

“My tree stays tree”: Sylvia Plath and Ovid’s Daphne¹

Critical appraisals of Sylvia Plath’s oeuvre remain dominated by psychoanalytic readings that conflate the writer’s life and work. Poems such as ‘Electra on Azalea Path’ are presented as emblematic of what is perceived to be Plath’s autobiographical identification with -- and self-positioning in her work as -- Electra-mourning-Agamemnon (Plath’s father, Otto Plath, died of complications related to untreated diabetes shortly after her eighth birthday).² One consequence of this biographical bias is that when the presence of classical allusion in her work is noted, scholarly focus falls on Plath’s brief references to Greek tragedy. This critical fallacy has been encouraged, in part, by her husband Ted Hughes, who figured Plath explicitly as Electra in his poem, ‘The Hidden Orestes’, and who wrote of Plath’s poem ‘The Eye-mote’, in which the blinded speaker dreams ‘I am Oedipus’, that ‘[t]he mention of Oedipus, and the Greek Tragedians’ figures elsewhere, may seem literary, but if one can take [Plath’s] dream life as evidence, those personalities were deeply involved in her affairs’.³ Within this critically-constructed biographical matrix comprising Plath, her father, and the classics, however, is the little-noted fact that it was Otto who first introduced Sylvia to Latin. In this essay, I seek to re-focalize discussions of Plath’s classicism around her literary engagement with Latin literature and with Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in particular.

The essay begins with a brief survey of Plath’s classical training. To establish context for my argument that *Metamorphoses* exerts a significant influence on Plath’s poetic imagination, I provide an overview of the Ovidian allusions that suffuse her work, pausing to examine in closer detail her use of the tale of Philomela in ‘The Courage of Shutting-Up’. In the main body of the essay, I discuss Plath’s engagement with the tale of Daphne across five of her poems: ‘On the Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad’, ‘On a Plethora of Dryads’,

¹ The following abbreviations for Plath’s works are used throughout: *LH* (*Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963*, ed. A. Plath, London, 1976), *LVI* (*Letters of Sylvia Plath: Volume 1: 1940-1956*, ed. P. Steinberg and K. Kukil, London, 2017), *LVII* (*Letters of Sylvia Plath: Volume 2: 1956-1963*, ed. P. Steinberg and K. Kukil, London, 2018), *CP* (*Collected Poems*, ed. T. Hughes, London, 1981), *J* (*The Journals of Sylvia Plath: 1950-1962*, ed. K. Kukil, London, 2000). Sincere thanks are due to the two anonymous reviewers at *IJCT* for their comments and suggestions, and to Greg Woolf and the Institute of Classical Studies for postdoctoral funding.

² For example, A. Bakogianni, ‘Electra in Sylvia Plath’s Poetry: A Case of Identification’, in *Living Classics: Greece and Rome in Contemporary Poetry in English*, ed. S. Harrison, Oxford, 2009, pp. 194-217; and I. Hurst “‘We’ll all be Penelopes then’: Art and Domesticity in American Women’s Poetry, 1958-1996’, in *Living Classics*, pp. 275-94 (278). On Plath’s parody and pastiche of psychoanalytic models, see J. Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, London, 1991, and C. Britzolakis *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning*, Oxford, 1999 (pp. 7, 60-61, 160); on psychoanalytic approaches to Ovid’s work, see E. Spentzou, ‘Theorizing Ovid’, in *A Companion to Ovid*, ed. P. Knox, Malden, 2009, pp. 381-93.

³ T. Hughes, *Collected Poems*, ed. P. Keegan, London, 2005, pp. 1175-7; T. Hughes, ‘Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath’s Poems’, in *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, ed. C. Newman, Bloomington, 1970, pp. 187-99 (190).

‘Pursuit’, ‘Virgin in a Tree’, and ‘Elm’. I track Plath’s developing reception practice via her different modes of approach to Ovid’s text (intertextual and ekphrastic, and ventriloquizing ‘Ovid’, Apollo, and Daphne); and I explore her poetic responses to the allegorical and thematic possibilities suggested by the tale to her as a woman artist in the 1950s. I relate Plath’s use of the myth to her poetic search for artistic and sexual independence. In conclusion, I argue that Ovid’s tale of Daphne is as programmatic for Plath’s poetry as it is for the Roman poet’s epic text.

Plath and the Greco-Roman classics

Otto Plath majored in classical languages at Northwestern College, Wisconsin, before continuing with Latin through graduate school at Washington University to doctoral level at Harvard, where Latin was mandatory for studying entomology (at the time of his death in 1940, Otto was Professor of Biology at Boston University).⁴ The young Plath would memorize and recite the Latin names of insects to amuse her father at home, who proudly showcased his daughter’s precocity with Latin to his professorial colleagues.⁵ After his death, Plath studied Latin formally for four years at Gamaliel Bradford High School, Wellesley (1945-1949), where Ovid’s poetry remains on the syllabus today.⁶ Childhood letters and journals detail her Latin homework and reveal playful experimentation with Latin prose composition to communicate secretly with her brother.⁷ An early poem, ‘Ouija’, wittily recalls ‘every foul declension’ of her school Latin lessons (*CP* 77); later, classroom 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’ (*CP* 212) -- although these pains are forgotten by the time Plath considers applying for a doctoral degree programme: ‘What fun to... relearn French and Latin’ (*LVII* 305). Plath seems to have received a standard school introduction to Latin poetry, evidenced by allusions to Ovid, Catullus, Virgil, and Apuleius, and to Greek epic, reading the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in translation for her English class.⁸

⁴ *LH* 9; E. Butscher, *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness: A Biography*, Tucson, 2003, p. 4.

⁵ E. Butscher, *Method and Madness* (n. 4 above), pp. 10-11.

⁶ Now ‘Wellesley High School’; Latin syllabus available at: <https://sites.google.com/a/wellesleyps.org/whs-program-of-studies-2018-19/cml-courses> (accessed: 6 September 2018).

⁷ *LVI* 87, 105, 106, 107.

⁸ Cf., a local contemporary of Plath, Rachel DuPlessis, recalls reading Apuleius in her school Latin class in her essay ‘Psyche, or Wholeness’, *The Massachusetts Review*, 20, 1, 1979, pp. 77-96.

One of Plath's earliest poems, 'To Ariadne (deserted by Theseus)', composed in spring 1949, aged sixteen, creatively responds to Ovid's *Heroides* 10, addressing Ariadne empathetically as a friend:

Oh, fury, equalled only by the shrieking wind—
The lashing of the waves against the shore,
You rage in vain, waist deep into the sea,
Betrayed, deceived, forsaken evermore.

...

The white-hot rage abates, and then—futility.
You lean exhausted on the rock.

...

Why do you stand and listen only to
The sobbing of the wind along the sand?⁹

Another early poem, 'The Ghost's Leavetaking', is densely classically allusive and closes with a knowingly bathetic retranslation of Catullus 101: 'Hail and farewell. Hello, goodbye' (*CP* 90); in later poems, Cupid and Psyche's palace is ironically invoked by a newly-wed couple in 'Two Views of Withens' ('the House of Eros | Low-lintelled, no palace', *CP* 71); and Plath's celebrated cycle of bee poems are interspersed with allusions to the bees and thundering Caesar of Virgil's fourth *Georgic* (*CP* 211-219).¹⁰

After matriculating at the women's liberal arts college Smith College in 1950, Plath did not initially continue any formal study of classical languages. She read a selection of Greco-Roman tragedy in translation for a freshman English paper, 'Modern Tragedy in the Classic Tradition', and studied late Roman history for her freshman history module. A journal entry from this time recalls cramming for a paper, 'centuries to comprehend before I sleep, millions of lives to comprehend before breakfast tomorrow... To stop with the German tribes and rest awhile: But no! On, on, on. Through ages of empires, of decline and fall' (undoubtedly referring to Edward Gibbon's eighteenth-century six-volume *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*).¹¹

In 1955 Plath won a Fulbright Scholarship to Newnham College, Cambridge, where she reprised her Latin studies and received her first formal introduction to ancient Greek (1955-1957). Reading for the English Tripos Tragedy and Moralists papers, Plath studied

⁹ *LH* 37. On Hughes' biographical use of the Theseus and Ariadne myth, see D. Berry, 'Ted Hughes and the Minotaur Complex', *Modern Language Review*, 97, 3, 2002, pp. 539-52, and G. Liveley, 'Birthday Letters from Pontus: Ted Hughes and the white noise of classical elegy', in *Ted Hughes and the Classics*, ed. R. Rees, Oxford, 2009, pp. 216-32 (220-22).

¹⁰ On Plath's engagement with the *Georgics*, see my forthcoming chapter in *Sylvia Plath in Context*, ed. T. Brain, Cambridge, 2019.

¹¹ *J* 26-7.

Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Plato, Aristotle, Quintilian, and Augustine under the supervision of Dorothea Krook.¹² Plath's library, now divided between Emory University, Indiana University, and Smith College, contains numerous works of Greek and Latin literature. Many of these texts are in English, French, German, and Italian translations, but several are Harvard Loeb Classical Library editions, suggesting that, when writing her allusive poetry, she may have worked from texts containing the Latin or Greek on the facing page.¹³ Echoes of her Cambridge classical training can be found in the 'goatish tragedians' of 'The Beggars' (CP 47), for example, and the 'black deus | Ex machina' of 'Spider' (CP 48). Clytemnestra shadows the avenging lioness of 'Purdah' ('The shriek in the bath | The cloak of holes', CP 242), while 'Mother Medea in a green smock | Moves humbly as any housewife' in 'Aftermath' (CP 113). Plath also 'feminizes' Plato's Cave allegory to describe a moment between mother and child in 'Candles', 'By Candlelight', and 'Nick and the Candlestick' (CP 148, 236, 240); and 'lamp-headed Plato' is singled out for explicit rebuttal in 'Magi' and 'Totem': 'What girl ever flourished in such company?' (CP 148, 264).¹⁴

Plath returned to the US in 1957 where she held a post as instructor in English Language and Literature at Smith College (1957-1958). As part of her course on the modernists, Plath spent two weeks in February 1958 lecturing on Sophocles' *Oedipus and Antigone*:

Woke after 9 hours sleep still exhausted & rebellious, not wanting to drag my drugged body to a lecture platform... bell rang, into class in a daze, with faces looking up, expecting me to say something, & me not there, blank, bored, hearing my voice lead out blither on ironic structure of the Oedipus which I realize I don't understand myself: It is folly to try to outwit the gods. Or: we are all predestined—or still: we have free will & must be responsible. How glad I was, when bell rang. (J 334-35)

¹² For a history of the English Tripos Tragedy Paper, and a copy of the exam Plath sat in 1957, see <https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/cambridgeauthors/the-tragedy-paper-continuity-and-change> (accessed: 8 January 2019).

¹³ Including *Plato: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, and Phaedrus*, ed. H. Fowler, Cambridge, 1953; *Plato: Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias*, ed. W. Lamb, Cambridge, 1953; and Quintilian (*Institutio Oratio* Vol. III, ed. H. Butler, Cambridge, 1921). Plath's library is catalogued online at: <http://www.librarything.com/catalog/SylviaPlathLibrary/yourlibrary> (accessed: 17 September 2018). G. Jacobsen, in "'A holiday in a rest home": Ted Hughes as *vates* in *Tales from Ovid*", in Rees, *Ted Hughes and the Classics*, pp. 156-76 (159-60), cites F. J. Miller's 1916 Loeb edition of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as Hughes' source text for his translations in *Tales from Ovid*. The use of a Loeb edition as a crib is unusual as Hughes' preferred source texts (for Seneca and Aeschylus, among others) are Penguin Classics. Hughes' library (Emory University) has not yet been fully catalogued, although the collection includes many volumes previously owned by Plath; it is tempting to speculate that this Loeb Ovid may be an inheritance from Plath. Available here: http://discovere.emory.edu/primo_library/libweb/action/search.do (accessed: 17 September 2018).

¹⁴ Britzolakis, *Theatre of Mourning* (n. 2 above), pp. 116-17.

In other journal entries from this time, it is Plath's dry humour which manifests in classically-infused passages that explore the interplay between the personal and the scholarly -- between gender and the classics. A gossipy neighbour, 'Mrs Doom', plagues Plath and makes her feel as if she is being followed around by a 'Greek tragic chorus' (J 443); and as household tasks mount in a period of intense lecture-writing and marking, Plath wryly contrasts the high art and 'mysteries' of *Oedipus* with her own domestic tragedies, observing the mouldering apples in her fruit bowl which 'mock' her (J 334) and the 'knot of laundry, with a classic bunch of sheets' (CP 90): 'to hell with Sophocles' (J 329-30). As these extracts suggest, Plath's relationship with Greek tragic texts was far more ambivalent than has been generally allowed by biographical readings which focus on her Greek allusion. Plath was acutely aware both of the limitations of myth to represent her life or emotions, and the limitations of psychoanalytic narratives which draw upon those myths: '[Do] I really think I killed and castrated my father...?' (J 476); 'O the tangles of that old bed' (J 520). In her overtly-allusive poem 'Electra on Azalea Path', Plath pre-emptively undermines any scholarly attempt to map classical myth onto life by her knowing use of allusion as a stage-prop. She observes herself in the process of reception with a detached critical eye: 'I borrow the stilts of an old tragedy' (CP 116).

Plath and Ovid

From this broad knowledge of ancient Greek and Latin texts, it is to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Plath turns most frequently to borrow characters and themes. Her poems display a sustained thematic preoccupation with metamorphosis, meditating on the transmutations of insects and the changing moon, and using gendered Ovidian imagery and themes to explore the female body in metamorphosis -- discovering one's sexuality, menstruating, lactating, bleeding, or swelling with a child.¹⁵ Mental ill-health is also repeatedly figured in the poems as a kind of metamorphosis, most often represented by images of women overwhelmed by plant-life, echoing the many traumatized women of Ovid's epic poem transformed into flowers, shrubs, and trees. There is an unsettling blur between human and vegetation, for example, as a female psychiatric patient melts into the flower-patterned carpets in 'Miss Drake Proceeds to

¹⁵ J. Gill, *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath*, Cambridge, 2008 (pp. 54, 60) notes the mythic presences of Echo, Narcissus, and Diana and Actaeon in Plath's work; and S. Van Dyne, *Revising Life: Sylvia Plath's Ariel Poems*, Chapel Hill, 1993 (p. 114) reads the Demeter and Persephone myth in 'Wintering' (CP 217); neither scholar links Plath explicitly to Ovid.

Supper', and in the hallucinatory, suffocating flowers of 'Poem for a Birthday' (CP 41, 131). Plath also employs metamorphic imagery to dissolve the boundaries between self and other, highlighting the fragility and permeability of the body by juxtaposing the Ovidian with modern images of surgery and tattooing, as in 'The Courage of Shutting-Up', discussed in further detail below.

There are also allusions to many specific stories found together in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In an early journal entry, for example, the myth of Semele is used to express a classically-infused sexual fantasy. Sunbathing on hot cliff-top rocks, Plath describes:

being raped deliciously by the sun, filled full of heat from the impersonal and colossal god of nature... An orgiastic sacrifice on the altar of rock and sun, and I arose shining from the centuries of love, clean and satiated from the consuming fire of his casual and timeless desire' (J 74).

While this fantasy is disturbing from a contemporary feminist perspective, the passage reveals one consequence of the 1940s and 1950s sexual double standard which taught Plath to believe that a woman's sexual desire was shameful. Such fantasies of external violence became the only legitimate expression -- aged 17 and inexperienced -- of her sexual appetite. Years later and more worldly-wise, Plath employs Ovidian figures to the opposite effect. In her verse play *Three Women: A Monologue for Three Voices* (1962), a BBC radio play set on one night in the maternity ward of a hospital, her speakers are composites of Ovid's women characters. The stories these characters narrate introduce a sense of masculine threat which pervades the female realm of the maternity ward. Third Voice is at times Procne ('what is this bird that cries | With such sorrow in its voice?'), while Second Voice is Philomela: 'learn to speak with fingers, not a tongue. | The body is resourceful' (CP 186, 184). Third Voice recollects the event of the conception of her child as a Narcissus-like rapture, Danaë's shower of gold, and Leda's rape: 'I remember the minute I knew for sure... The face in the pool was beautiful, but not mine':

And all I could see was dangers: doves and words,
Stars and showers of gold -- conceptions, conceptions!
I remember a white, cold wing

And the great swan, with its terrible look,
Coming at me (CP 176).

A further example of Plath's Ovidian engagement can be found in one of the first poems she wrote for Ted Hughes and which took him as its subject, 'Faun' (CP 35). The

poem describes a new vatic lover's transformation into a Pan-like figure. Initially titled the more explicitly Latinate 'Faunus', the poem was composed under the working title 'Metamorphosis'. It provides an early representation by Plath of Hughes as Orpheus, a bard whose songs charm animals, trees, and stones to follow him: 'Hunched like a faun, he hooded | From grove of moon-glint and fen-frost | Until all owls in the twigged forest | Flapped black to look and brood | On the call this man made' (*LVI* 1165; *J* 410; 163, 323; *Met.* 11.1-2).¹⁶ Plath harnesses another tale from *Metamorphoses* Book 10, that of Pygmalion, for her exploration of the contemporary myth of the 'man-made woman'. In 'The Applicant' (*CP* 221), a pre-packaged wife is cynically advertised to a prospective bridegroom. Pygmalion's 'marvelous product' -- the domestic model wife hawked as 'A living doll, everywhere you look' -- is sold as a sheet of 'naked paper' upon which the applicant can inscribe his idealized woman-muse.¹⁷ In *Metamorphoses*, the episode mocks Pygmalion's misogyny by its over-signification of the manufactured 'perfect' woman as white and silent (*niueum... ebur; ebur... ebur; eburnea... eburnae*, 'snowy... ivory', *Met.* 10.247-8, 255, 275-6) -- a detail Plath picks up in her use of 'paper', 'salt', and porcelain 'teacups' to suggest the culturally-valorized whiteness of the woman that is also a uranium-hued lethal blankness.¹⁸ In this example, we see a further characteristic of Plath's experimentation with Ovidian allusion in her postmodern blend of classical images overlaid by domestic noir, pulp fiction, and consumer culture references.

In an extended example of Plath's Ovidian engagement, the tale of Philomela -- sister of Procne, raped by Tereus, mutilated of her tongue, and metamorphosed into a bird -- crucially informs 'The Courage of Shutting-Up' (*CP* 209). Alongside the imagery of birds, purple mouths, tongues, and bruises (*purpureas... notas*, *Met.* 6.577), the poem shares with Ovid a thematic interest in the interrelation between sexual violence, and speech and silence. Set at a point in narrative time after Philomela's glossectomy, Plath's poem focuses on women's mouths and tongues as particular targets of male violence. At the centre of Ovid's episode is 'a contest between narrators' -- an unequally weighted battle to establish a dominant narrative between a king who lies about his crime, and the mute Philomela.

¹⁶ The widespread acceptance of the biographical nature of Plath's poetry may have led T. Ziolkowski to dismiss Plath's poem 'Metamorphosis' as 'hav[ing] nothing to do with Ovid or his *Metamorphoses*', in *Ovid and the Moderns*, Ithaca, 2005, p. 169.

¹⁷ 'Marvelous product' from S. Plath, 'Script for the BBC broadcast "New Poems by Sylvia Plath"', in *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, ed. F. Hughes, London, 2004, p. 193.

¹⁸ All Latin quotations are taken from *P. Ovidi Nasonis. Metamorphoses*, ed. R. Tarrant, Oxford, 2004; all English translations are my own. Gill notes an 'implicit reference' to Ovid in 'The Courage of Shutting-Up' in *Cambridge Introduction* (n. 15 above), p. 68.

Throughout the episode, Tereus is subtly characterized by his ability to speak through Ovid's use of twenty-one verbs of speech in association with the king. In contrast, after Philomela's testimony and her physical silencing, her non-verbal means of communicating with her sister are conveyed by the single verb *intexuit* ('she weaved'), and the phrases *gestu rogat* and *pro uoce manus* ('she asked with gestures', 'with hands in place of her voice', *Met.* 6.577, 579, 609).¹⁹ It is this one-sided contest of narration that Plath stages in her poem:²⁰

The courage of the shut mouth, in spite of artillery!
The line pink and quiet, a worm, basking.
There are black disks behind it, the disks of outrage,
And the outrage of a sky, the lined brain of it.
The disks revolve, they ask to be heard—

Philomela's quivering tongue (*indignantem... micat... immurmurat... palpitat*, 6.557-560) stutters its doubled 'outrage... outrage', a jarring effect heightened by the triple consonantal 'disks' of a broken record -- the black vinyl skipping and repeating, replaying old arguments and old myths. Characteristic of Plath's blackly comic streak, she bathetically transforms Ovid's simile describing Philomela's castrated tongue as an adder, implying a latent danger, *utque... mutilatae cauda colubrae*, 6.559, to a pink worm. Plath also updates Philomela's tapestry to contemporary recording equipment. Jo Gill has suggested that '[t]he silence of the shut mouth masks the active assimilation of the truth which is quietly, discreetly, being recorded' on the 'black disks' and 'lined brain'.²¹ Plath therefore transforms Philomela's tapestry into an audio recording device -- the appurtenance of the Cold War spy. In the second and third stanzas, Plath transforms the *purpureas notas* into blue ink. Disturbingly, not even 'the voice of the shuttle' remains available to Philomela as a means of communication, for it is a male Sailor Jerry figure who marks Philomela's skin: 'A great surgeon, now a tattooist, | Tattooing over and over the same blue grievances, | The snakes, the babies, the tits | On mermaids and two-legged dreamgirls'.²²

¹⁹ Daniel Libatique discussed the 'eloquence' (*facundum*, *Met.* 6.469) of Ovid's Tereus as a mechanism of power in his paper 'Ovid in the #MeToo Era', Society of Classical Studies 2019 Annual Meeting, San Diego, 6 January 2019.

²⁰ P. Hardie, *Ovid's Poetics of Illusion*, Cambridge, 2002, p. 86; see also C. Segal, 'Philomela's Web and the Pleasures of the Text: reader and violence in the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid', in *Modern Critical Theory and Classical Literature*, ed. I. de Jong and J. Sullivan, Leiden, 1994, pp. 257-80; L. Curran, 'Rape and Rape Victims in the *Metamorphoses*', *Arethusa*, 11, 1, 1978, pp. 213-41; P. Joplin, 'The voice of the shuttle is ours', *Stanford Literary Review*, 1, 1984, pp. 25-53; A. Richlin, *Arguments with Silence: Writing the History of Roman Women*, Ann Arbor, 2014, pp. 140-43.

²¹ Gill, *Cambridge Introduction* (n. 15 above), pp. 67-8.

²² 'The surgeon's role is ambiguous; he is implicit in the mutilation of the speaker yet at the same time it is precisely this mutilation (the tattooing of the body) which gives metaphorical voice to the subject's trauma', Gill, *Cambridge Introduction* (n. 15 above), p. 68.

At the climax of the poem, the speaker asks, ‘the tongue, | Indefatigable, purple. Must it be cut out?’:

It has nine tails, it is dangerous.
And the noise it flays from the air, once it gets going!

No, the tongue, too, has been put by,
Hung up in the library ...

...
It is a marvelous [*sic*] object—
The things it has pierced in its time.

The speaker attempts to retain her dignity with mock-epic humour, repeating the exaggerations of her male interlocutor, whose words appear in reported speech (we recall that in Ovid, Tereus’ words are reported wholly in indirect speech, excepting the chilling ‘We have won!’, *uicimus*, *Met.* 6.513). The reader is told of the man’s ‘brag’ at having captured such a fearsome ‘marvelous object’. The woman’s tongue is here reduced to a sign of prestige, ‘Hung up in the library with the engravings of Rangoon | And the fox heads, the otter heads, the heads of dead rabbits’. The library is figured here as a male, aristocratic space filled with colonial markers of prestige: books (we presume, in Latin), hunting trophies, and images of Yangon, Myanmar; his domination of a woman can now be added as a field specimen or impotent silent curio to his collection. This Victorian stereotype of masculinity is surely parody on Plath’s part, but it is a bitter parody with lived consequences for the speaker of the poem.

Plath’s heavily-ironized emphasis on her speaker’s courage to *not* speak suggests that this choice is an illusion. As the poem progresses, the reader understands that the speaker refers to herself in the third person, a psychological distancing strategy often employed by traumatized individuals. The speaker’s Echo-like repetition -- and finally -- adoption of Tereus’ voice comments darkly on this woman’s complicity in her silencing. Plath’s significant departure from Ovid then is to create a Philomela who has internalized her role as the passive, silent woman -- a woman who has hitherto participated in the male fantasy of ‘mermaids and two-legged dreamgirls’. The reader is uncertain whether the speaker’s tongue has been cut out by her antagonist, or if she has mutilated herself.²³ The shifting subjectivities -- between speaker, tattooist, and antagonist -- and the internalized misogyny of the speaker

²³ Initially titled ‘The Courage of Quietness’, Plath’s amended title transforms ‘a feminine virtue [quietness] to the internalization of what is usually a command by another’ (L. Bundtzen, *The Other Ariel*, Stroud, 2005, p. 245 n. 36).

create an uneasy ambivalence in the poem which destabilizes a simple reading of Plath's use of classical material for a feminist reclamation of the myth. The absence of Procne in Plath's version may also be symptomatic of the time at which she wrote, prior to the political and social sisterhood of second-wave feminisms.

Plath's juxtaposition throughout the poem of mouthy images with those of muting, interruption, and repetition expresses the physical and linguistic silencing of the woman writer attempting to enact a poetic, rather than bloody, retribution. In addition to its extended appearance in *Metamorphoses*, the myth of Philomela also appears in *Fasti* on February 26th (2.629, 853-6) -- the date of the infamous journal entry in which Plath records her first bloody meeting with Hughes (both retreat from this initial scene with bite-marks, gashes, and bruises). 'The Courage of Shutting-Up' was composed on 2nd October 1962, around the time that Hughes was moving out of their family home after Plath's discovery of his infidelity. Plath herself may provocatively suggest a biographical reading of her use of Philomela to portray a spousal contest of narration. The poem can also be read as a brutal critique of the male artist and the silenced female muse, a theme which Plath continues to explore in a series of Daphne poems which develop her gendered response to Ovid.

'On the Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad' and 'On the Plethora of Dryads'

Plath's engagement with Ovid's Daphne is long-standing and arcs across her career through the poems 'Pursuit' (1956), 'On the Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad' and 'On the Plethora of Dryads' (1957), 'Virgin in a Tree' (1958), and 'Elm' (1962). As the first instance of attempted rape in *Metamorphoses*, and in its programmatic interplay of sexual violence, gender, and art, the tale of Daphne and Apollo introduces two themes that recur throughout the rest of the epic: aggressive sexual pursuits; and woman-as-art, whether she is fleeing in terror, or fixed into the landscape (*Met.* 1.452-567).²⁴ In Ovid, Cupid fires a golden arrow

²⁴ On the interplay of sexual violence, gender, and art in Ovid's episode, and its programmatic nature for the epic that follows see Curran, 'Rape and Rape Victims' (n. 20 above); see also H. Parry, 'Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: Violence in a Pastoral Landscape', *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, 95, 1964, pp. 268-82; W. Nicoll, 'Cupid, Apollo, and Daphne (Ovid, *Met.* 1.452 ff.)', *Classical Quarterly*, 30, 1, 1980, pp. 174-82; N. Davis, *The Death of Procris: 'Amor' and the Hunt in Ovid's Metamorphoses*, Rome, 1983, pp. 39 ff.; L. Barkan, *The Gods Made Flesh: Metamorphosis and the Pursuit of Paganism*, New Haven, 1986, p. 85; B. Nagle, 'Erotic pursuit and narrative seduction in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*', *Ramus*, 17, 1988, pp. 32-51; P. Knox, 'In Pursuit of Daphne', *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 120, 1990, pp. 183-202; C. Segal, 'Ovid's metamorphic bodies: art, gender and violence in the *Metamorphoses*', *Arion*, 5, 1998, pp. 9-41; J. Farrell, 'The Ovidian Corpus: Poetic Body and Poetic Text', in *Ovidian Transformations: Essays on the Metamorphoses and its Reception*, ed. P. Hardie, A. Barchiesi, and S. Hinds, Cambridge, 1999, pp. 127-41 (133); p. 139; P. Salzman-Mitchell, *A Web of Fantasies:*

into Apollo's chest which makes him insatiably desire Daphne, and fires a leaden arrow into Daphne's chest, driving her to ceaselessly flee from love; Apollo chases Daphne, who curses her beauty (*perde figuram*, *Met.* 1.547) and prays that it be changed so she can retain her chastity. Daphne's escape into tree form is ambivalent, for at the end of the episode Apollo claims the laurel tree and her leaves as his own, *at quoniam coniunx mea non potes esse, | arbor eris certe... mea; semper habebunt | te coma, te citharae, te nostrae, laure, pharetrae. | tu ducibus Latiis aderis* ('since you cannot be my wife, then you will certainly be my tree. You, you, you, laurel, will cover my hair, my lyre, my quiver; you will decorate Roman generals', *Met.* 1.557-60).²⁵

The themes which coalesce in Ovid's Daphne episode (sexual pursuits; woman-as-art) are echoed in Plath's career-long poetic meditation on sex, sexuality, gender, and art. I argue here that *Metamorphoses* both informs and provides a ready model for Plath's expression of those themes. Yet her use of Daphne is not as a simple motif or template, nor does she set out to re-write Ovid's story from Daphne's point of view. As with the Philomela example above, Plath presents a complex and idiosyncratic reworking of the tale that expands, meditates upon, interrogates, and contemporizes Ovid's themes. She uses Daphne to explore the representation of women in art and the frustrations of a woman writer under cultural pressure to be muse, rather than poet. She also writes against a tradition that has employed Ovid's Daphne as a morality tale to police female chastity -- her speaker is not the fleeing Daphne who rejects love. Instead, Plath harnesses Ovid's tale to present a twofold critique of the patriarchal imperative for women to adhere to artistic and sexual chastity.²⁶

Ted Hughes has claimed that he and Plath found a shared poetic vision in Robert Graves' *The White Goddess* and modelled their domestic and writing life on that of Graves and his partner, the poet Laura Riding.²⁷ In Graves' formulation, a poet is always male; the

Gaze, Image, and Gender in Ovid's Metamorphoses, Columbus, 2005, pp. 29-38; and Richlin, *Arguments with Silence* (n. 20 above).

²⁵ The conclusion of the tale of Daphne -- a woman whose laurel leaves are worn by the surviving male poet -- suggests a model for the afterlife of Plath and her poetry; on Plath's literary presence in Hughes' *Tales from Ovid*, see my 'Ovid, Plath, Baskin, Hughes', forthcoming in *The Ted Hughes Society Journal*, 2019, 8, 1.

²⁶ On the valorization of female chastity in patriarchal societies, see M. Macciocchi, 'Female Sexuality in Fascist Ideology', *Feminist Review*, 1, 1979, pp. 67-82. On the tradition of using Daphne as a moral lesson to preserve female chastity, see M. Barnard, *The myth of Apollo and Daphne from Ovid to Quevedo: love, agon, and the grotesque*, Durham, 1987. On Ovid's own poetic political critique of the legislation of the *lex Iulia de adulteriis coercendis* (intended to preserve chastity), see J. Hallett, 'The Role of Women in Elegy: Counter-cultural Feminism', *Arethusa*, 6, 1973, pp. 103-24.

²⁷ J. Kroll, *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*, 2nd edn, Stroud, 2007, p. 42; Laura (Riding) Jackson was, however, a reluctant muse, and viewed her relationship with Graves ambivalently. For Jackson's 'crushingly unsympathetic' response to Kroll's use of *The White Goddess* to read Plath's poetry, see Bundtzen, *The Other Ariel* (n. 23 above), p. 39; on Graves and Ovid see G. Liveley, 'Ovid in Defeat? On the reception of

woman takes the role of the Muse/ Maenad, for whom domesticity ends in death: ‘woman is not a poet: she is either a Muse or she is nothing’.²⁸ By figuring the woman as muse, the male poet denies his feminine counterpart her subjectivity and her creative power, co-opting her poetic force to enrich his own art, and obliterating the real woman with a literary construct of his own imagining. Plath’s journals evidence a sustained concern with the figure of the muse, and her conflicted relation to it. At times she notes with humour that the muse is only a fiction: ‘Story: woman with poet husband who writes about love, passion -- she, after glow of vanity & joy, finds out he isn’t writing about her (as friends think) but about Dream Woman Muse’ (*J* 301). Elsewhere, she fights this compelling archetype and repeatedly urges herself to reject this ostensibly flattering role in order to write creatively: ‘So I am, however, not worth the really good boys; or is it me? If [my] poems were really good, there might be some chance; but, until I make something... away from the reflection of myself in Richard’s eyes and the inevitable narrow bed... they can ignore me’ (*J* 208).²⁹

In journal entries, Plath repeatedly upbraids herself to actively and consciously resist the seductive pull of being the Muse, and to resist the notion that maleness alone equates to creativity. Her poetry provides the vehicle to test her artistry -- to recover or construct a female poetic self and to fashion new models of poetic inspiration. The metapoetic conceit of the two poems, ‘On the Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad’ and ‘On the Plethora of Dryads’, is the speaker’s attempt to write poetry both ‘as a man’ and ‘as a woman’. The dryad diptych stages a second contest of narration, mapped explicitly onto Apollo and Daphne: a contest between masculine and feminine poetic vision. The poems’ juxtaposition reveals different subjectively ‘feminine’ or ‘masculine’ reading/writing experiences. Plath’s mode of reception here is not to embody one of Ovid’s characters, but to step back from the myth and critique the tale as a reader and rewriter of Ovid. Plath’s explicit reference to the tree-nymph Daphne in the first poem, and the specific use of ‘Dryads’ in her titles as exemplary of the genre of poetry the speaker is attempting to write, suggest that the speaker is positioned outside the myth as a critical reader, brandishing a physical copy of Ovid’s text.

Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria* and *Remedia Amoris*, in *The Art of Love: Bimillennial Essays on Ovid’s Ars Amatoria and Remedia Amoris*, ed. R. Gibson, S. Green and A. Sharrock, Oxford, 2006, pp. 318-37.

²⁸ R. Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, New York, 1983, p. 446.

²⁹ Richard Sassoon, Plath’s lover before Hughes. Cf. P. Murray, ‘Reclaiming the Muse’, in *Laughing With Medusa: Classical Myth and Feminist Thought*, ed. V. Zajko and M. Leonard, Oxford, 2006, pp. 327-54. On Ovid’s Muse, see A. Sharrock, ‘An A-Musing Tale: Gender, Genre, and Ovid’s Battles with Inspiration in the *Metamorphoses*’, *Cultivating the Muse: Struggles for Power and Inspiration in Classical Literature*, ed. E. Spentzou and D. Fowler, Oxford, pp. 207-27. On Daphne in modern women’s writing, see S. Brown, ‘Daphne’, in her *Ovid: Myth and Metamorphosis*, London, 2005, pp. 45-66; and R. Fowler, ‘“This tart fable”: Daphne and Apollo in Modern Women’s Poetry’, in Zajko and Leonard, *Laughing With Medusa*, pp. 381-98.

In the first poem, the woman writer struggles to find inspiration whilst contained within the domestic space, ‘Ravening through the persistent bric-à-brac | Of blunt pencils, rose-sprigged coffee cup’. In contrast, the ‘arrogant’ male nature poet tames ‘Trout, cock, ram’ ‘With my fantasy alone’ into his ‘importunate’ compositions. In a comic scene, the speaker visits a doctor to diagnose her writer’s block:

But no hocus-pocus of green angels
Damasks with dazzle the threadbare eye;
‘My trouble, doctor, is: I see a tree,
And that damn scrupulous tree won’t practice wiles
 To beguile sight:
 E.g., by cant of light
 Concoct a Daphne;
 My tree stays tree.’

Unlike the ‘brag’ (cf. *superbus*, *Met.* 1.454) of the parodied Hughesian poet in stanza two, for whom the desirable dryad is a readily available muse who inspires animalistic nature poems (‘rook-tongued spaces, | Sheep greens, finned falls’), the woman writer cannot imagine herself into the Apollonian subject position to ‘stare’ and ‘wrench obstinate bark and trunk... no luminous shape | Steps out radiant in limb, eye, lip’. The poet laments that ‘No doubt now’, while she visits the doctor, the ‘moon-eyed’ male poet sees dryads wherever he looks, ‘While this beggared brain | Hatches no fortune, | But from leaf, from grass, | Thieves what it has.’

The speaker’s absurd complaint (‘My tree stays tree’) contains a commentary on twentieth-century psychiatric practices. While we may imagine this as comic scene -- a mad woman complaining to her doctor that trees do not metamorphose into women before her eyes -- medical practitioners have historically attempted to cure women diagnosed with ‘neurasthenia’ by forbidding them to write (an activity deemed too intellectually stimulating). Readers familiar with Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ (1892) or the life of Virginia Woolf (forced to write in her journals secretly whilst in recovery following her breakdowns), recognize that this prescribed prohibition exacerbated rather than relieved women’s mental ill-health.³⁰ Here, the male poet and the (male) doctor are aligned as figures of the establishment with the power to deny women’s expression. Yet the poem’s dark undercurrent of gendered and literary violence was signalled from the poem’s opening word: ‘Ravening’. The violent verbs throughout the poem -- ‘ravening’ ‘stare’, ‘wrench’, ‘thieve’ --

³⁰ On Woolf’s ‘treatment’ see J. Briggs, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*, London, 2005, p. 37.

extemporize thesaurus definitions for the Latin *raptus*, the rape that Daphne forestalls with her metamorphosis, but which is the formulaic fate of dryads in Ovid's epic poem.³¹

Plath's medicalized poetic complaint reverses the Daphne myth in her attempt to metamorphose tree into woman, but she shares an Ovidian sense of the blurring of the line between nature and woman as objects of the male poetic gaze. The speaker's scorn for such 'fantasy' women as imagined by the male poet is evident: the process of 'conjuring' a dryad is described as 'hocus-pocus', a 'fiction', and 'dream-propriety', and the figure of Pygmalion again shadows the image of the male poet 'conjuring' his man-made muse. The female speaker 'Spurns such fiction | As nymphs', and her 'cold vision | Will have no counterfeit | Palmed off on it'. Examining the figuration of woman-as-art, the poem suggests that the male poetic task is an easy one: all one has to do is imagine a dryad. The speaker mocks the 'Star-lucky sleight-of-hand man' who simply 'watches' the lady and makes his fortune. Plath's sleight-of-hand man -- a prescient image that foreshadows Amy Richlin's wry figuration of Ovid-as-magician -- suggests that even tricksters and frauds can make their names as great male poets through literary or actual violence against the woman muse.³² The woman poet has attempted to emulate and literalize the violence of male poetic vision ('ravening' 'stare', 'wrench', 'thieve'), but her attempt in this poem has failed. The woman writer is excluded from creativity in the paradigm that opposes male-poet with female-muse, and her violent struggle is in counterpoint to the easeful exercise of patriarchal power that views the natural world and women as sites of equal conquest and as equally fitting material for poetry.³³

The second poem of the diptych, 'On the Plethora of Dryads', stages the male poetic vision envied by the speaker of the first poem. Here, the female speaker temporarily adopts the male subject position and plays Apollo (or perhaps Ovid himself). Plath's knowledge of

³¹ For example, Tereus' vision of Philomela as 'one of those naiads or dryads you hear about...', *quales audire solemus* / *Naidas et Dryadas* (*Met.* 6.452-53); on rape 'interpellating' the female subject in *Metamorphoses* see L. Enterline, *The Rhetoric of the Body from Ovid to Shakespeare*, Cambridge, 2000, p. 158.

³² The fraudulent *uates* is similarly filtered through an Ovidian lens in 'Snakecharmer' (*CP* 79), in which the aspiring Orpheus can pipe 'no rocks' (cf. *Threicius uates et saxa sequentia ducit*, *Met.* 11.2).

³³ Malin Pereira links 'On the Difficulty of Conjuring a Dryad' and 'Virgin in a Tree' in her discussion of Plath's early-career negotiation of hegemonic binary modernist aesthetics. Pereira argues that Plath initially 'accepts the aesthetic values inherent in her concerns with binarism, perfection, and formalism... [although she] recognizes the position of women within these frames as problematic and confining, and uses irony as a tool of interrogation', in *Embodying Beauty: Twentieth-century American Women Writers' Aesthetics*, London, 2000 (pp. 104-5). Pereira also argues that the conclusion of 'On the Difficulty of Conjuring a Dryad' posits natural life and 'the real' as the true benchmarks of artistic vision -- the narrator's tree stays tree, and she builds her art from leaf, from grass -- thus subtly undercutting the male 'fantasy' aesthetic (106). The author does not find the presence of Ovid or Daphne in these poems, however, describing rather their 'classical Greek subject matter' and an indebtedness to H.D.'s poem 'Mid-day', a poem that allegorizes female anxiety of authorship and represents H.D. 'at her most "Greek" -- and modernist' (106, 105). I thank the reviewer for bringing Pereira's work to my attention.

her source text is evidenced by her emulation of Ovid's punning play, and in her reading of Daphne-as-text. The poem also follows Ovid in foregrounding the act of storytelling in the episode, with Plath's exposé of the creation of the literary woman taking its cue from Ovid's own puns on *frons*, *liber*, and *figura*, which metamorphose Daphne literally into a book.³⁴ The poem opens with the speaker noting ironically that after 'Hearing a white saint rave' she decides to test out the artistic method of the ascetic shaman ('Without meat or drink... | Starving my fantasy down'), and like the *uates* of the first poem: 'I tried my sight on an apple-tree'.³⁵ Although the tree-as-tree is 'more beautiful | Than flesh of any body' to the woman poet, she is soon overpowered by the male poetic vision: 'before I might blind sense... Each particular quirk so ravished me'. The poetic experiment is a disaster, for now 'a wanton fit' obscures the 'leaves'... babel tongues... [and] tawn bark', and the woman poet sees only 'sluttish dryads' in 'multifarious silks' of 'seductive | Reds, greens, blues'. Wherever she looks, 'no chaste tree[s]' remain: 'such grit corrupts my eyes'. This poetic sequel is filtered through a distinctly Woolfian Ovidianism. In *Orlando*, Woolf's most Ovidian work, her eponymous sex-changing hero/ine (at this point in the novel a man), similarly tries his hand at the male art of poetry:

So then he tried saying the grass is green and the sky is blue... "The sky is blue," he said, "the grass is green." Looking up, he saw that, on the contrary, the sky is like the veils which a thousand Madonnas have let fall from their hair; and the grass fleets and darkens like a flight of girls fleeing the embraces of hairy satyrs from enchanted woods.³⁶

While Procne was absent from her reworking of Philomela's tale, here, Plath's comic version of male poetic vision, filtered through Woolf's earlier pastiche, opens the possibility of a sisterhood of reading. Plath reads Ovid both alongside and through Woolf. While the poem ostensibly mock-imitates male poetic vision, she tests out an ironized feminine reception practice that imitates Woolf's own earlier reading of Ovid.

As in the first poem, whilst heavily comic, there is a peak of violence mid-poem when the speaker fully assumes the male subject position. The reader is assaulted by words and verbs of violence ('battle', 'break', 'streak', 'lightnings', 'snared', 'pierced') and harsh

³⁴ *Met.* 1.547-50; Farrell (n. 24 above), p. 133; Enterline, *Rhetoric of the Body* (n. 31 above), p. 39.

³⁵ Suggesting a further dryad informs this tale: Pomona (*Met.* 623-97).

³⁶ V. Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography*, London, 2003, p. 49; a tapestry hanging in Orlando's house depicts Daphne in flight. As R. Fowler notes, Orlando's is a distinctly Ovidian poetic imagination: 'Moments and Metamorphoses: Virginia Woolf's Greece', *Comparative Literature*, 51, 1999, pp. 217-42 (235); see also S. Brown, *The Metamorphosis of Ovid: From Chaucer to Ted Hughes*, London, 1999, pp. 203-10.

combative sounds ('twitch', 'flux', 'blotch'). As well as highlighting the sexual objectification of the dryad (her new vision ravishes all it sees until there is 'no chaste tree'), Plath emphasizes the violence of the fantasy: the speaker is 'ravished', 'dragged', and 'snared' by the male poetic gaze that seizes her, and the tree-dryad's body is bruised but 'beautiful... | Flawed by love's prints'.³⁷ At the close of the poem the speaker's position is unresolved. Despite her dissatisfaction with the result of the experiment, she is left in an in-between space, trapped between woman poet, dryad, and sleight-of-hand man. While using Ovid's tale of Daphne allegorically to explore the transformation of woman into art -- and the impossible situation of a woman who wants to create art within this traditional paradigm -- Plath's two dryad poems are saturated with an atmosphere of unresolved sexual violence. In the next poem I discuss, Plath reads Ovid's tale literally, as a tale of sexual pursuit, and draws upon Daphne's tale in an attempt to fashion a new paradigm for herself as a poet and as a desiring woman.

'Pursuit' and 'Virgin in a Tree'

'Pursuit' is narrated from the perspective of a speaker chased by a sexually voracious and omnipotent panther. As the poem Plath wrote two days after meeting Ted Hughes, biographical readings tend to posit Plath as the speaker of the poem and the panther as Hughes; but Plath again draws heavily on Ovid's tale of Daphne.³⁸ She does not simply map Daphne and Apollo onto the speaker and the panther, but refigures the episode: the panther is not the pursuing lover or god, but her own lust she has been taught to fear.³⁹ As we saw in the Semele example above, one consequence of Plath's upbringing within 1940s and 1950s discourses of chaste femininity in which female sexual desire was shameful, is that she explicitly and frequently connects sexual desire, violent fantasy, and guilt. In her journals, Plath encodes her sexual desire as a black panther -- an image from the natural world perhaps chosen to emphasize an empowering sense of its natural, guiltless impulse -- and this code is

³⁷ Cf. *Am.* 1.7; on bruises adding to the beauty of the elegiac *puella*, see B. Gold, 'Propertius 3.8: A Self Conscious Narration', *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica*, 17, 1985, pp. 155-64 (158); on erotic violence in Ovid, see: L. Cahoon, 'The Bed as Battlefield; erotic conquest and military metaphor in Ovid's *Amores*', *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 118, 1988, pp. 293-307 (296-7); D. Fredrick, 'Reading Broken Skin: Violence in Roman Elegy', in *Roman Sexualities*, ed. J. P. Hallett and M. Skinner, Princeton, 1997, pp. 172-93 (185-6); E. Greene, 'Travesties of Love: Violence and Voyeurism in Ovid *Amores* 1.7', *The Classical World*, 92, 5, 1999, pp. 409-18 (415-17).

³⁸ It is a 'poem about the dark forces of lust... It is dedicated to Ted Hughes', *J* 214.

³⁹ Hughes casts himself in the role of the panther in his response poem, 'Trophies', in his *Birthday Letters*, London, 1998, p. 18.

reprised in 'Pursuit'. Writing of her desire following her first encounter with Hughes, Plath notes: 'the panther wakes and stalks again' (*J* 233; 235). In the letter to her mother in which she encloses 'Pursuit', Plath writes that the poem is 'influenced a bit by Blake, I think (tiger, tiger)... It is, of course a symbol of the terrible beauty of death, and the paradox that the more intensely one lives, the more one burns and consumes... [One] epigraph could have been from my beloved Yeats: "Whatever flames upon the night, Man's own resinous heart has fed."' (*LVI* 1133-4). Plath's deflection may be accounted for, in part, by journal entries detailing her resentment of her mother's prohibitions towards pre-marital sex and her subsequent rebellion against the double standard that allows men sexual freedom:

She gave her daughter books by noble women called 'The Case for Chastity'. She told her any man who was worth his salt cared for a woman to be a virgin if she were to be his wife, no matter how many crops of wild oats he'd sown on his own.

What did her Daughter do? She slept with people, hugged them and kissed them.⁴⁰

This tension between repressed sexual desire fed by 'woman's own heart', guilt, shame, and 'appropriate' bourgeois feminine behaviour plays out in Plath's *Daphne*, and is focalized in the speaker's ambivalent terror ('Appalled by secret want'; 'that dark guilt').⁴¹ 'Pursuit' may also reveal an attempt to rewrite *Daphne's* shame at her beauty in Ovid (*mutando perde figuram*, *Met.* 1.547) -- read here as bound in with a repulsion of sexuality -- transforming Apollo's words into a self-imprecation: 'it is not an enemy that pursues you' (*Met.* 1.504-7, *non insequar hostis*). Plath's poem confronts the classical and moral traditions with a desiring woman and her poetry.

A second classical pursuit also informs the poem. Plath composed 'Pursuit' in the middle of writing an undergraduate essay on Racine's *Phèdre*, which lends Plath's poem an epigraph and title: *Dans le fond des forêts votre image me suit* ('In the heart of the forest, your image pursues me').⁴² The context of the French line, which suggests that the image which pursues Phaedra has been imagined by her, provides further evidence that Plath's panther is the speaker's encoded sexual desire, rather than an Apollo-pursuer. The epigraph and echoes of Euripides -- via Racine -- add further layers of intertextual meaning to the theme of destructive love, as Plath's speaker oscillates between the subject positions of *Daphne* and *Phaedra*. Plath records that her marked Racine essay was returned 'with the

⁴⁰ *J* 432; cf. disdain for 'conventional morality' at *J* 269, 432, 461.

⁴¹ 'Pursuit, guilt', *J* 350.

⁴² *Racine: Phèdre*, ed. E. James and G. Jondorf, Cambridge, 1994, Act 1, Sc. 2.

comment that passion is only one aspect and not the fatal holocaust I made it: also mixed my metaphors re flames and cancers and appetites: well, not in that poem: which I wrote for Ted'.⁴³ The essay, the woman's desire, and panther poem flow into one another, mixing the academic with the personal and the literary.

The poem begins:

There is a panther stalks me down:
 One day I'll have my death of him;
 His greed has set the woods aflame,
He prowls more lordly than the sun.
Most soft, most suavely glides that step,
 Advancing always at my back;
 From gaunt hemlock, rooks croak havoc:
The hunt is on, and sprung the trap,
Flayed by thorns I trek the rocks,
 Haggard through the hot white noon.
 Along red network of his veins
What fires run, what craving wakes?

'Pursuit' draws verbal parallels with Ovid, following the Latin as the poem narrates the increasing speed of the chase and proximity of the panther. At first the panther 'stalks' and 'prowls' the speaker, but the pace and intensity of the poem grows in a crescendo of violence conveyed by the increasingly forceful vocabulary ('insatiate', 'hurls', 'rush') and the speaker's flight through a mountainous woodland setting.⁴⁴ As in Ovid, the hunt is neck-and-neck (just as the hound is about to bite, the hare leaps away, *Met.* 1.533-9, cf. 505-6): the panther is 'Advancing always at my back', 'the hunt is on', 'On fluent haunches, keeps my speed' (as Apollo calls to Daphne to curb her speed, promising he will slow down and match hers, *moderatius, oro, | curre fugamque inhibe; moderatius insequar ipse, Met.* 1.510-11). That the speaker is 'Flayed by thorns' comically literalizes Apollo's shout in the preceding lines of the Latin, which warn Daphne to take care not to scratch her legs (*ne prona cadas indignaue laedi | crura notent sentes, Met.* 1.508-9).

Plath's pursuing panther borrows the characteristics of Apollo ('He prowls more lordly than the sun') and Jupiter ('I rush | From such assault of radiance'). This latter allusion

⁴³ J 225.

⁴⁴ On the relationship between sexual violence and landscape in Ovid, see C. Segal, *Landscape in Ovid's Metamorphoses: a study in the transformations of a literary symbol*, Wiesbaden, 1969; R. Gentilcore, 'The Landscape of Desire: The Tale of Pomona and Vertumnus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*', *Phoenix*, 49, 2, 1995, pp. 110-20; M. Bolton, 'Gendered Spaces in Ovid's *Heroides*', *Classical World*, 102, 3, 2009, pp. 273-90.

to the tale of Semele is reinforced by the speaker's claim that 'In the wake of this fierce cat, | Kindled like torches for his joy, | Charred and ravened women lie'.⁴⁵ By linking Jupiter and Apollo, Plath expands her poem beyond a retelling of the Daphne episode. The panther is now a code for the rapists who leave a wake of charred and ravened women across *Metamorphoses*. In addition to the allusion to the fate of Semele, Plath further emphasizes her theme of the 'fatal holocaust' of lust by reworking Ovid's double simile that likens the effects of lust on Apollo in terms of burning foliage (like 'the flimsy stubble which burns in a harvested cornfield', or 'a blazing hedgerow fired by a torch to which a traveller has carelessly brought a lamp too close or left behind'; *utque leues stipulae demptis adolentur aristis, | ut facibus saepes ardent, quas forte uiator | uel nimis admouit uel iam sub luce reliquit, | sic deus in flammis abiit, Met. 1.492-5*). Plath's Daphne runs through 'woods aflame' as the pursuer's 'ardor... lights the trees', until finally, 'The gutted forest falls to ash'. If 'Pursuit' is read biographically, then Plath may also allude to Arethusa's flight from Alpheos (*Met. 5.572-641*). In addition to the contextual setting of the tale and the woman's flight through woods and over mountains, the chase is again matched in speed, and Arethusa describes feeling Alpheos' breath on her hairbands, hearing his footsteps close behind her (*sed certe sonitusque pedem terrebat et ingens | crinales uittas adflabat anhelitus oris, Met. 5.616-7*). Plath's poem includes the detail of the footsteps ('The panther's tread is on the stairs'), and it is difficult not to recall Hughes' theft of Plath's hairband at their first meeting (*J 212*).

At the close of 'Pursuit', the speaker brings about her own metamorphosis -- as Daphne asks for hers (*mutando, Met. 1.547*) -- delaying the assault of the panther by enclosing herself behind a series of (wooden?) doors: 'I shut my doors... | I bolt the door, each door I bolt'. At the moment of the poem's conclusion, the speaker resists expressing her sexuality and yielding to the forces of lust. Nor has Plath found a way to de-code the Apollonian panther. This codified, anthropomorphic lust remains male, reflecting the scarcity of public discourses of female sexuality in the 1950s, and the lack of feminine modes of sexual expression. Two years later, Plath revisits the tale of Daphne in the poem 'Virgin in a Tree' with an increased confidence in feminine sexuality and expression.

While 'Pursuit' took a literary approach, Plath now experiments with an ekphrastic approach: 'Virgin in a Tree' takes its title from Paul Klee's etching *Jungfrau im Baum* (1903), now held by MoMA, New York. Klee's diaries, first published in English the year

⁴⁵ cf. *Met.* 3.259-315, esp. 309.

before Plath wrote this poem, note both the inspiration he drew from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and his intention that the withered virgin represent an unflattering critique of bourgeois values.⁴⁶ His Daphne lies on a leafless tree, looking directly, if ambivalently, towards the viewer. Her distorted form is a parody of the idealized female nude, and she rejects a bourgeois gaze that would interpret the naked female form as a passive allegory of Beauty.⁴⁷ Plath plays with ekphrastic tropes throughout the poem by explicitly foregrounding the act of looking: 'Here', she calls the reader, 'etch on the inner window of your eye | This virgin on her rack'; 'Look!'. Yet the poem does not so much directly address Klee's *Jungfrau im Baum* (as the ekphrastic mode dictates a poet address the painter or their work), as it reads Ovid's tale alongside Klee, and lambasts the history of moralizing Daphne's story ('this tart fable').⁴⁸ Plath maintains and extends Klee's intention in her poem's rejection of bourgeois imperatives towards female chastity. She also overtly signals her ironic frame and mode of reading Ovid through and alongside Klee by labelling the myth of Daphne a 'parody'.⁴⁹ Plath's poem soon departs from its ostensible purpose (an ekphrastic meditation on an etching) to consider more widely the representation of women in art and the reduction of woman to 'the beauty of a garden bed... spectacularly painted'. Her critique is emphasized by the poem's clash of 'green virgins' with three paradigmatic beauties, Eve, Cleopatra, and Helen of Troy -- women who all bear complicated histories of representation within art's archetypal virgin/whore binary.⁵⁰

The poem opens:

How this tart fable instructs
 And mocks! Here's the parody of that moral mousetrap
 Set in the proverbs stitched on samplers
 Approving chased girls who get them to a tree
 And put on bark's nun-black

⁴⁶ P. Klee, *The Diaries of Paul Klee: 1898-1918*, ed. F. Klee, Berkeley, 1964, p. 168.

⁴⁷ On the poem's critique of 'art-for-art's-sake', and its reprisal of the anti-fantasy aesthetics of 'On the Difficulty of Conjuring a Dryad', see Pereira (n. 33 above), pp. 106-7.

⁴⁸ Angélique Thomine suggests that the 'puritanical' voice, distinguished by quotation marks throughout the poem, can be read '*dans ce contexte de références grecques omniprésentes*' as a Greek Chorus, announcing the victory of exemplary virgins over Eves, Cleopatras, and Helens, in 'Le Mythe de Daphné vu par Sylvia Plath', *Les Chantiers de la Création*, 6, 2003, para. 13. Thomine similarly reads the poem in the context of 1950s sexual mores, but takes an explicitly biographical approach. I thank the reviewer for bringing Thomine's article to my attention.

⁴⁹ Contra Fowler, who reads the poem as a 'now-classic poem of sexual demurral' in 'This tart fable' (n. 29 above), p. 382.

⁵⁰ On the representation of women in art and women's to-be-looked-at-ness, see J. Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, London, 1972; L. Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 16, 3, 1975, pp. 6-18; quotation from 'I Am Vertical', *CP* 162.

Habit which deflects
All amorous arrows. For to sheathe the virgin shape
In a scabbard of wood baffles pursuers,
Whether goat-thighed or god-haloed. Ever since that first Daphne
Switched her incomparable back

For a bay-tree hide, respect's
Twined to her hard limbs like ivy: the puritan lip
Cries: 'Celebrate Syrinx whose demurs
Won her the frog-colored skin, pale pith and watery
Bed of a reed. Look:

Pine-needle armor protects
Pitys from Pan's assault!

Plath uses homophones to mock the paradox of the 'chased girls' who must remain chaste but simultaneously sexually available to the male gaze, and puns on chastity and virginity throughout the poem to mock this cultural 'tart fable'. While the 'tart' nature of the tale seeks to deliver a sharp moral warning to its female listener, the phrase 'tart fable' is also a witty précis of Ovid's epic poem -- a pun that compresses the frequent blurring of aesthetics and misogyny in *Metamorphoses* (a tale of tarts). The word play is emphasized by Plath's Latin joke on the word *uagina* to describe Daphne's metamorphosis: 'to sheathe the virgin shape | In a scabbard of wood baffles pursuers'; an obscene pun that emulates a Latin dictionary entry -- and Ovid's own verbal play.⁵¹ Plath highlights a further paradox of a chastity-obsessed morality which reduces both Daphne and Apollo to quasi-Freudian sexualized attributes: Daphne's 'scabbard of wood' and Apollo's phallic 'amorous arrows'.

The opening lines of the poem also inform the reader that this is the kind of story 'set in the proverbs stitched on samplers'. Plath's choice of words to describe this programmatic tale reminds the classical reader of Ovid's own mis-en-abyme, Arachne's tapestry in *Metamorphoses* 6, 'embroidered with the gods' crimes' (*pictas, caelestia crimina, uestes*, 6.131). As in her dryad diptych, Plath expands the Daphne myth in 'Virgin in a Tree' to create a silent chorus of multiple female presences who bear witness to the violent representations of women in culture and art. A sharp pun contained within 'Green virgins' -- which evokes freshness, youth and sexual naivety at the same time as it foreshadows the green foliage of the woman-tree -- signals that Plath's host of women will be Ovidian. The poem explicitly references 'that first Daphne' (noting her programmatic placing in Ovid's

⁵¹ *uagina*: (1) the sheath (of a sword or sim.), scabbard; (2) (transf.) a natural structure resembling a sheath; (especially applied to the sheath that encloses an ear of corn before it emerges); P. Glare ed., *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (2 vols), Oxford, 2012, p. 2208.

text), invokes Syrinx and Pitys by name, and includes an allusion to the nursing Myrrha, ‘shrouded to suckle darkness’. Plath’s familiarity with her Ovidian source is evidenced by the two references to Syrinx and Pitys, who are found with Daphne in *Metamorphoses* 1; are all transformed into plants and trees; and Pitys’ story appears only as an aside as Mercury relates the story-within-a-story of Syrinx (*Met.* 1.689-712). Here, goatish Pan approaches Syrinx ‘bedecked with a garland of sharp pine needles’ (*pinuque caput praecinctus acuta, Met.* 1.699): his previous victim as his crown. In Plath’s poem, the virgins flee ‘pursuers... goat-thighed or god-haloed’, and the close echoes of Ovid’s text continue in Plath’s figuration of the metamorphosed women now aging as trees: ‘though age drop | Their leafy crowns, their fame soars’ (*tu quoque perpetuos semper gere frondis honores, Met.* 1.565. (Compare both Apollo’s prophecy to Daphne that her leaves will be used as wreaths and victor’s crowns, her evergreen leaves earning eternal glory and praise; and Plath’s anxiety about being transfixed on paper as the Dream Woman Muse, and the need to reject this role to create her own literary fame, *J* 301). Yet the ‘armor’ offered by pine trees, ‘bay-trees’, and reeds, and the defensive laurels ‘which deflect[...] | All amorous arrows’ represent a Pyrrhic victory for the women: Plath doubts that the cost of metamorphosis has been worth the protection of virginity.⁵²

This ironic stance on the ‘protection’ of virginity is emphasized by an atmosphere of entrapment and enclosure which dominates the poem, transforming Daphne’s encasement within a tree into an allegory for the suffocation of feminine norms of behaviour and religious dress codes. Plath’s description of the ‘bark’s nun-black || Habit’, and the image of bark as constricting lingerie (‘girdle’) are suggestive of the ways in which contemporary women’s bodies are paradoxically contained for both the purposes of chastity and to heighten one’s sexual allure. The girdle of the tree suggests an image of the literal restriction of modern fashion -- corsetry that ‘trains’ the body by degrees into an ever smaller size -- and the diminishing narrowness of the bi-partite virgin-whore paradigm presented as archetypal models to women. Plath implies that cultural codes, and their voluntary or involuntary adoption, compress the dryad’s skin as tightly as a corset, or the bark of an enclosing tree. In Ovid, the transformation of Daphne into the laurel tree is explicitly described: ‘a heavy torpor overcame her limbs: thin bark encircled her heart, her hair became leaves, her arms branches,

⁵² Thomine argues that the poem’s figuration of virginity as dehumanizing is complicated by a lexical field of protection which is consistently and positively associated with trees (the ‘laurel skin’, ‘pine-needle armor’, and ‘bark habit which deflects’): ‘*Le champ lexical de la protection est très présent dans “Virgin in a Tree”... Ces termes évoquant la protection sont tous liés à l’arbre, que ce soit la “peau de laurier”, “l’armure de pin”, ou “l’écorce qui dévie”*’, in ‘Le Mythe de Daphné’ (n. 48 above), para. 16-18.

her feet -- just now so swift -- stuck in sluggish roots, her face was covered by the tree-top; only her bright beauty remained' (*torpor grauis occupat artus; | mollia cinguntur tenui praecordia libro; | in frondem crines, in ramos bracchia crescent; | pes modo tam uelox pigris radicibus haeret; | ora cacumen habet; remanet nitor unus in illa, Met. 1.548-52*). In Plath, the metamorphosis is effected implicitly through a subtle shift in vocabulary. Once the woman has renounced her sexuality, she is dehumanized and described more like a tree than a woman: 'her fingers | Stiff as twigs, her body woodenly | Askew'.⁵³ In the poem's shift from the feminine ('bodies', 'nipple') to the arboreal, Plath embeds the shifts of metamorphosis across the poem. Finally, she draws on Ovid's vocabulary to bring out the bitterness of his conclusion. Where Ovid's Daphne retains her 'bright beauty', a poor consolation, Plath's Daphne is 'lemon-tasting... all beauty's bright juice sours'.

The final stanza of the poem starkly concludes the themes first explored in the dryad diptych, of violence perpetrated against the woman's image by the male artistic gaze, and the silencing of the female muse: 'Untongued... | Tree-twist will ape this gross anatomy | Till irony's bough breaks'. The 'tree-twist' that 'apes' the woman's form both returns the poem to Klee's own visual parody, and brings the reader's attention to the perversity of the ancient male artist's sexualization of a woman, even in tree form. There is a tension between the poem's presentation of the female victims of male art, and the poem's ironic and unsympathetic view of women who comply with codes which circumscribe feminine behaviour and valorize female chastity: 'virgins for virginity's sake'. The vivid 'untongued' - - immediately evocative of Philomela -- suggests finally that to resist one's sexuality is to render oneself silent.

'Elm'

Plath's thematic use of the Daphne myth to question bourgeois values of feminine chastity finds its conclusion in her poem 'Elm'.⁵⁴ I have shown how Plath staged Daphne's story

⁵³ 'Déshumanisée, elle est assimilée à l'arbre... plutôt qu'à une femme', Thomine, 'Le Mythe de Daphné' (n. 48 above), para. 16.

⁵⁴ CP 192. cf. 'The Bee Meeting', where the speaker wishes to escape by metamorphosing -- not into a beautiful tree but into the weed cow parsley: 'I could not run without having to run forever' (CP 211). In Ovid, Daphne blames her beauty for 'causing' Apollo's lust ('change this treacherous form which has pleased too much', *qua nimium placui, mutando perde figuram, Met. 1.547*); her metamorphosis into a tree does not mar her beauty as wished, nor allow her to escape from Apollo's lust ('only her bright beauty remained. Apollo still loved her [like this]', *remanet nitor unus in illa. | hanc quoque Phoebus amat, Met. 1.552-3*). Plath may comically pre-empt Ovid's Apollo in 'The Bee Meeting' by asking to be turned into an unremarkable plant, unsuitable for decorating the heads of Roman victors. Plath describes the 'gullible head' of the cow parsley as 'not even

across her series of poems: in her ‘Dryad’ poems, Plath imagined the act of composition (conjuring a Daphne); in ‘Pursuit’, the speaker is the Daphne who runs for her life; in ‘Virgin in a Tree’, the woman is caught mid-metamorphosis as she becomes encased in the ‘bark’s... habit’ and ‘wooden girdle’; finally, in ‘Elm’, the aged, chaste woman encased within the tree speaks, and she delivers a mournful message (*CP* 292). Unlike the cold eye of ‘Virgin in a Tree’, which looked without sympathy at ‘puritan’ and ‘barren’ ‘ugly spinsters’, there is pathos in this late poem’s description of the reminiscing spinster. Plath’s mode shifts from overt ‘parody’ and ‘irony’ to subtle melancholic reflection. As in the dryad and Klee poems, it is not Apollo that threatens Daphne, but the denial of her own sexuality.

The elm-woman gently warns her younger interlocutor not to be afraid of her sexuality: ‘It is what you fear. | I do not fear it: I have been there... terrified by this dark thing | That sleeps in me’. Daphne must embrace love before it disappears (‘Listen: there are its hooves: it has gone off like a horse’), and before she is left only with ‘the isolate, slow faults | That kill, that kill, that kill’. The use of repetition allows Plath once more to expand the Daphne myth -- here, to allude to the disappearing Echo, fading into the landscape (‘Till your head is a stone, your pillow a little turf, | Echoing, echoing’), and an older, wiser Semele: ‘I have suffered the atrocity of sunsets... scorched to the roots’. Draft versions of the poem reveal further associations to the Latin in the excised lines, ‘She pulses like a heart on my hill. | The moon snags in her intricate nervous system’: the pulsing life of the tree-woman recalling Daphne’s heart pulsing beneath her new bark encasing (*positaque in stipite dextra | sentit adhuc trepidare nouo sub cortice pectus, Met. 1.553-4*).

The reader of ‘Elm’ experiences the metamorphosis from woman to tree as Plath shifts the narrative voice of the poem from an initial external observation of the tree (‘she says’), to the voice of the tree itself (‘I have suffered’). Subject positions swap back and forth in the poem (‘Her radiance scathes me. Or perhaps I have caught her’), suggesting the confusion of pursuer and pursued. Yet in ‘Elm’, Plath has removed the pursuer Apollo from the myth and reworked Ovid’s story to create a space for dialogue between two women about female sexual desire. This space is not an unambiguously positive sisterhood, however, as the poem’s

nodding’; while ‘gullible’ suggests the speaker’s complicity in the passivity and violence of the Daphne episode, the speaker also demonstrates a silent control over her narrative actions. Where Ovid’s Daphne seemed (*uisa*) to give her resigned assent to Apollo (*adnuit, Met. 1.567*), Plath’s speaker silently refuses. Jessica Luck reads a demurring Daphne in ‘The Arrival of the Bee Box’ (*CP* 212): ‘would [they] forget me | If I... turned into a tree[?]’ in ‘Exploring the “Mind of the Hive”: Embodied Cognition in Sylvia Plath’s Bee Poems’, *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, 26, 2, 2007, pp. 287-308 (292). On the ambivalent nature of Ovid’s *uisa* which may signal Daphne’s refusal, see G. Liveley, *Ovid’s ‘Metamorphoses’: A Reader’s Guide*, London, 2011, p. 28.

spinster remains a figure of curiosity and suspicion. This may reveal Plath's nascent critical self-awareness of her own complicity in misogyny and contemporary myths of femininity.

In suggesting that Daphne's metamorphosis is not inevitable (the elm aims to avert Daphne's fate: 'do not fear it'), Plath writes Daphne a route out of her story -- if only she will embrace her sexuality.⁵⁵ Reclaiming and embracing female sexuality may represent one strategy, if problematic -- given the nature of the majority of the sexual encounters in Ovid's epic poem -- of recovering the subjectivity of Ovid's poetic women. Plath's own metamorphoses of the Daphne myth across the poems and her various approaches to rewriting the myth suggest that she recognized the problematic nature of this endeavour; but she remained trapped in 1950s discourses of femininity and lacked the explicit vocabulary to express and embrace positive representations of active female sexuality and sexual pleasure. It is important to acknowledge Plath's ambiguous status both in the history of women's revisionary mythmaking and with regard to contemporary feminisms, which may look to Plath to recover a feminist foremother. She wrote at a time before the political framework of second-wave feminisms, and before women had begun to develop the literary tools that might have helped her negotiate her ambivalence towards the literary canon that informed her work. Plath recognized the limitations of classical literature to describe her life and parodied the dangers of adopting an 'authoritative' male poetic voice. Simultaneously drawing upon and rejecting her classical models, her use of allusion is always heavily-ironized. Yet her Daphne poems reveal a poetic attempt towards such a negotiation of this ambivalent relation with her inherited, male literary canon, and they express her efforts to write a way out of poetic and sexual passivity, and to construct a new self as a woman artist against a biased history of literary representation.

Conclusion

An understanding of Plath's deep literary engagement with Ovid counters readings of her work that have reduced her classical allusions to biographical clues. Over her series of five Daphne poems Plath employs her characteristic irony and humour to read and rewrite classical myth, mixing the contemporary with the classical to critique both ancient and

⁵⁵ An older Daphne also appears in 'Widow' (*CP* 164): 'the compassionate trees bend in, | The trees of loneliness, the trees of mourning' -- recall Daphne's 'nodding' branches (*Met.* 1.566-7). The tragic loss of personhood these women have suffered in metamorphosis and the denial of sexuality is expressed by Plath's lines, 'They stand like shadows about the green landscape— | Or even like black holes cut out of it. | ... a shadow-thing', 'a bodiless soul'.

modern myths of femininity. Ovid's irony may have particularly attracted the wry poetic sensibilities of Plath, together with his self-reflexive style that provided space -- and female characters -- for her to experiment with the creation of a female poetic voice. Her personal style also echoes Ovid's own collage of high and low culture, ancient and contemporary. The tale of Daphne facilitated Plath's career-long interest in exploring the relationship between 'literary form, cultural fantasy, and sexual violence', and the tale became as programmatic for the concerns of Plath's poetry as it is programmatic for the Roman poet's epic text.⁵⁶ Using Ovid's Daphne, Plath meditates on the personal harm of running from sexuality, deconstructs the 'hocus-pocus' behind literary and visual representations of women, highlights the very real violence experienced by women under the male gaze, and challenges the twofold cultural imperative towards feminine artistic and sexual chastity -- all in her search for artistic and sexual independence.

⁵⁶ Enterline, *Rhetoric of the Body* (n. 31 above), p. 10.