)arrangement of the translations. Finally, I suggest that while *Birthday Letters* represents an explicit

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[4] Bundtzen, pp. 460–1.
[5] See also, e.g., the essays collected in *Ted Hughes and the Classics*, ed. Roger Rees (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
[6] Diane Middlebrook, 'The poetry of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes: call and response', in *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, ed. Jo Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 156–71; Margaret Uroff, *Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1979); Ekbert Faas, 'Chapters of a shared mythology: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes', in *The Achievement of Ted Hughes*, ed. Keith Sagar (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983); Erica Wagner, *Ariel's Gift: A Commentary on Birthday Letters by Ted Hughes* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000); Heather Clark, *The Grief of Influence: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

engagement with Plath, *Tales from Ovid* presents an implicit dialogue with Plath's work and her own Ovidian allusion.

The Evolution of 'Sheep in Fog'

In 'Sylvia Plath: The Evolution of "Sheep in Fog"', an essay written for an illustrated lecture to the Wordsworth Trust on 25 February 1988, Hughes delineates the underlying mythic elements of Plath's poems 'Ariel' and 'Sheep in Fog' (*WP* 191-211; *SPCP* 239, 262).[7] He argues that a key mythic figure for Plath was Phaeton, child of Apollo, god of the sun and poetry. In Book 1 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Phaeton asks to drive the chariot of the sun across the sky, killing himself and scorching the earth when he loses control of his father's horses (*Met.* 1.750–2.366). In Hughes's reading, 'Sheep in Fog' represents a continuation of the Phaeton myth that first appeared in Plath's poem 'Ariel', written three months earlier. 'Ariel' ostensibly describes a ride on a horse ('How one we grow, / Pivot of heels and knees!'), and the speaker imagines herself first as Godiva, before flying like an 'arrow', 'Into the red / Eye, the cauldron of morning' (*SPCP* 239). Hughes writes, 'the speaker, the I, hurls herself free from all earthly confinement and aims herself and her horse – as the poem says, "suicidal" directly into the red, rising sun' (*WP* 199). He sets out for the reader how this theme – 'a dawn ride towards a kind of death' – continues in 'Sheep in Fog', a second poem inspired by this same morning ride (*WP* 199). While in 'Ariel' the speaker appeared as the triumphant 'spiritual hero, she is now the failed one, the one who disappoints, trudging towards a mournful dissolution in bottomless, starless, fatherless, darkness' (*WP* 199).

Using a manuscript draft of the poem, which contains the crossed-out lines, 'The world rusts around us / Ribs, spokes, a scrapped chariot', Hughes reads the retained word 'rust' in stanza two of the finished poem as referring to 'the rusty iron wreckage of a chariot', an image which ghosts the final version (*WP* 200). Hughes now introduces the myth of Phaeton to link the two poems, positioning Plath as the reckless child who dies in the process of attempting – 'suicidal' – to emulate the divine father:

> As an image of her Ariel flight in the chariot of the God of Poetry, which was also her attempt to soar (plunge) into the inspirational form of her inaccessible father, to convert her former physical suicide into a psychic rebirth, that myth [of Phaeton] is the parable of *Ariel* and of her life and death. (*WP* 200–1)

[7] SPCP: Sylvia Plath, Sylvia Plath: Collected Poems, ed. Ted Hughes (London: Faber & Faber, 1981).

At this point in the poetic process, however, 'the myth shows no sign of having broken into her consciousness' (*WP* 201).

Keeping the myth of Phaeton in mind, Hughes re-reads the lines retained in stanza three of the finished poem, with the rhyme and repetition of 'morning' (mourning) and the 'dolorous bells' of the horse's hooves, as 'bells for the dead Phaeton' (*WP* 202; the transformation at the end of Phaeton's story in *Metamorphoses* occurs when his grieving sisters become poplar trees). Then, as Hughes writes, 'with a real shock we come to the actual body of the fallen charioteer' in Plath's draft line 'Like a dead man left out' (*WP* 202). This dead man has metamorphosed into a wilting flower by the final version of stanza four: '(like the flower which replaces the body of Adonis in Shakespeare's Venus and Adonis), this metamorphosed flower now has a lively, coded meaning for us' [i.e. of a dead man] (*WP* 203). Shakespeare is a possible intertext for Plath's engagement with Ovid here – and as a favourite author of Hughes, one through whom he may suggest his own influence on Plath – but Shakespeare is drawing on Ovid: the tale of Venus and Adonis is found in Book 10 of *Metamorphoses,* and is one of the twenty-four Ovidian episodes chosen for *Tales from Ovid*. Next, Hughes turns to the new image which completes stanza four ('the far / Fields melt my heart' (*SPCP* 262)) and takes the word 'melt' to suggest that the myth of Phaeton here 'reaches through to another myth' and 'has metamorphosed the sun's chariot and horses into the wax of the wings of Icarus' (*WP* 205–6). Icarus, who appears in *Metamorphoses* Book 8, is a boy who, like Phaeton, ignores his father's advice and whose wings 'melt' when he flies too high and too close to the sun. Instead of flying into the cauldron of morning as at the close of 'Ariel' – a 'triumphant Phaeton reaching her Father' – the speaker now plunges as Icarus into the 'Starless and fatherless… dark water' of the sea that swallows the boy at the end of his tale (*WP* 206); in Ovid, Phaeton's journey in the chariot of the sun also ends with a plunge into the waves when Tethys welcomes him into her waves, *quae me subiectis excipit undis* (*Met*. 2.68).[8] Hughes concludes by positioning 'Sheep in Fog' as a coda to 'Ariel' which 'admits' that Plath's biomythographical narrative project had 'failed' (*WP* 207).

Hughes argues persuasively for the presence of Phaeton and Icarus in 'Ariel' and 'Sheep in Fog'. Further evidence for his reading can be found in Plath's poems. The lines 'People or stars / Regard me sadly' ('Sheep in Fog' (*SPCP* 262)) suggest both the personified constellations who flee Phaeton's flaming chariot (The Plough, Scorpio, and the Ploughman Boötes), and the mourning of his sisters, the Heliades,

[8] All Latin quotations are taken from P. Ovidi Nasonis. *Metamorphoses*, ed. Richard Tarrant (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); unless otherwise indicated, all English translations are my own.

which closes the episode (*Met.* 2.171-7; *Heliades lugent*, 2.340). In 'Ariel', the speaker's horse 'Hauls me through air' (*SPCP* 239), translating the violence of Ovid's *trahit* (Phaeton is 'dragged along', *Met.* 2.230); and the deleted lines from the manuscript draft of 'Sheep in Fog' include the detail of the 'spokes' (*radii*, *Met.* 3.317) of the wrecked chariot. A more momentary allusion in 'Sheep in Fog' may be suggested by 'They threaten | To let me through to a heaven' (*SPCP* 262): when Phaeton's mother, Clymene, tells the hitherto 'fatherless' boy to seek out his father's house, Phaeton leaps up 'his head ablaze / with the idea of heaven' (*concipit aethera mente, Met.* 1.776; Hughes's translation (*CP* 881).

One criticism of Hughes's approach is his alignment of Plath's poetic voice with a male poetic voice (Phaeton, Icarus), which overlooks the complex work in myth and gender with which Plath is engaged in much of her poetry. Hughes may have wished to position Plath within a male literary tradition to protect her reputation (that is, to establish her as a poet not a 'poetess'); and Plath herself does initially look to male models – both authorial and archetypal – and suppresses references to female models, real and mythic. A further criticism may be levelled at Hughes's biographical interpretation of the mythic presences in Plath's work. He chooses to link 'Sheep in Fog' and 'Ariel' by two mythical episodes that both contain wayward children and their ultimately destructive relationships with their genius or divine fathers (a popular narrative of Plath's own life). Elsewhere, Hughes vehemently refutes the image of Plath as 'a young woman hurtling to disintegration shedding rags of poetry – leaping into Aetna [and] bursting into flames as she fell'; but this is an elegant *praeteritio* that serves to emphasise the connection between Plath and spectacular self-destruction.[9] In alluding to Typhon, the monster buried beneath Mt Etna (and a tale found in *Metamorphoses* Book 5, 5.346-358), Hughes links Plath once more to a progeny rebelling destructively against the divine father (or, perhaps, rebelling against herself: Typhon, also known as Set, is the mythical enemy of the goddess Isis, whom Hughes uses as a cipher for Plath in his 'Isis', (*CP* 1114)). In his focus on an autobiographical use of the Phaeton myth Hughes misses Plath's literary classicism. An alternative reading begins by recalling that in *Metamorphoses*, Phaeton's is not a story about emulating one's father, but about establishing paternity (Phaeton is attempting to prove that Apollo is his father).
Read in this light, 'Ariel' and 'Sheep in Fog' may represent Plath's attempt to establish a literary heritage and insert herself into the paternal literary canon, proving herself a rightful heir. The speaker's confidence in 'Ariel' even suggests that she is ready to forge on ahead without any sense of male literary anxiety (the female element is emphasised by 'lioness', 'sister', 'Godiva'). Three months later in 'Sheep

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[9] Quoted in Sagar, *The Laughter of Foxes*, p. 69.

in Fog', the speaker is 'fatherless' (*SPCP* 262) – in my reading, Plath does not inevitably repeat the destructive myth or fail in the act of emulation, but breaks out of the myth's confines.

Plath references Phaeton explicitly in a journal entry from June 1959: 'about Ambition: universal, driving Ambition; how to harness it, not be a Phaeton to its galloping horse' (*JSP* 495).[10] Here, Phaeton represents literary ambition, perhaps at risk of being out of control. Plath emphasises the need for measured intellectual risk-taking (the passage comes at the end of an ambitious list of potential literary projects), and she reminds herself not be 'dragged along' (*trahit*, *Met*. 2.230) in its power – to show more discipline than Phaeton. She similarly employs Icarus as a code for ambition in a letter to her brother expressing the necessity to challenge herself and travel to the UK to study in Cambridge: 'my wings need to be tried. o icarus' [sic] (*LSP1* 944).[11] Plath's linking and encoding of these myths chimes with Ovid's own self-figuration as both Phaeton and Icarus, who appear as a pair in two of Ovid's poems of exile, *Tristia*, suggesting that Plath may have drawn on Ovidian sources additional to *Metamorphoses* (Valerie Wise has argued that Ovid similarly uses Phaeton and Icarus as ciphers for his poetic ambition).[12] Plath uses her Ovidian models here to express an 'unfeminine' desire to be a successful intellectual, an idea contra to 1950s views of feminine propriety (compare how Apollo tells Phaeton that to successfully control the horses, he must fly against the prevailing winds, *in adversum… contrarius*, *Met*. 2.72-3). Plath harnesses the aura of authority of the paternal literary canon, but tames it by subverting the gender and conclusion of the tale. Reading Plath's use of Phaeton and Icarus intertextually with her fiction – which often portrays a young woman caught at the moment of choosing between the seemingly mutually exclusive roles of 'writer' and 'mother' – we find a metaphor for the difficulty facing a young woman in the 1950s attempting to negotiate the 'middle path' safely by taming her masculine ambition. Both Phaeton and Icarus are advised by their fathers not to fly too high or too low, but to take the middle path: *medio… ibis*, *Met*. 2.137; *medio… limite*, *Met*. 8.203. Compare Hughes's description of the 'extreme polarity… of Plath's inspiration, and achievement' (*WP* 199).

In his essay, despite his claim that 'We know where this chariot comes from', Hughes declines to name a source for Plath's allusions to Phaeton and Icarus (*WP*

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[10] JSP: Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath: 1950-1962*, ed. Karen Kukil (London: Faber & Faber, 2000).

[11] LSP1: Sylvia Plath, *Letters of Sylvia Plath: Volume 1: 1940–1956*, eds. Peter Steinberg and Karen Kukil (London: Faber & Faber, 2017).

[12] Phaeton, Tr. 1.1.79–80 and 3.4.29–30; Icarus, Tr. 1.1.89–90 and 3.4.21–24; Valerie Wise, 'Flight Myths in Ovid's Metamorphoses: An Interpretation of Phaethon and Daedalus', *Ramus* 6 (1977), pp. 44–59.

200). He briefly considers Plath's print of Brueghel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (1560s) as a source of inspiration (only Icarus's foot is visible in the painting), but ultimately concludes that it was a 'submerged' 'mythic force' trying to break into her consciousness, a 'certainly terrible large-scale psycho-mythological drama' (*WP* 207). Hughes is a careful reader of Plath, and astutely notes that she has incorporated the myths of Phaeton and Icarus in these two poems 'with beautiful, extremely powerful effect, yet without any overt mention of either' (*WP* 206). Heather Clark has proposed that by providing the myth of Phaeton as the interpretative key for Plath's poems, Hughes may have wished to suggest an indebtedness of her great poem 'Ariel' to his own earlier 'Phaetons' poem, published in *The Hawk in the Rain* in 1957 (*CP* 33); Plath read and suggested edits for this poem (*LSP1* 1281).[13]

I think that in this essay Hughes becomes the first critic to note Plath's allusions to Ovidian figures (more recently, Jo Gill has noted the presence of the tales of Echo and Narcissus, and Diana and Actaeon in Plath's work, but she does not link Plath explicitly to Ovid).[14] Although he chooses not to name her source explicitly, he uses the verb 'metamorphosed' four times, perhaps unconsciously betraying the origin of the tales (*WP* 202, 203, 206, 211); Hughes also uses 'metamorphoses' of Plath's work in his essay 'Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems', and is quoted using this term by Ekbert Faas.[15] Further, in his emphasis on the covert nature of the allusions of these two poems, he also becomes one of the first critics to note the influence of what Kathleen Connors has called Plath's 'hidden mentors'.[16] Hughes's demurral may therefore be an attempt to protect Plath's hidden sources ('any mention would have killed the suggestive power of the mythic ideas', *WP* 206); such covert literary allusion has become an important aspect of my own readings of Plath's Ovidianism.

I am interested in the ways in which Plath's Phaeton resurfaces, or is perhaps re-used in Hughes's translation of the tale of Phaeton. *Tales from Ovid* is notable for its 'characteristic expansion[s]' and deviations from the Latin text.[17] A close reading reveals that Hughes's additions to Ovid's Phaeton episode borrow

[13] Clark, p. 156.
[14] Jo Gill, *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 54, 60.
[15] Ted Hughes, 'Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems', in *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, ed. C. Newman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), p. 187; Ekbert Faas, The Unaccommodated Universe (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow, 1980), p. 180.
[16] Kathleen Connors, 'Living Color: The Interactive Arts of Sylvia Plath', in *Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath's Art of the Visual*, eds. Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 118-28.
[17] Raphael Lyne, 'Ovid in English translation', in *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*, ed. Philip Hardie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 262.

vocabulary from both the essay on Plath's Phaetons and the two poems 'Ariel' and 'Sheep in Fog'. In the essay, for example, he writes that the poems express 'a wish to emulate her father and follow him into death', a wish restated in his translation of Phaeton's 'idiot emulation', amending Ovid's description of Phaeton as 'unwitting' (*inscius*, 2.148; *CP* 887; later, Phaeton is 'unlucky', *infelix*, 2.179). The cities Phaeton flies over (in the Latin, *magnae pereunt cum moenibus urbes*, 'Great cities are destroyed with their walls', 2.214), become 'black stumps of burnt stone' (*CP* 890), picking up the 'blackening' and 'black' charred imagery of Plath's poems. The translation of the Phaeton episode is not alone in its use of Plath's poetry, and I suggest that many of Hughes's expansions and deviations from the Latin – and many of his unusual choices of episodes for inclusion (and exclusion) in *Tales from Ovid* – may be explained by looking at Plath's engagement with those tales.

Sylvia Plath's Tales from Ovid

Plath first learned Latin from her father Otto, who had majored in classical languages at Northwestern College and continued his Latin to doctoral level at Harvard, where it was mandatory for studying entomology.[18] Later, she studied Latin formally for four years at Gamaliel Bradford High School, Wellesley (1945-1949), where Ovid's poetry remains on the syllabus today. Childhood letters and journals detail her Latin homework and reveal playful experimentation with Latin prose composition to communicate secretly with her brother (*LSP1* 87, 105, 106, 107). The poem 'Ouija' wittily recalls 'every foul declension' of her school Latin lessons, and her fears of miscomprehension are conveyed by the 'unintelligible syllables' of her new bee hive 'like a Roman mob [...] I lay my ear to furious Latin' (*SPCP* 77, 212). Plath seems to have received a standard introduction to Latin poetry, evidenced by allusions to Catullus, Virgil, and Apuleius – and her personal library catalogued so far contains many books in Greek and Latin as well as classical works in English, French, German, and Italian translation – but it is Ovid's *Metamorphoses* which most often lends characters and themes to Plath's myth-infused poetry.[19]

Her work displays a sustained thematic interest in images of metamorphosis, repeatedly meditating on insects and the changing moon, and using metamorphic imagery to describe pregnancy and the ill or menstruating body. Mental ill-health is also repeatedly figured as a type of metamorphosis, most frequently represented by images of women overwhelmed by plant-life, as in the unsettling blur between

[18] Edward Butscher, *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness: A Biography* (Tucson: Schaffner Press, 2003), p. 4.
[19] Available online at: http://www.librarything.com/catalog/SylviaPlathLibrary/yourlibrary (accessed 2 December 2018).

woman and plant as a woman melts into the flower-patterned carpets in 'Miss Drake Proceeds to Supper' (*SPCP* 41). One characteristic of Plath's experimentation with Ovidian allusion is her postmodern blend of classical images overlaid by domestic scenes, pulp fiction, and pop culture references, and the transformation of the Ovidian *locus terribilis* – a parodic inversion of a Virgilian pastoral idyll, the *locus terribilis* is a place that signals danger to women – into the hallucinatory and opium-filled hospital wards of surgeons and psychiatrists. (We can compare Hughes's approach in *Tales from Ovid*, punctuating the narrative with turn-of-the-millennium slang and imagery, and pathologising the mania of Ovid's characters.) Plath's interest in the potential for dark humour and the grotesque in metamorphosis may owe a debt to Franz Kafka's tragic insect-man (Plath received a copy of Kafka's short stories for her twentieth birthday (*LSP1* 518)), but there are allusions to many specific stories found together in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The tales of the metamorphosed tree-nymphs Daphne, Syrinx, and Pitys, for example, explicitly inform the poem 'Virgin in a Tree', which uses the myths to critique cultural imperatives to chastity, and the diptych 'On the Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad' and 'On the Plethora of Dryads', poems which satirise the male nature poet's poetic vision and need for a female muse (*SPCP* 81, 65, 67). The reader finds a reversal of the tale of Diana and Actaeon as a woman is chased down by an angered lover's hounds in 'The Snowman on the Moor' (*SPCP* 58); the conception of a child is experienced both as a Narcissus-like rapture and Danaë's shower of gold in the verse play 'Three Women' (*SPCP* 176); and the dazzling beauty of the Midas effect of autumn's spread of gilded leaves in 'In Midas' Country' (*SPCP* 99) is given a chilling twist in 'The Rival', a poem addressed to an Other whose 'first gift is making stone out of everything. / I wake to a mausoleum; you are here, / Ticking your fingers on the marble table' (*SPCP* 166).

Among the many literary references that saturate their love affair, Ovidian characters and imagery can be found in many of their early exchanges. Plath is Semele to Hughes's Jove, who blasts women with lightning and in whose wake 'Charred and ravened women lie' (*LSP* 1166; *SPCP* 22); and she evokes *Metamorphoses* in letters to her mother which describe her transformation upon meeting Hughes.[20] One of the first poems Plath writes for Hughes and which takes him as its subject, 'Faun', describes a Pan-like figure's transformation to woodland beast (*SPCP* 35); 'Ode for Ted' was also originally titled 'Poem for Pan' (*LSP1* 1168). Initially titled the more explicitly Latinate 'Faunus', the poem was composed under

[20] John Henderson, 'Ch-ch-ch-changes', in *Ovidian Transformations: Essays on the Metamorphoses and its Reception*, eds. Philip Hardie, Alessandro Barchiesi and Stephen Hinds (Cambridge: Cambridge Philological Society, 1999), p. 303.

the working title 'Metamorphosis', and provides an early representation by Plath of Hughes as Orpheus, a bard whose songs charm animals, trees, and stones to follow him (*LSP1* 1165; *JSP* 410; 163, 323; *Met.* 11.1-2). It is also to Ovid that Plath turns at the breakdown of their marriage. 'The Courage of Shutting-Up' (*SPCP* 209) is crucially informed by the tale of Philomela – sister of Procne, raped by Tereus, mutilated of her tongue, and metamorphosed into a bird from *Metamorphoses* Book 6. At the centre of Ovid's episode is 'a contest between narrators' – between Tereus, a king who lies about his crime, and the mute Philomela, who must silently weave her story – an unequal contest that Plath stages in her poem.[21] Characteristic of Plath's blackly comic streak, she bathetically transforms Ovid's simile describing Philomela's castrated tongue as an adder (*utque… mutilatae cauda colubrae*, 'like the cut-off tail of an adder', *Met.* 6.559) – implying a latent danger – to a worm, 'pink and quiet'. At the climax of the poem, the narrator asks, 'the tongue, / Indefatigable, purple. Must it be cut out?' (*SPCP* 209), alluding to the 'purple marks' (*purpureas… notas*, *Met.* 6.577) made in the tapestry by which Philomela communicates her story. In addition to its extended appearance in *Metamorphoses*, the myth of Philomela also appears in Ovid's *Fasti* (*Calendar*) on February 26th (2.629, 853-856) – the date that Plath first met Hughes. Plath herself may provocatively suggest a biographical reading of her use of Philomela to portray a spousal contest of narration.

The tone and imagery of Plath's Philomela poem – the image of a broken record, the black disks replaying old arguments, old myths, 'Tattooing over and over the same blue grievances' – may inform Hughes's deviations from the Latin in his translation of the tale of Philomela, titled 'Tereus'. He alters Ovid's line describing the mutilated Philomela's inspiration to weave a message to her sister from 'great grief / is inventive, and ingenuity is born of wretched events' (*grande doloris / ingenium est, miserisque venit sollertia rebus*, *Met.* 6.574–5) to: 'frustration, prolonged, begets invention. / And a vengeful anger nurses it' (*CP* 1031). Later in *Tales from Ovid*, in the tale of Deianeira (a woman betrayed by her husband Hercules and the unwitting vehicle of his demise), Hughes may have in mind Plath's 'disks of outrage' – 'The disks revolve, they ask to be heard' – in his decision to have Deianeira brood on 'what it means to be jilted', and to translate Ovid's 'her mind travelled various paths' [lit.] (*in cursus animus varios abit*, *Met.* 9.152) as 'she revolved her options' for revenge (*CP* 972). A more extended engagement by Hughes with one of Plath's earlier tales from Ovid can be found via her engagement with the tale of Pygmalion, to which I now turn.

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[21] Philip Hardie, *Ovid's Poetics of Illusion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 86.

Ovid, Plath, Baskin, Hughes

In Ovid, the story of a man-made statue who comes to life is in part a story about the creation of beautiful art that has the power to move the observer and to confound fiction and reality. It is also a story about the eroticised and gendered power struggle between an artist and muse. Pygmalion's statue-woman, Galatea, informs both the eerie plaster-cast doppelgänger of 'The Lady and the Earthenware Head' and 'In Plaster', and the 'marvellous product' of the pre-packaged woman in 'The Applicant'; finally, in 'Sculptor' (on which I will focus) ,we see the artist at work on his perfect woman (*SPCP* 69, 158, 221; 91). Across the poems, Plath's speakers take on multiple narrative perspectives, shifting between the sculptor, the created woman herself, or a third person observing the act of artistic creation and fixity. This labile subject position between and within the poems reflects the dilemma of the female poet who is automatically aligned with Pygmalion's statue as a woman, yet as a writer is linked to the sculptor himself – a blurring of subjectivity that destabilises the myth's paradigm of male creativity (compare Plath's description of herself as a 'feminine pygmalion' [sic] (*JSP* 191)).[22]

In 'The Lady and the Earthenware Head', the speaker observes a created woman who both is and is-not herself. Plath had received a clay model of her own head as a gift from a Smith College room-mate who had made the sculpture in Leonard Baskin's art class.[23] Plath describes the earthenware head of the poem in her journals as 'a terrible and holy token of identity' sucking her into itself, growing in size and power as her own flesh withers, in a comic reversal of Wilde's Dorian Gray (*JSP* 332). When read alongside 'Sculptor', in which Baskin himself is cast in the role of Pygmalion, we better understand the speaker's uneasy relationship with an earthenware doppelgänger made under Pygmalion's watch. Plath composed 'Sculptor' in June 1958, shortly after meeting Esther and Leonard Baskin for the first time in May (*JSP* 379). In a July 1958 journal entry, Plath recounts a visit to Baskin's studio, describing a room littered with 'dead men, bronzes' and stone bodies, and a half-finished statue with its outline drawn on wood (his *Grieving Angel*, 1958 (*JSP* 406–7)). Hughes tells us that the rows of 'mutilated dead', the eerie half-carved bald angel, and the 'the person with the owl growing out of his shoulder' left a deep impression on Plath, resonating with her own 'pantheon' of gods.[24]

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[22] Plath had also seen the 1938 film of George Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion (LSP1 731).
[23] Connors and Bayley, p. 110.
[24] Hughes, 'Notes on the Chronological Order', p. 189.

Before the Hugheses met the Baskins in person, Leonard Baskin appeared in Plath's journals four times, and most significantly in a dream (*JSP* 317, 347, 371):

> Dreamed also I met & somehow loved the unmet and hence unloved Leonard Baskin in some strange house, his wife pale as death, her hands blackening with that terrible nameless disease. Ted says he will be, red, fat. No. Saw floating in a dream his 'Large Dead Man', fat, obscene, puffing. Stone-grey. I gushed, purple, spontaneous passages, prose-praise. Hell, Baskin, said, you read all that in a book. (*JSP* 321).

Plath's anxiety dream may have been influenced by rumours among the Smith faculty of Baskin's caustic demeanour, but it is notable for its revelation of the artistic power-struggle between literature and the visual arts that would later permeate Hughes's own artistic collaboration with Baskin (as Carrie Smith has shown).[25] This sense of inferiority recurs in Plath's tentative request in April 1959 to Baskin to dedicate the poem to him: 'It was written for you, but I felt you might not like the poem… I know parts of it are rank falsehood, for you claim to have no dreams' (*LSP1* 316).

In Ovid's version, stress is laid on Pygmalion's skill and craft. Plath similarly describes the sculptor at work, but rather than witnessing an act of creation she imagines that the sculptor communes with 'bodiless' spirits, who visit the sculptor and competitively 'barter endlessly / … for bodies / Palpable as his' (*SPCP* 91). The sculptor's carving technique is hieratic ('Hands moving[,] move priestlier / Than priest's hands'), conducting the spirits into 'sure station in bronze, wood, stone' (*SPCP* 91). In the final stanza, Plath incorporates and reverses her own early dream encounter with Baskin, as the 'spirits' who 'without him, were beggared… of their bodies' possess the sculptor and 'Try entry, enter nightmares', 'Until his chisel bequeaths / Them life livelier than ours'.

Hughes's Pygmalion episode in *Tales from Ovid* is over one hundred lines longer than the Latin text's fifty-four lines.[26] When read alongside 'Sculptor', it becomes clear that many of the translation's additional lines are taken from Plath's Pygmalion-figure:

> Yet he still dreamed of woman.
> He dreamed
> Unbrokenly awake as asleep
> […]
> Though this dream

[25] Carrie Smith, 'Illustration and Ekphrasis: The Working Drafts of Ted Hughes's Cave Birds', in *The Boundaries of the Literary Archive: Reclamation and Representation*, eds. Carrie Smith and Lisa Stead (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), pp. 133.
[26] Compare A.S. Kline's English translation here: https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/Metamorph10.php#anchor_Toc64105570.

> Was not so much the dream of a perfect woman
> As a spectre, sick of unbeing,
> That had taken possession of his body
> To find herself a life.
>
> She moved into his hands,
> She took possession of his fingers
> And began to sculpt a perfect woman.
> So he watched his hands shaping a woman
> As if he were still asleep…
> […]
>
> So he had made a woman
> Lovelier than any living woman…
> She might have moved, he thought…
> […]
> For this woman so palpably a woman
> Became his life. (*CP* 965–6)

At the beginning of the episode, Hughes changes Ovid's adjective *caelebs*, 'bachelor' (*Met*. 10. 245), to the epithet 'Pygmalion the sculptor' (*CP* 965). He then borrows Plath's central image of the sculptor-as-spirit-conduit in his description of a bodiless 'spectre sick of unbeing', who takes possession of the sculptor to find herself a 'life' via a night-time visitation: 'nightmare' in Plath, 'dream' in Hughes. Hughes's Pygmalion is Plath's Leonard Baskin. This is also suggested by the imagery and vocabulary of 'Sculptor' which appears in his essay on Baskin, 'The Hanged Man and the Dragonfly', an essay which meditates on metamorphosis, transmogrification, and cycles of change. Hughes argues that Baskin's draughtsmanship is 'A passport between worlds usually kept closed to each other'; and while Baskin has no time for those who claim to commune with other realms, nevertheless, 'Other existences seem to compete for substance… He obviously feels compelled to give these *dramatis personae* their forms' (*WP* 86–7). Reading Hughes's Pygmalion through the lenses of 'Sculptor' and his essay on Baskin reveals Plath as a 'third collaborator' in their creative partnership, as Carrie Smith has termed the role of Plath's spectral absences in the Hughes-Baskin collaboration *Cave Birds*.[27]

In Hughes's 'Pygmalion', the words 'dream', 'dreamed' and 'asleep' are each repeated twice, as are 'moved' and 'hands' (drawing directly on Plath's vocabulary) (*CP* 965). The 'palpable' physicality of the statue again borrows from Plath, and finally, the moment of creation is expressed in a formula that directly echoes

27 Carrie Smith, 'Gazing at Ophelia, Veronica and Sylvia: The Manuscript Drafts of Ted Hughes's Cave Birds', conference paper, Sylvia Plath: Letters, Words and Fragments, Ulster University, 10 November 2017.

'Sculptor' ('livelier than any life'/ 'lovelier than any woman... his life' (*CP* 295–6). Further additions to this episode borrow from elsewhere in Plath's corpus: Pygmalion's mad vision of the Propoetides, which transforms 'Every woman's uterus to a spider. / Her face, voice, gestures, hair became its web. / Her perfume was a floating horror' (*CP* 965), recalls both Esther Greenwood's impression of a woman giving birth as 'nothing but an enormous spider-fat stomach', and the famous reworking of Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' in 'Lady Lazarus': 'Beware / Beware. // Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air' ('Beware! Beware! / His flashing eyes, his floating hair!'; *SPCP* 244).[28] And in Pygmalion's prayer for his statue to come to life, which rises to Venus's ear 'like a great fish' (*CP* 967), we hear the echo of 'like a terrible fish' from Plath's 'Mirror' (*SPCP* 174) (in the Latin, Venus merely 'hears' Pygmalion's prayer, *sensit*, *Met*. 10.277). The final word of this dream-section, 'life', provocatively suggests the rhyme 'wife', a ghostly figure whose presence here is reinforced by the paired repetitions throughout this passage which are suggestive of the double authorship of this translation. If Pygmalion's tale in Ovid is a story about the craft of original artistic creation, Hughes's rendering of the tale becomes an allegory for anxieties of influence and the struggle to create originally in the face of Plath's spectral literary presence. Hughes may have experienced this as a broader struggle to create originally when confronted with the vast tradition of Ovid and his imitators; but we note that Plath's plural genderless spirits have been transformed into a singular, female spectre. Sarah Annes Brown suggests that the female spirit is a comment on the gendered metaphorics of translation – that is, translation as a passive conduit for the original text.[29]

Tales from Ovid

Hughes's substantial alterations to his translation of the tale of Pygmalion are coincident with the clearest evidence of Plath's presence in *Tales from Ovid*; but her literary presence can be found throughout the collection in Hughes's creative translations of the Latin. Some of these allusions are sustained, as in the example of the Pygmalion episode, but many are only momentary. In the tale of Erisychthon, the decision to translate his 'pestilential hunger' (*pestifera*, *Met*. 8.787) as 'insatiable' (*CP* 926) may be informed by Plath's 'insatiate' panther in 'Pursuit' – a poem she wrote after first meeting Hughes and which itself may draw on the myths of Erisychthon and wolfish Lycaon ('He eats, and still his need seeks food' (*SPCP* 22)). Semele's annihilation upon seeing Zeus in his true form ('The nuclear blast / Of his naked impact') echoes the radioactive imagery of 'Elm' and the 'silhouettes'

[28] Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005), p. 61.
[29] Sarah Annes Brown, 'Classics reanimated: Ted Hughes and reflexive translation', in Rees, p. 287.

of women blasted into 'shadows' on the landscape in 'Widow' (*SPCP* 192; 164); and the detail of a living encasement expanding to cover a woman's eyes in Plath's 'In Plaster' may shade Hughes's alteration to his translation of the tale of Myrrha. In Hughes, the bark 'warps upwards / Reaching for her eyes' (*CP* 953); in Ovid, it is Myrrha who 'buries her face in the bark' (*mersitque suos in cortice uultus*, *Met.* 10.498).

Plath is also conspicuously absent where we might expect to find her. The omission of the tale of Daphne, for example, a myth so programmatic to the narrative and themes of *Metamorphoses* as the first instance of a lustful pursuit and the trope of woman-as-art (whether she is fleeing in terror, or metamorphosed into the landscape), is notable. This omission may be due to the fact that Plath engages so clearly with the tale of Daphne in 'Virgin in a Tree' and her dryad poems as a myth of the capture of the female muse by the male poet; the inclusion of the tale of Daphne would have placed their Ovidianism in direct competition. Its inclusion may also have exposed Hughes to attack: the myth of Daphne – whose laurel leaves are worn by the surviving male poet – suggests a ready model for Plath and the afterlife of her poetry. Further omissions are minor details that are biographically significant. When translating the tale of Arethusa's flight from the pursuit of Alpheos (*Met.* 5.572-641), Hughes omits the detail provided in the Latin that she could 'feel [her pursuer's] breath on her hairbands' (*crinales uittas adflabat anhelitus oris*, *Met.* 5.617) – the item Hughes is reported to have stolen from Plath at their infamous first meeting (*CP* 913; *JSP* 212). Hughes may have again omitted the detail as being too obvious and exposing him to charges of exploitation (the reason provided to Keith Sagar for omitting the Orpheus and Eurydice narrative).[30] A further omission can be found in the translation of the tale of Persephone and her kidnap by Dis, lord of the Underworld. In the Latin, Dis drives a chariot with 'rust-dyed reins' (*tinctas ferrugine habenas*, *Met.* 5.404), an adjective Hughes omits (*CP* 904). In this instance, he may be avoiding an allusion to the 'rust' of 'Sheep in Fog'; but returning to 'Sheep in Fog' with the tale of Dis in mind – a kidnapped daughter on a frenzied chariot ride to the Underworld – may confirm Hughes's argument that Plath's poems reveal a mythic ride towards a kind of death (Plath is more explicitly figured as Persephone in *Birthday Letters*).

With this brief survey, I hope to have shown how Plath's Ovidian allusions may in part help to explain some of Hughes's curious selections and omissions in *Tales from Ovid*, from subtle translation choices for individual words to the inclusion or exclusion of entire episodes. Garrett Jacobsen (quoting Keith Sagar) has named Frank Justus Miller's 1916 Loeb Classical Library (Harvard) bi-lingual

30 Sagar, *The Laughter of Foxes*, p. 84.

Latin-English edition of *Metamorphoses* as Hughes's source text for his translations for *Tales from Ovid*.[31] The use of a Loeb edition as a crib is unusual as Hughes's preferred source texts (for Seneca and Aeschylus, among others) are Penguin Classics. Emory University, which holds Hughes's library, has not yet fully catalogued the collection, but it includes many volumes previously owned by Plath. It is tempting to speculate that Hughes's Loeb once belonged to Plath; her copies of Plato's dialogues and Quintilian, for example, are Harvard Loeb editions (if she did not inherit these from her father, who studied Latin at Harvard in the 1920s shortly after Miller's Loeb was published, then she likely acquired these while reading for the English Tripos at Newnham College, Cambridge).[32] An examination of this edition's marginalia and annotations may in time reveal further interconnections between Hughes and Plath as readers and rewriters of Ovid.

Conclusions

The Pygmalion episode is the most creatively expanded tale in Hughes's translation, and this draws attention to the rearrangement of the sequence of tales within which Pygmalion's tale is embedded. In *Metamorphoses* Book 10, Pygmalion's tale is the first of a cycle of songs by the legendary bard Orpheus: Pygmalion, Myrrha, Venus and Adonis, and Atalanta (a cycle concluded by the death of Orpheus, torn apart by the ecstatic female worshippers of Dionysus). In *Tales from Ovid*, the tales are re-ordered: Actaeon (taken from *Metamorphoses* Book 3), Myrrha, Venus and Adonis (and Atalanta), Pygmalion, and Hercules and Deianeira (from *Metamorphoses* Book 9). Garrett Jacobsen and Sarah Annes Brown have both suggested that the purposeful rearrangement of the tales aligns Hughes with the storytelling poet-*vates*-shaman Orpheus and should be read as an attempt to mark the text as 'Hughes's Ovid'.[33] To my mind, the rearranged and bookended tales in *Tales from Ovid* also construct a biomythographical narrative that – at the very point in the translation at which Plath's literary influence rises clearly to the surface – deflects attention from the literary presence of Plath to present the myth of Plath and Hughes: two 'all-too-human' characters who 'stumble[d] out into the mythic arena'.[34]

Hughes's amended bardic cycle begins with the tale of Actaeon from *Metamorphoses* Book 3, a story about a profane act of witnessing; its placement

[31] Garrett Jacobsen, '"A holiday in a rest home": Ted Hughes as vates in Tales from Ovid', in Rees, pp. 159–60, quoting Keith Sagar.
[32] Hughes's library is partly available at: https://findingaids.library.emory.edu/documents/hughes644.
[33] Jacobsen, p. 171; Brown, p. 287.
[34] Ted Hughes, 'Introduction', *Tales from Ovid* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), p. x.

here opens Hughes's Orpheus cycle with the disclaimer 'Destiny, not guilt was enough [to destroy Actaeon]' (contra the admission of the earlier version: 'He looked at her' (*CP* 937; 558)). This fateful meeting between a goddess and the man she will destroy is followed by a tale of father-daughter incest and the failed suicide attempt of the daughter Myrrha, who is metamorphosed into a tree and gives birth to Adonis. (Note that the father-as-husband narrative that informs the mythology of *Birthday Letters* is also made explicit in *Tales from Ovid* in this episode by the addition: 'the bliss of their infancy… a wedding present' (*CP* 944). Myrrha's wish to die a second time is also overemphasised in the shift from Ovid's 'change me, deny me life and death' – *mutataeque mihi*, *Met*. 10.487 – to 'remove me / From life and from death' (*CP* 953).) This episode is followed (as in Ovid) by the tale of Venus and Adonis, a great passion destined to end in tragedy. This tale includes the embedded narrative of Atalanta (again, following Ovid), a woman fated by an oracle to marry only the man who is her match: a man who beats her in a running race by throwing golden apples in her path – compare Plath's 'Pursuit', in which she is Atalanta and must hurl her heart to halt the panther's pace, and her letter describing Hughes as the only man strong enough to be an equal (*LSP1* 1120). After Pygmalion, Hughes now adds to Ovid's sequence the tale of Hercules and Deianeira from *Metamorphoses* Book 9, a tale about a woman who wreaks vengeance on her unfaithful husband and commits suicide. By this constructed parable of Plath's life and death, we find that Hughes's rearrangement of Ovid's poetry works to embed a miniature *Birthday Letters* within *Tales from Ovid*. And a peaceful coda to this destructive narrative is revealed by the episode chosen to close the translation, Pyramus and Thisbe from *Metamorphoses* Book 4 – a tale of tragic lovers who are united in death if not in life.

The reciprocal and interrelated Ovidian allusion discussed here is one of many routes by which Plath's and Hughes's classicisms interact, but it is one of the most longstanding. Plath saw the Ovidian in Hughes from their first encounter and fixed him in poetry as an Ovidian character. This may in part explain why, at the end of his life, Plath and Ovid seemed so inextricable to Hughes as he finally moves to engage with her poetic and biographical legacy. Reading Plath more deeply into *Tales from Ovid* perhaps also finds Hughes testing these moments of metamorphosis as moments of metaphor. In his introduction to the translation, he notes his interest in those tales of Ovid which document passion *in extremis*.[35] In this light, his translation becomes a sequence of metaphors that attempt again and again to put into words that moment of metamorphosis upon meeting Plath (which she first captured in 'Faun'), and their sublimation into the mythic realm (captured

[35] Hughes, 'Introduction', p. ix.

in 'Pursuit'): for Hughes, their meeting was like bursting into a flame that scorched the sky and razed the earth; it was like hurtling in free fall, wingless, towards the ground; or, as if you were a spirit that suddenly had a body. An understanding of Plath's literary classicism adds poignancy and sympathy to Hughes's own work, and transforms his *Tales from Ovid* into an intertextual act of reinscription, as he turns not to translate Ovid *per se*, but to recall the words and works of his first wife. While *Birthday Letters* represents Hughes's explicit dialogue with Plath and her work, a comparative reading of *Tales from Ovid* reveals an implicit dialogue with Plath and her own Ovidian allusion: and the final body to metamorphose is a poetic one.