

CHAPTER 3

Sylvia Plath and the Classics

Holly Ranger

Sylvia Plath's approach to the use of Greco-Roman myth in contemporary poetry may be suggested by her review of C.A. Trypanis' *The Stones of Troy*. She finds Trypanis' engagement with the classical past too self-consciously done and she comments, 'There is always the danger [in classically-inspired texts] that the poet will not transform the material, will not, in some way, make it freshly his own or ours':

The weakest poems... are those where the gap between 'contemporaneity and antiquity' is uncomfortably straddled: where the mythic material remains inorganic and untransformed in the context of the modern poem; where the parallel between old and new is pointed at, rather than realised in the poems' shape and texture.¹

If, she continues, the poet chooses metaphor to infuse classicism into a poem, then it must be 'intrinsic to the poem, working back and forth on itself, not expressed prosaically at the close, like the moral in a fable'. In Plath's own classically-infused poems, her engagement with her literary models is subtle and organically embedded; and when classical tales are referenced explicitly, she uses them knowingly as stage-props, observing herself in the process of reception with a detached critical eye: 'I borrow the stilts of an old tragedy' (*CP* 116).

One consequence of the dominant biographical mode of reading Plath is that her intertextual engagement with an extensive range of Greco-Roman classical texts has been neglected. Her turn to Homer's Penelope, for example, as a model for herself as a resisting woman translator of the canonized classical past, sitting at home with dictionaries and working covertly at her literary task, a 'Penelope weaving webs of Webster, turning spindles of Tourneur' (*J* 233); and her playful inversion of such models in letters to lovers, casting the sailor Gordon Lameyer as Penelope to her

‘female ulysses’ (*LV1* 953; 894; 1046), or figuring herself as Ceres to Richard Sassoan’s absent Proserpine and a ‘feminine pygmalion’ to J. Mallory Wober’s Galatea (*LV1* 1018). The anxiety Plath expresses elsewhere regarding her male peers’ assumed or actual classical education, and her comparative ‘ignorance’ in this field (*LV1* 978; 1085; 1122), is belied by her calculated yet playful erudition—embedding letters to classicizing recipients with subversively gendered allusions. Her recurring self-characterization as Pygmalion from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is employed to alternately mould her male lover and critique her complicity in the self-creation of the 1950s man-made woman (*J* 191; 510; *CP* 221, 69, 158). The shared female gaze of ‘In Plaster’—between *Pygmalione* and her ‘new absolutely white’ creation—also reveals how Plath’s approach to myth frequently removes the male antagonist to open up the ancient text and create a space—if ambivalent—for female dialogue.²

Although ancient tragic heroines are commonly invoked in Plath scholarship—she is variously described as an Electra, Medea, Clytaemnestra, Phaedra, or Dido—they are used to mythologize the poet herself, and the construction of Plath-as-myth has overshadowed her literary artistry.³ Such fatalistic and biographical readings of Plath as a doomed heroine trapped in a Freudian cycle of perpetual mourning for her father overlook her arguably more redemptive reading of Sophocles’ *Oedipus* (‘we have free will & must be responsible’, *J* 335; cf. 329, 333-5; cf. *LH* 195, 209, 229). They also overlook her interest in the archetypal figure of feminine rebellion, Antigone (*J* 216, 222, 333, 340, 554). Antigone suggests a productive route for exploring Plath’s use of the classics to create an alternative and highly-ironized ‘feminine’ Oedipus complex to represent her relationship with ‘Jocasta’ and her literary mother(s). For while Plath was first introduced to Latin by her father, a trained classicist, she developed her personal classicism in dialogue with other women.⁴ Plath was influenced by acquaintances with women classical scholars

including her college Latin teacher Eleanor Shipley Duckett (*LH* 252), Smith colleague Pat Hecht, and her Cambridge philosophy supervisor Dorothea Krook, as well as by the feminist anti-bourgeois take on the classics developed by writers such as Stevie Smith, Anne Sexton, and Christine Brooke-Rose (*LH* 369). As Virginia Woolf looked to Jane Harrison, Plath may have looked to these women as models to validate both her life as a writer and her gendered approach to the classics, self-consciously positioning herself within a tradition of women readers and rewriters of the classics.

Plath's classical allusions often sit in an intertextual chain of earlier women's receptions: her use of a Psyche-narrative in her Yorkshire Moor poems, for example, reworks the tale's earlier appearance in the novels of the Brontë sisters. Plath likely first read Apuleius' recombination of Platonic myth and folk-tale in *Cupid and Psyche* in his *Metamorphoses* in her 1940s school Latin class (*LV1* 87, 106-7, 137)—US contemporaries of Plath, Rachel DuPlessis and Alicia Ostriker, both recall reading Apuleius at school and both have written their own Psyche sequences—but her bathetic presentation of the House of Eros in 'Two Views of Withens', and its use to foreground a difference between masculine and feminine poetic vision, is clearly filtered through its dilapidated appearance in *Jane Eyre*. Similarly, the bridal imagery of 'The Bee Meeting' (*CP* 211) plays with Sappho fr. 13 ('Neither honey nor bee for me') via the sexual undertones of the plundering bees in H.D.'s Sappho poem, 'Fragment 113'; and both Plath and Anne Sexton make wry use of Ovid's tale of Daphne to explore female sexuality and cast a disdainful eye upon cultural imperatives to chastity in their respective poems 'Virgin in a Tree' and 'Where I live in this honorable house of the laurel tree'.

It is Woolf, however, who informs Plath's antagonistic relationship to the traditional guardians of classical literature. Cramming for a history lecture in her first

year at Smith College, Plath feels ‘faceless’ before the ‘centuries to comprehend before I sleep’, and colours her journal entry with a distinctly Woolfian scepticism about the benefit of rote classical learning: ‘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’ (*J* 26-7). In Woolf’s coming-of-age story, *The Voyage Out*, Edward Gibbon’s six-volume *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1789) is a key comedic prop in the text, as the socially-awkward Cambridge scholar Hirst attempts to ‘educate’ the young Rachel Vinrace. Hirst exclaims his shock upon learning that Rachel has reached the age of twenty-four without reading Gibbon—he believes that appreciating the work is ‘the test’ to establish a woman’s intellectual ‘capacity’ (Rachel’s guardian, Helen Ambrose, argues that it is not Gibbon the naive Rachel needs, but ‘the facts of life’).⁵ Woolf’s use of Gibbon here is thematically reprised in *Jacob’s Room* and *Between the Acts*, where an elite classical education is shown to hold no preparatory value for sexual encounters, romantic or aggressive: upon seeing Florinda’s naked body, Jacob ‘knew that cloisters and classics are no use whatever’.⁶ The contrast between sex and the classical tradition in Plath’s college journals implicitly echoes Jacob’s thoughts, yet both she and Woolf suggest that it is not so much the classical past itself that is useless, but rather the ideologically-loaded way that the classics have been taught and their reduction to the ‘lives of great men’, set texts, and rote-learning. As Plath observes of the rows of ‘girls, girls everywhere’ reading Gibbon together in the library, ‘Huxley would have laughed. What a conditioning center this is!’ (*J* 26; 328).

As a student, Plath laughs at the banal indoctrination of the classics; but as a teacher at Smith College a few years later, her disappointment in those entrusted with the classical past is clear. At a faculty meeting, Plath’s eyes and concentration flit about the room, mixing the contemporary with the classical:

No eyes met mine... A roomful of smoke and orange-seated black-painted chairs. Sat beside a vaguely familiar woman in the very front, no one between me and the president. Foisted forward. Stared intently at gilt leaved trees, orange-gilt columns, a bronze frieze of stags, stags and an archer, bow-bent. Intolerable, unintelligible bickering about pluses & minuses, graduate grades. On the backcloth a greek with white-silver feet fluted to a maid, coyly kicking one white leg out of her Greek robe. Pink & orange & gilded maidens... Haven't you heard? Mr Hill has twins. (*J* 318).

Plath's disillusionment is heightened by the contrast between the culturally-esteemed classical art and the 'unintelligible bickering' of the staff around her; she conveys a sense of loss and belatedness in recognizing that, as a woman in the 1950s who has finally gained access to the classical learning that men have controlled for centuries, she is too late—the classical greats have been reduced to 'pluses and minuses, graduate grades' (or, perhaps, it is a recognition that the classics have always been so). If we read the neo-classical frieze at Smith as depicting Diana and Actaeon, then Ovid's story of trespassing and vision highlights Plath's sense of exclusion from academia—an outsider looking in—alongside a sense that in witnessing the behind-the-scenes bureaucracy of teaching, she has seen something she regrets being privy to—something she may be disproportionately punished for glimpsing.⁷ The scene gains a Woolfian colour when the journal entry is compared to the account provided in a letter to her brother. Plath writes how disillusioning it is to find that those whom she admired as a student now 'gossip, especially the men... with those on tenure getting pot-bellies' (*LH* 341). The portly classical scholar is a recognisably Woolfian type. In her essay on Gibbon, Woolf describes the scholar as 'ridiculous' in body, 'prodigiously fat, [and] enormously top-heavy'; while the sight of classical philologist Erasmus Cowan in *Jacob's Room* moves the authorial voice to wonder, 'what if the poet strode in? *This* my image?' he might ask, pointing to the chubby man, whose brain is, after all, Virgil's representative among us, though the body gluttonise, and as for arms, bees, or even the plough... But... [n]owhere else would Virgil hear the like'.⁸

Plath's journal sketches of her classical colleagues at Smith are essays in Woolfian pastiche. Recounting a dinner party where a male peer expresses his hostility towards the women classicists of Smith College ('Paul spoke of... Pat Hecht's 'Knowing more about Greek plays', or pretending to, than he', *J* 326), Plath clearly dislikes Paul Roche's attempt to disparage Hecht's learning. Both Roche (English) and Hecht (Art History) were possible candidates for a Classics professorship, and Roche seems threatened by Hecht's classical credentials. Well-versed in the classics herself, Plath resents his affected scruples concerning the new wave of women scholars entering the 1950s (male) academy. The interplay between the personal and the scholarly—between gender and the classics—informs Plath's presentation of herself as an academic battling endemic sexism at work alongside endless domestic chores. Teaching Sophocles to undergraduates in between late nights and grocery shopping (*J* 334-5), and attempting to prepare class notes while running a house and cooking for dinner guests ('to hell with Sophocles', *J* 329-30), 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, Plath imagines that the great demand the gods make of her is simply (in the face of Oedipus' trials) to get out of bed (*J* 334). Plath struggles, clearly exhausted, yet berates herself for her 'sloth... & weakness', observing the clash between her own life and the lives of the male academics around her who effortlessly succeed (*J* 507). She describes Roche, too, in ironically classical terms which increasingly hold negative connotations in her writing when associated with male writers. Plath notes with a hint of fascinated disgust his face, 'adonis-boy looks lost', and his 'professionally dewy blue-eyed look and his commercially gilded and curled blond hair on his erect, dainty-boned aristocratic head looking as if it had been struck on a greek coin that since has blurred & thinned

from too much public barter and fingering' (*J* 326, 354). Later, Plath discovers that Paul is a 'palpable sham':

what machinations lead him to set about doing Greek translations...? to impress [his wife's] parents, to stall (until they come across handsomely by leaving a fortune) under the aura of a specialist scholar's life work? One can't help wanting to know. He is 'successful' in getting money, getting an audience... [but] what does he do? The translations are a front: he uses a lexicon. Stanley claims to have seen the lexicon & Louis MacNeice's translation on his desk, open, and his own page a kind of elaborate synthesis. So he is a fraud. One suspects, one knows, this—and yet one wonders: how, so beautifully, does he keep it up? (*J* 383-384)

Plath sees through the neo-classical pretences of these male frauds, mocking their classically decorated houses and classical posing as 'saccharine'—artificially sweet (*J* 503). Like Woolf, Plath reserves her greatest scepticism for the guardians of the classical past, interrogating the fetishized value assigned to signifiers of a classical education and the ways in which the classical past is transmitted. This distinctive attitude is also found in Plath's poetry, but is, I think, always present alongside a self-reflexive critique of her own modernist anxieties—a reproach to break away from modernist classicizing impulses. In 'Private Ground', for example, the speaker mocks the unsuitability of 'those Greek beauties you brought | Off Europe's relic heap | To sweeten your neck of the New York woods' (*CP* 130), while the speaker of 'The Colossus' is 'none the wiser' for her thirty years of labour reconstructing the fragmented colossus of the past (*CP* 129); in 'Insomniac', ineffective sleeping tablets are described as 'worn-out and silly, like classical gods... [they] do him no good' (*CP* 163).

Yet the pull of both ancient and modernist poetic traditions remained forceful. Plath repeatedly reveals in her poems an intimate knowledge of ancient languages and texts through close verbal echoes and allusions. 'Ouija' wittily recalls 'every foul declension' (*CP* 77) of her school Latin lessons, while her fear of miscomprehension

is conveyed by the ‘unintelligible syllables’ of her new bee hive ‘like a Roman mob... I lay my ear to furious Latin’ (CP 212). Her personal library contained a broad range of classical texts including Sappho, Plato, Aristotle, Thucydides, Quintilian, Marcus Aurelius, and Augustine, and many of these are bilingual Harvard Loeb Classical Library editions, suggesting that Plath worked from translated texts containing the Latin or Greek on the facing page. Works of classical reception such as Racine’s *Phèdre*, Anouilh’s *Antigone*, and Marguerite Yourcenar’s *Hadrian’s Memoirs* (J 233, 383-4, 399; LH 149, 256, 307), alongside representations of mythological characters in visual art (the films of Jean Cocteau and the paintings of Paul Klee, Rousseau, José Clemente Orozco, and Giorgio de Chirico), also acted as key stimuli for Plath’s classicism. Undoubtedly, her ‘Roman time’ in the spring of 1956 (J 336; LV1 1160) shades poetic references to tourist sites including the Roman Forum (CP 129), and ‘Aqueducts, the Baths of Caracalla’ (CP 170).

In an extended example of Plath’s classical engagement, her cycle of bee poems (CP 211-19) innovatively translate and rewrite Virgil’s guide to beekeeping in *Georgics* 4. According to one biographical tradition, Virgil, like Plath, had a beekeeper father; but the links between their works extend beyond the personal. Alongside repeated references to the Latin language, Rome, Romans, and Caesar (cf. *Geo.* 4.506), each of the five poems that form Plath’s sequence corresponds directly to a section of Virgil’s poem, and holistically rework his use of the bee society as an allegorical figure for civil, domestic, strife. More explicitly, ‘The Swarm’ borrows the extended war metaphor at *Geo.* 4.67-87, but updates Virgil’s references to Caesar to describe the swarm as the bee-emperor Napoleon and his troops battling at Waterloo. An understanding of how Virgil’s fourth *Georgic* informs the bee cycle can therefore illuminate, in part, the integral role of ‘The Swarm’—a critically neglected poem that Plath herself left in parentheses.

Her use of 'African hands' in 'The Arrival of the Bee Box' to describe the speaker's first sight of the bees reminds the classical reader of Virgil's own African bees, the Carthaginians, compared to bees building a new city for the queen bee, Dido, when the hero Aeneas first catches sight of the new city at *Aeneid* 1.430-6. Like the speaker of Plath's poem, Aeneas stands marvelling at the great 'din' (*strepitum*, 1.422) emitted by the workers, uncertain whether he meets friends or enemies. 'Stings' also follows the Latin closely in its account of the old queen, 'Her wings torn shawls, her long body | Rubbed of its plush', and the 'Honey-drudgers' who 'thought death was worth it' (*saepe etiam duris errando in cotibus alas | attriuere, ultroque animam sub fasce dedere: | tantus amor florum et generandi gloria mellis*, 'Often they even wear down their wings as they bumble against the hard rocks, and freely give their lives under the load: so great is their love of flowers and the glory in making honey', *Geo.* 4.203-5).

Plath also uses Virgil's text to foreground the woman who is the necessary yet unspoken condition of the poetic pastoral paradise, subverting the *Georgics* to challenge the male poetic tradition which uncritically praises the pastoral life. 'Stings' in particular implies that the man's idyll has come at the expense of the woman's cultural starvation and hard work: 'for years I have eaten dust | And dried plates with my dense hair'. A poetic sequel to her Woolfian journal entries, the poems darkly allegorize the ambivalent 'value' of a classical education in a period when women were expected to abandon their university studies for marriage.

The bee poems present an ambivalent response that both endorses and refutes her classical model. Plath problematizes Virgil's imperial paean whilst drawing heavily upon it, flaunting her classical training at the same time as questioning the cultural authority that the classics hold (literalized in her text through the dominating and dangerous presences of Caesars and Napoleons) by expressing a self-reflexive

anxiety regarding the power her speaker does not necessarily want to hold—and regarding a poetic tradition from which the poet has not quite yet broken free. Reading Plath reading Virgil resists biographical accounts of the apian poems that explain her thematic interest solely in relation to her father, at the expense of her intricate allusion—an obfuscation enacted, for example, by Hughes’ poem ‘The Bee God’, in which the bees’ Latin is rewritten as German ‘gutturals’ (*BL* 150).

The bee cycle forms part of Plath’s larger engagement with Virgil. Virgil’s own bee poem is notable for its description of Octavian—future father of the country, *pater patriae*, Augustus—as ‘thundering in battle’ (*fulminat... bello*, *Geo.* 4.561). This is the first instance of the Latin verb *fulminare* (‘to thunder’) used of a mortal (it is previously only used of the father god Jupiter)—a linguistic conceit neatly reflected in the ‘thundering’ father of ‘Among the Bumblebees’ (*JP* 259, 261). ‘Elm’ (*CP* 192), meanwhile, ‘inhabited by a cry. | Nightly it flaps out’ reworks the *ulmus opaca*, the shady elm filled with false dreams encountered in the Underworld of *Aeneid* 6.282-4. Plath’s engagement with Virgil is clear and deep; but it is Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* which most often lends characters and themes to her work.

Her poems display a sustained thematic interest in metamorphosis, meditating on the transmutations of insects and the changing moon, and using metamorphic imagery in a specifically gendered way to describe pregnancy and the ill or menstruating body (in, for example, ‘Metaphors’ and ‘Cut’, *CP* 116, 235). Mental ill-health is also repeatedly figured in the poems as a kind of metamorphosis, most frequently represented by images of women overwhelmed by plant-life. This echoes the many traumatised women of Ovid’s epic poem who are transformed into flowers, shrubs, and trees. We see the unsettling blur between human and vegetable as a woman melts into the flower-patterned carpets in ‘Miss Drake Proceeds to Supper’, and in the suffocating flowers of ‘Poem for a Birthday’, ‘Leaving Early’, ‘Tulips’, and ‘I

Am Vertical' (*CP* 41, 131, 145, 160, 162). Metamorphic imagery dissolves the boundaries between self and other, and poems highlight the fragility and permeability of such boundaries by juxtaposing the Ovidian with modern images of surgery and tattooing (as in 'The Surgeon at 2 a.m.', *CP* 170). There are also allusions to or reworkings of many specific stories found together in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, perhaps most strikingly to Philomela—sister of Procne, raped by Tereus, mutilated of her tongue, metamorphosed into a bird, and inspiration for Shakespeare's Lavinia—in 'The Courage of Shutting-Up' (*CP* 209), and 'The Snowman on the Moor'.

Alongside the imagery of birds, purple mouths, tongues, and bruises (*purpureas... notas*, *Met.* 6.577), the poems share with Ovid a thematic interest in the interrelation between sexual violence, and speech and silence (the word 'mouth' and its cognates appears 67 times across Plath's poems, the Latin equivalent *os* 250 times across *Metamorphoses*). The story of Procne and Philomela (metamorphosed respectively into a swallow and nightingale) shades many other poems linked by their close association of sisters, birds, tongues, and bloody mouths ('The Shrike', *CP* 42, 'Three Women', 180, 'The Rabbit Catcher', 193, 'Poppies in July', 203, and 'The Detective', 208). In 'Blackberrying' (*CP* 168), the 'blue-red juices' of the blackberries (cf. the bloodstains on the metamorphosed sisters' breasts, *Met.* 6.577; *caedis... notae*, 669-70) stain the speaker's hands in 'a blood sisterhood', while overhead 'cacophonous flocks' wheel: 'Theirs is the only voice, protesting, protesting'—a mournful cry that recalls the Sophoclean tradition in which the birds Procne and Philomela lament for eternity.

A recognition of Plath's sophisticated and explicitly gendered classicism impacts beyond her own work. Both Plath and Sexton, for example, were working on their Daphne poems when they met in Robert Lowell's poetry class in Boston in 1958. While the link between Lowell, Plath, and Sexton is usually figured in terms of their

poetic dramatization of autobiographical material, an understanding of Plath's classicism impels a reassessment of the 'confessional' school of poetry in terms of the role played by classical mythology. Similarly, any exploration of the poetic interaction between Plath and Hughes must integrate her classical scholarship. Allusions to Plath in his *Tales from Ovid* and *Oresteia* may be read not as allusions to Plath-the-woman, but rather as allusions to her own classical work.

Simultaneously rejecting yet drawing upon the classical tradition, Plath wrote at a time before she had the political framework to negotiate her ambivalence to the literary canon that informed her work. But her transformations of classical literature represent a poetic attempt towards such a negotiation, using old texts to explore new ways of representing herself as a lover, a mother, and a poet. Plath approached her classical models, her poetry, and her life with characteristic irony and humour, creating a place for herself in life and the classical tradition as a woman and as a writer.

¹ Plath, 'Review'; 'contemporaneity and antiquity' quotes T.S. Eliot's 1923 *The Dial* review of James Joyce, 'Ulysses, Order, and Myth'.

² On ambivalent, female, classically-infused spaces, compare Plath's heavily ironic title 'Lesbos' to describe not a Sapphic idyll, but 'viciousness in the kitchen' (*CP* 227).

³ Lowell, 'Introduction'; Newman, 'Candor', 45; cf. 'Pythia, Cassandra, the Whore of Babylon', Newman, 'Candor', 55; Nausicaa, Calypso, Dido, Circe, Artemis, Aphrodite (Lameyer, quoted in Wilson, *Mad Girl's Love Song*, Simon and Schuster, 10); a 'vestal... initiate[...]' (Howard, 'I have no face', 82); 'Isis' (Sagar, *Laughter*; Rollyson, *Isis*); Tiresias (Axelrod, *The Wound*, 175).

⁴ *LH* 37; Butscher, *Method*, 10; Kirk, *Biography*, 31; Wilson, *Mad Girl's Love Song*, 87.

⁵ Woolf, *Voyage Out*, 172, 183.

⁶ Woolf, *Jacob's Room*, 69.

⁷ Compare 'The Snowman on the Moor' (*CP* 58), in which the speaker finds herself in the role of Actaeon, fleeing a lover's quarrel as the man 'send[s] police and hounds to bring her in'; Hughes inverts these subject positions in *Tales from Ovid*, casting Plath as Diana and himself as Actaeon (Hughes, *Tales from Ovid*, 105).

⁸ Woolf, 'The Gibbon'; Woolf, *Jacob's Room*, 33.