

Mother Moon: Conflation of myth and motherhood in Sylvia Plath's poetry

by Ashlyn Ruley

While she was reasonably recognized for her work during her lifetime, after her death in 1963, Sylvia Plath quickly grew into a mythic literary icon. Many of her poems, such as "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy," inspired and influenced the female writers and feminists of the decades that followed. Throughout the progression of her, readers observe Plath transform her style from the more stilted, formal writing of her earlier poems to the vivid, violent, and mythical words of the posthumously published *Ariel*. The poems of her younger years present female subjects and speakers who fall into one of two categories: the mother, wife, and homemaker, or the career woman, the artist, the poet. While her earlier work strictly separates these two ideals of womanhood, the poems written during the time she was compiling *Ariel* begin to consider these two separate women as one, both mother and poet. As these later poems indicate, Plath's ability to reproduce and her ability to write are intimately bound up. Additionally, her poems about motherhood include mythological allusions and mystical language that further contribute to the success of her last poems. This essay will examine how myth and motherhood work in tandem with one another to weave together the legacy of Plath.

"The Plath Myth: is there anything legitimate about such a phrase?" (Gilbert 588). Sandra Gilbert voices the universal question that every Plath critic must ask themselves when navigating the knotted ties between Plath's life and writing. No matter how ardently one tries to resist the magnetism of her biography, eventually Plath scholars must contend with this issue. While it is not altogether uncommon for literary critics to draw connections between an author and their work, in Plath's case, these parallels swell to excessive proportions, which serve to either overshadow her writings or minimize their worth. Cultural interpretation shoulders a portion of

the blame for this conflation of life and art, particularly in relation to female writing; already women bear the stereotypes of sensitivity, fragility, an overreliance on emotion. When these preconceptions project themselves onto poetry, one can easily dismiss the writings of women such as Plath as girlish effusions of emotion, lacking the control and genius of true art. Rather than reading her poems through the lens of literary analysis, the amateur Plath reader so easily takes on the role of diagnostician, poring over her words in search of “the signs” foreshadowing her infamous death instead of reading them as acts of creation, of artifice, like any other art.

At some point in the evolution of Plath criticism and cultural perception, her work became synonymous with troubled female adolescence, despite the fact that she lived past her thirties. Arielle Greenberg and Becca Klaver discuss the mythic aura surrounding Plath, and in particular, its influence on new generations of girl poets. The emphasis on girlhood is no accident in their conversation—Klaver notes that “in the unwritten handbook for aspiring female writers, the chapter on Plath ends with adolescence” (180), a conception substantiated no doubt by her own husband’s classification of over two hundred poems as “juvenilia” in the volume of her collected poems (Alexander 356). Klaver and Greenwood point out that Plath’s suicide does not cast the only shadow over her work, and perhaps not even the greatest shadow. A purely biographical reading of Plath’s poetry trivializes her work, reducing it to the status of a girlish diary. Whether or not one manages to avoid the trap of reading her work this way, the fact remains that some morbid combination of her suicide, the publication of her personal journals, her classification as a confessional poet, and the general transparency of her life directly contributes to the cultural myth that is Sylvia Plath.

Another reason Plath’s work is often read biographically traces back to a general misconception of confessional poetry, the movement to which Plath is most often assigned. Plath

wrote on the cusp of the confessional mode in American poetry, pioneering the genre along with poets such as Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton. While confessional poetry demands the vulnerability of the author to write about the commonplace, the taboo, or the personal realms of life, often readers mistakenly assume that confessional poems accurately mirror the life of the author, or that they capture some unfiltered outflow of emotion. David Yezzi's definition of confessional poetry counters these common assumptions, describing it as an "artful simulation of sincerity...an artifice of honesty...[a] lie like truth" (qtd. Asotic 58). With this definition in mind, confessional poetry requires readers to examine *how* the author strategically crafts a facade of candid emotion. Selma Asotic asserts that in Plath's case, her confessional style is marked by a signature detachment from the subjects of her poems; any biographical characters or events in her work "become an element in Plath's unique mythological system" (61). Even the personal "I" in her poetry represents far more than simply her own voice, but rather the voice of a fictional persona. A distinction exists between the mythic Plath portrayed in her work and the posthumous cultural myth imposed on her. In her work, Plath appoints herself as the primary mythologizer of her own life, and in doing so, assures an agency over her work that has outlived her death.

Plath's poems, her novel, and other writings all provide evidence of her hand at work in shaping the mold in which her cultural imprint was to be cast. Even her personal journal can't escape the calculated fictionalization of her life. Her journal is full of practice poems, linguistic analyses, self-instated rules for her writing habits, and poetic inspirations. Even in the diaristic portions of her journal, Plath maintains control over her life narrative. She criticizes the style of her journals without the expectation of an audience, writing: "I think this book [her journal] ricochets between the feminine burbling I hate and the posed cynicism I would shun...I try to be

honest. And what is revealed is often rather hideously unflattering” (70). Plath never relaxes her writer’s eye; every detail, no matter how minute, or mundane, or domestic, is rendered in a deliberate, poetic fashion. Of her published works, the *Ariel* poems often strike readers as the most personal in her collection, with poems such as “Daddy” and the sequence of bee poems hinting at her relationship with her father, as well as her musings on motherhood coinciding with that phase of her life. However, these ostensible biographic details are couched in surreal landscapes, grotesque imagery, and mythological references, as she reshapes the events and characters in her life into her own intimate mythology. Allusions to myth and fantasy appear frequently in her earlier poems as well, with poems either explicitly naming mythic figures or else utilizing supernatural motifs and dream-like tones.

While mythology has served a substantial role as a subject and inspiration for literature and art, Bojana Vujin argues a particular relationship between modern female writers and their use of myth. Highlighting “a change in mythological focus from creation to hero myth” as an indicator of the “masculinization of mythology,” Vujin asserts that in original myth and mythopoetic works since, the presence of the female perspective has been largely omitted in favor of exalting the heroes of epic poetry, the war-bloodied soldiers, the executors of deadly feats (44). The generation of postmodernists to which Plath belonged started to critique these centuries of masculine domination of myth, challenging outdated, male-oriented narratives. Women writers in particular brought the feminine aspects of mythology to the surface and gave a voice to the women of myth, oft stultified in masculine reimaginings. In Barbara Dell’Abate-Çelebi’s words, “The historical tendency associates mythic and literary female characters with the feminine stereotypes of passivity, submission and subordination,” with mythological “rewrites aiming to provide new representations of female subjectivities that break stereotypical

molds and emphasize autonomy” (qtd. Vujan 47). Beyond reclaiming and reinventing the heroines of mythology for themselves, the very act of retelling these stories reinstates women as makers of myth rather than subjects of it. Like statues come to life, in the hands of women, the goddesses, wives, nymphs and muses of mythology reanimate and inspire droves of female storytellers.

If reappropriation of myth serves the female author in general by restoring agency to these characters and shattering stereotypes, the question remains: what role does mythology play in Plath’s work, and moreover, how does the self-actualized myth of her life serve her writing? Plath hints at an answer in her journals, defining her goals for her writing as “not merely a diary: not ostensibly autobiography...I must so douse this experience in my mind, imbue it with distance, create cool shrewd views of it, so that it becomes reshaped” (200). Fully aware of the close correlation between her life and the subjects of her work, this excerpt from her journals demonstrates that she held herself accountable to a detachment from her experiences—as a writer, a wife, a mother, a woman—in order to make art from them. By conflating her reality and her artistry, Plath places herself in the position of both muse and mouthpiece, observed and observer, and by couching her story in myth, she distances herself from her own life enough to use it as a source for her writing.

In addition to providing insight into her approaches to writing, Plath’s journals also reveal her internal conflict between two opposing spheres of her life: home and career. Now, in no way was this an experience unique to Plath. Plenty of women writers before Plath questioned and critiqued patriarchal oppression that limited women’s options in life. However, it’s clear that this conflict was at the forefront of Plath’s thoughts in her personal writing, where she asks: “Would marriage sap my creative energy and annihilate my desire for written and pictorial

expression, which increases with this depth of unsatisfied emotion...or would I if I married achieve a fuller expression in art as well as in the creation of children?...Am I strong enough to do both well?" (Plath 23). These anxieties about marriage and children recur throughout the journals: "I am afraid that the physical sensuousness of marriage will lull and soothe to inactive lethargy my desire to work outside the realm of my mate—might make me 'lose myself in him'" (37). In her younger years, (her years at Smith College and Cambridge), she could not imagine these two lives possibly intersecting; to choose one would necessarily exclude the other, a forked road in her psyche. This mental dilemma gave rise to feelings of intense jealousy of men who had "the physical freedom to lead a double life—his career, and his sexual and family life" (35), and these sentiments seep into her poetry, especially her early writing, in which she repeatedly pits these notions of womanhood against each other.

The earliest example of the duality of womanhood materializing in Plath's published work appears in the poem "Two Sisters of Persephone." Light and dark symbolism enhance the contrast between the women in the poem, one married to the sun and made quickly a mother, living life in open air and warmth. The other cloistered "in her dark wainscoted room...wry virgin to the last, goes graveward with flesh laid waste, worm-husbanded, yet no woman" (31-32). Plath convolutes the image of home in this poem in associating it with the working, writing woman rather than the wife and mother. Instead of limiting the latter to the inside, to domesticity and maternal servitude, Plath chooses to place the intellectual, celibate sister within the confines of home. No matter what she meant through this inversion of inside/outside worlds, Plath clearly communicates the stark separation between the lives of two sisters, extending this binary all the way to her conceptions of sex and gender altogether. The last words of the poem resonate

ominously: “yet no woman;” in Plath’s eyes, the rejection of a husband and children desexes the woman completely.

One must also take into account the mythic element of this poem, though only mentioned in the title—the absent third sister, Persephone. Despite appearing nowhere within the body of the poem, the implications of the Persephone myth weave their way into the themes of duality in this piece. After all, Persephone lived a life split between two worlds, half the year in darkness and death, the other half in light and life. One could interpret Persephone as the middle ground between the worlds inhabited by the sisters, living the double life of marriage and freedom that Plath so envies. Perhaps the reason Plath excludes any mention of the third sister is precisely because, in her mind, this double life can only be achieved in the realm of myth. Even her existence outside of the poem contributes to her sense of otherworldliness. While the mythic Persephone walks the line between these two lives, her mortal, non-mythic sisters are incapable of balancing the two and must choose. Ultimately, this poem serves as a harbinger for the tensions between writing and domesticity that will occur again and again in her work.

For instance, in 1957, just a year later, Plath wrote “The Disquieting Muses,” in which she illustrates yet again the dichotomy of womanhood. However, this poem distinguishes itself from the previous one in *how* it considers this dichotomy. Whereas poems such as “Two Sisters of Persephone” contain female subjects altogether unaware of their observer, the speaker in “The Disquieting Muses” directly addresses her intended audience: Mother. Moreover, Plath shifts to a first-person perspective, mythologizing her own poetic voice, as opposed to the voice of a third-person observer. This poem describes the speaker’s coming-of-age as she navigates a life torn between the influences of her female guardians—Mother and Muses. Both of these figures fill the role of female protector for the speaker, but in radically different ways. Mother offers a life

of warmth and light, of stories with only happy endings and “cookies and Ovaltine” to weather storms (74-76). The Muses, on the other hand, “stand their vigil” throughout the poem, casting their silent but alluring “shadows long in the setting sun” over the speaker’s life. “Mouthless, eyeless, with stitched bald head,” the Muses lack any and all physical significations of gender, and if Plath had not assigned them the titles of “the ladies” or “Godmothers,” they would have remained gender-neutral the entire poem, mirroring the desexed sister of the previous poem. Plath’s split perspective of womanhood plays out in the tensions between these two female figures. If Mother represents a world of home, childcare, and nurturing, the Muses represent a world of subconscious creativity, of the surreal, and ultimately, of authorial power. Compared to the Muses, Mother’s “made to order stories” prove too predictably safe for the speaker, and the Muses demonstrate the powerlessness of Mother’s words when her protective charm (““Thor is angry: we don’t care!””) fails to ward off the storm—“those ladies broke the panes” anyway. The Muses even undermine Mother’s attempts to teach the speaker skills of feminine refinement, such as piano and dance. Rather, the speaker refutes her mother’s influence, saying, “I learned, learned, learned elsewhere, / From muses unhired by you, dear mother.”

In other poems, Plath presents the feminine dichotomy ambivalently; any conflict between her two visions of femininity remains unresolved by the end of the poem. In contrast, the speaker of “Disquieting Muses” makes a choice between her two options, Mother or Muse. By the end of the poem, as the presence of the mother fades, the speaker is left alone with her Muses, her now permanent “traveling companions.” However, the speaker assures the reader that “no frown of mine will betray the company [she] keep[s],” clearly expressing her contentment with her choice. While the speaker in this poem addresses an external mother figure, one can also interpret this direct address as the speaker wrestling with her own feelings and apprehensions

about motherhood. Will she side with Mother and become homemaker and child-bearer, or with Muse, accepting the ascetic life of an artist? Nested in the cadences of a nursery rhyme, with repetitions of “mother, mother,” this poem lures her readers into the dreamlike world of the Muses alongside the speaker. The poem reads as distinctively girlish, not only in tone, but in the experience described; Plath mythologizes the girlhood experience of discovering the limitations of a mother’s life and fantasizing about escaping it, in this case, through poetic expression. Ultimately, she continues to reinforce the conclusion of “Two Sisters of Persephone:” at this point in her writing, motherhood does not and cannot converge with her creative life.

Earlier works exhibit Plath’s struggle to synthesize her life as a poet and her life as a mother. However, a perceptible shift in tone and subject matter occurs in the years between the poems mentioned above and the poems of the *Ariel* era, beginning roughly in 1961. Plath still represents dual visions of femininity, but in these poems, she emphasizes themes and images of fertility, birth, and children. A binary still exists between fertility and infertility, but these this contrast encompass both female reproduction and female creative work. Many critics attribute this change in Plath to her firsthand experiences with motherhood. Sandra Gilbert responds to the confusion that this switch in perspective might bring about in a reader, writing: “Doesn’t the baby, on the contrary, anchor her more firmly into the attic, the dark house? . . . The answer to this last question is, I think, no . . . in her view the fertile mother is a Queen Bee, an analog for the fertile and liberated poet” (596). Before, Plath could only speculate about the impact children would have on her writing, assuming in her journal that the obligations of motherhood would naturally detract from her work. Despite the myth Plath proliferated in herself that children would hinder her creative processes, children proved to unleash wells of poetic inspiration for Plath, as evidenced in the spree of baby-centered poems written after her first child’s birth in

1960. Childlessness in these pieces does not signify the independent life of a writer, but rather the opposite—an inability to write, a lack of creativity. Plath’s motherhood poems illustrate the intersection of the two lives which she had so insistently kept separate before and the beginnings of her conflation of the Creator-Mother and the Creator-Poet.

The anxieties conveyed through these poems no longer hinge on the choice between motherhood and poetry; instead, these poems express fears of sterility, both a literal and literary barrenness. Written one after the other in 1961—although only one appears in the *Ariel* collection—the poems “Heavy Women” and “Barren Woman” clearly demonstrate the juxtaposition of fertility and infertility. In “Barren Woman,” Plath takes a step back from a complete association of childlessness with death; rather, bearing in mind the subtle difference, a sense of lifelessness pervades this poem. Sterility is not represented by death itself, but by the trappings of death. The emptiness felt by the speaker due to her inability to produce children, or poetry, plays out in the stark landscape of a mausoleum, a “museum without statues.” The speaker expresses the futility of trying to create in this state, since any creative force that springs from her only “leaps and sinks back into itself...nothing can happen.” Instead, she can only imagine herself mothering “a white Nike and several bald-eyed Apollos” to populate her empty home. Similar to the poem “Two Sisters of Persephone,” in the speaker’s imagination, her offspring are rendered as mythic figures, meaning that, dream as she may, the speaker’s ability to create is as unattainable as myth. It figures that, given her artistic/reproductive stagnation, the children of her dreams take on the forms of Nike, goddess of victory and success, and Apollo, god of arts and poetry. “Barren Woman” expresses a deep-seated fear of both poetic and reproductive infertility, both of which result in the same bleak hellscape of loneliness and tedium.

In contrast, "Heavy Women" depicts a much more optimistic scene. The first major difference between this poem and the last is the absence of the lonely "I." The women of this piece serve as models for the observer/speaker to appreciate. By situating these women as objects worthy of an external speaker's admiration, Plath confirms that these pregnant women exemplify the ideals of femininity, reinforcing her positive portrayal of fertility. The association with ideal femininity is enhanced by allusions to Venus and Mary. By comparing the women to Venus, "pedestaled on a half-shell," the women are exalted to a mythic, divine status, and describing their clothing as "Mary-blue" aligns them with notions of idyllic, saint-like motherhood. The fertile women are revered in this poem for their ability to physically produce a life; in their pregnant state, they live regally, waited on and free to idle as they "meditate devoutly as the Dutch bulb forming its twenty petals," awaiting the emergence of their creation. Whereas the "nothing" of "Barren Woman" holds the speaker against her will and stunts her creativity, "nothing" is a choice in this poem. In their free time, these women "loop wool, doing nothing in particular," at leisure to "step among the archetypes," which hints at a correlation between women's reproductive fertility and their creative fertility. In their idle time, the women are free to create and choose their "archetypes," lending them a sense of authorial control with which they can selectively compose their art. Plath fully exhibits an altered perspective of motherhood in these poems, in which the ability to birth a child is analogous to the ability to create entirely, including poetry. These poems showcase the progression of Plath's work as she moves towards deserting her preconceived notions of the dichotomous woman in order to fuse the Creator-Mother and the Creator-Poet into a singular voice.

As Plath matured as a writer, the separation of the lives of mother and poet apparent in her earlier poems breaks down completely, allowing a conflation of these two notions of

womanhood. Her actual experience of motherhood discounted any fears Plath entertained that marriage and children might “sap [her] creative energy and annihilate [her] desire for written...expression” (Plath 23), and rather, Plath experiences quite the opposite. Sandra Gilbert writes about Plath’s synthesis of mother and poet roles extensively in her essay “‘A Fine White Flying Myth,’” claiming that a “liberating sense of oneness with life was Plath’s predominant attitude towards childbirth and maternity” as she matured (597). By becoming a mother in the literal sense, Plath discovered the shared function both babies and poems can serve as a sort of creative outlet for women. For some female authors, pregnancy, birth, and children become sources of inspiration they can tap into, “ways for the self to transcend itself...the poet, finally, can be delivered from her own confining self through the metaphor of birth” (598-9). Returning to the dichotomy that the younger Plath projected onto femininity, it’s clear that neither option is better than the other; both women are confined by the strict binary where mother cannot write, and writer cannot mother. As Gilbert concludes, when Plath shatters the divisions between the two, her writing expands into wider and freer horizons of thought, evident in the rawness and immediacy of emotions that characterize the *Ariel* poems. Gilbert compares these later poems to real-life babies, “possessed of the imperfections of breath...nevertheless ‘born all of a piece,’ alive, viable, self-sufficient” (603).

Plath was fully aware of the artistic breakthrough she had experienced when writing the bulk of the *Ariel* poems, indicated by a letter sent to her mother in the midst of their production: “I am writing the best poems of my life; they will make my name” (Alexander 7), a prediction that proved entirely correct. While readers and Plath scholars frequently designate *Ariel* as the most flagrantly autobiographical of her poetry collections, these biographical details are eclipsed by the mythic and mystically powerful personas crafted by Plath in this collection. If Gilbert

asserts that Plath's transition into motherhood freed her from the limits of a female binary, I would take it a step further and contend that the instrument of this freedom is myth. In threading elements of her personal story together with mythological and otherworldly references, Plath simultaneously aggrandizes and veils the truth of her life in *Ariel*, freeing herself from the close scrutiny of "the peanut-crunching crowd" (Plath 15), who finish the book with the impression of seeing the real Plath without actually catching a glimpse of her. Mythological imagery blurs the lines between biography and fiction in Plath's poetry, creating a sense of distance between her life and her writing. In mythologizing her experiences with motherhood, Plath exalts the roles of mother and poet in her life, spinning the infamous Plath myth that for decades has lured readers to draw close and listen to the mystic feminine voice in *Ariel* tell its story.

Plath populated *Ariel* with a host of iconic and mythical female personas that have captured the cultural imagination over the years. In fact, a study conducted at Ludwig Maximilian University in Germany empirically cataloged the words Plath used through the years, noting that "there is a dramatic shift to the dominant use of...first person singular" in contrast to earlier works, which used third-person feminine (Wadsworth et al. 666). The first-person speakers of the *Ariel*-era poems are some of Plath's boldest, raising their voices defiantly, angrily even, against often masculine oppressive forces. In "Daddy," the speaker confronts the crushing influence of a father figure, tension building throughout the poem until she cries out at the end, "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through" (Plath 76). In "The Jailer," the speaker, held captive by some male captor, "imagine[s] him / Impotent as distant thunder...I wish him dead or away" (Plath 23-24). These themes of violence towards men come full circle in the famous last lines of "Lady Lazarus:" "Herr God, Herr Lucifer / Beware / Beware. / Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air" (Plath 17). However, while *Ariel* looms in popular

imagination as a sort of feminist treatise against oppressive patriarchal structures, a closer reading of *Ariel's* contents reveal that themes of motherhood dominate the collection. The words “womb,” “baby,” “child,” and “barren” surface again and again in these poems, and the attitude Plath assumes towards children and motherhood in these poems varies from ambivalence, to hostility, to tenderness, representing the subject from every angle. Additionally, as before, these poems about birth or fertility can be construed as metaphors for the creative outflow of poetry. In analyzing these poems, I first want to examine how Plath depicts the bodily processes of pregnancy and birth through the lens of Hélène Cixous’s landmark essay on “l’écriture féminine,” and then will shift my focus to the use of mythic imagery, specifically the moon motif, in tandem with these motherhood themes.

Plath’s depictions of motherhood in her poems exhibit the kind of writing Hélène Cixous charges women to create in her 1976 essay, “The Laugh of the Medusa.” The concept of “l’écriture féminine,” sometimes referred to as “writing the body,” compels women not to imitate the phallogocentric literatures of men, but instead to write of themselves, “to inscribe in language your woman’s style,” a style centered in a fearless and uncensored writing of female bodies, sexualities, and pleasures (882). “By writing her self,” Cixous argues, “woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display,” an act of poetic reclamation of the female body from men, not unlike women’s reclamation of myth mentioned earlier (880). Cixous, like Plath, draws a connection between creative writing and motherhood: “There always remains in woman that force which produces/is produced by the other... The mother, too, is a metaphor” (881). She equates woman’s impulse to create with “the gestation drive... a desire to live self from within, a desire for the swollen belly, for language, for blood” (891), just as Plath does. In fact, all of these

theories of writing can be mined from a close analysis of Plath's body of work. While she preceded the ideas of "l'écriture féminine," identifying them within her work is still useful in understanding how the locus of women's writing shifted to the very place from which Plath had already been writing—the female body.

A prime example of "l'écriture féminine" in Plath's collection can be found in her poem, "Medusa," in which she uses images of blood and reproductive organs to root her descriptions of motherhood within the female body. Corporeal descriptions of the body's parts and functions are central to this type of writing. Cixous describes the female poet as filled with "a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink" (881). For many other authors in conversation with Cixous's essay, this concept of "writing the body" is symbolized by blood. Bracha Ettinger writes, "poetry is blood, one's own and an other's. Red flowers stand for bleeding (mother, maternal and prematernal) wounds. Blood, dust, ashes, red, tulip, rose..." (141). Jemma King writes of Plath, "Such theories are particularly salient for an artist like Plath who is so closely identified with her own idiosyncratic 'bloodjet' aesthetic" (77). Blood-red imagery in Plath's work signifies fertility, menstruation, the womb. In "Medusa," Plath makes use of the motif of blood and the color red. Interestingly enough, Medusa is the mythic figure Cixous uses to embody the paralyzing effects of "l'écriture féminine" on men. She argues that explicit femininity terrifies the male, "bombarding his Mosaic statue with their carnal and passionate body words" (886). As in the myth of Perseus and Medusa, male authors avoid looking this corporeal and libidinous femininity head-on.

In the case of Plath's poem, the "body words" of female reproduction merge into the character of a bloody mother Medusa. The opening lines describe the retreat of the speaker from the monstrous figure described:

“Off that landspit of stony mouth-plugs,
Eyes rolled by white sticks,
Ears cupping the sea’s incoherences
You house your unnerving head—God-ball,
Lens of mercies” (Plath 60-61).

The Medusa’s grotesque bodily features frighten the speaker as she flees. However, the speaker struggles to escape, pursued by Medusa’s gory “stooges...pushing by like hearts, / red stigmata at the very center.” Later, these bloody entities are described as “old barnacled umbilicus, Atlantic cable, / Keeping itself, it seems, in a state of miraculous repair.” The “stooges” that chase after the speaker somehow represent extensions of the central Medusa figure, relentlessly grasping and “touching and sucking,” like an infant or a leech; in this poem, motherhood is portrayed as parasitic. The speaker addresses the advancing Medusa, saying:

“I didn’t call you...nevertheless
You steamed to me over the sea,
Fat and red, a placenta...
Squeezing the breath from the blood bells
Of the fuchsia. I could draw no breath...
Off, off, eely tentacle!
There is nothing between us.”

Words in the poem such as “umbilicus” and “placenta” connect the Medusa to pregnancy and birth, an experience which the speaker seeks to escape. Furthermore, if Medusa represents, as Cixous suggests, the unapologetic and unfiltered writer of the female body, then the speaker’s aversion to her bloody, visceral entourage denotes a fear of the physical sacrifices required of not

just a mother, but of a poet as well; after all, “poetry is blood” (Ettinger 141). Both roles involve sharing the space of the body or mind, a loss of total autonomy to an extent. In this poem, Plath provides her readers an image of these roles that is restrictive, maybe even revolting. However, despite the hostility of the Medusa in this poem, she possesses an undeniable amount of power. By using the Medusa as a mythic symbol for both motherhood and creative writing, Plath elevates these roles, imbuing them with a sense of power and dominance.

Throughout *Ariel*, Plath employs many mother-voiced personas to examine multiple facets and opinions on motherhood. Thus, while the “body words” in “Medusa” are presented as a danger to the speaker, in other poems, such as “Nick and the Candlestick,” she uses images of blood and fertility to illustrate the tender intimacy of the pregnancy experience. This poem opens on the speaker alone in a dark and cold cavern of “the earthen womb,” emblematic of barrenness. However, this barrenness is amended when the speaker exclaims: “O love, how did you get here? / O embryo / Remembering, even in sleep, / your crossed position” (Plath 47-48). The entrance of a child into the poem infuses the formerly desolate cave with warmth and vitality, the color red pushing back against the dark: “The blood blooms clean / In you, ruby... Love, love, / I have hung our cave with roses, / with soft rugs.” As opposed to the aversive portrayal of birth imagery in “Medusa,” the speaker in this poem fondly prepares her womb, or her life, for the welcome advent of a new creation. In the essay “Red Earth, Motherly Blood,” King notes that, particularly in *Ariel*, Plath “aligns her art with the cycles of the body and the cycles of life” (85). I’d argue further that by pairing this style of body writing with the mythological or mystic in these motherhood poems, Plath elevates the physical processes of motherhood to a realm transcending mortal experience, likening it to a goddess-like, supernatural power.

While mythological allusions pervade Plath's entire body of work, *Ariel* binds the mythic with the mother figure most closely, especially through the recurring motif of the moon. The moon bears a supernatural meaning in Plath's poetry, largely due to the influence of Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*. Mullenneaux summarizes Graves's intricate approach to the writing of poetry outlined in this book. Inspired by occult and myth, in *The White Goddess*, Graves "explores a Celtic cosmology that links women to poetry with the moon goddess as muse" (130). This goddess forms a trinity, mirroring the phases of the moon that are meant to represent the stages of a woman's life: New Moon, the white goddess; Full Moon, the red goddess; and Old moon, the black goddess. The evidence of Graves's influence on Plath can be perceived through her word usage during this time; the empirical study cited earlier notes that "moon," "white," "black," and "red" increased in usage throughout Plath's life, ranking "among the most consistently used words in the Plath corpus" (Wadsworth et al. 669).

Several of Plath's poems demonstrate the moon's role as a muse for her work, particularly in relation to the subject of motherhood. Similar to the images of blood and organs, the moon sometimes symbolizes fertility and divine femininity in Plath's poetry. Returning to "Heavy Women," the moon acts as yet another simile for the fullness and fruitfulness of the pregnant women. Conversely, the moon sometimes represents the exact opposite of fertility in Plath's poems. The moon in "Barren Woman" silently affirms the infertility of the speaker; starkly white and "blank-faced and mum as a nurse," the moon offers little comfort to the speaker in that desolate landscape (Plath 13). The moon acts more as Muse than a Mother in "Thalidomide," at least in direct relation to Plath's discussion of poetry itself in her work. The "half-moon" in "Thalidomide" parallels the "half-brain" of the speaker, the phases of the moon dictating the capacity of the inventive mind (9-10). Similarly, in "Rival," Plath describes the

moon as “the great light borrower,” in its own way, impersonating the action of poetic imitation (73). Plath deifies the moon, “who abases her subjects,” the poets; for, while she can arouse keen emotions in the poet, she herself remains untouched by feeling: “The moon has nothing to be sad about...She is used to this kind of thing” (272-273). In fact, in all these poems, the moon exists as a notably ambivalent and unsympathetic muse in relation to the speakers or subjects in these poems. This ambivalence reinforces the neutrality and multivalence of the moon motif, enabling Plath to use the moon to convey a range of perspectives towards motherhood, evident in the difference in tones in “Medusa” and “Nick and the Candlestick.” The moon represents simultaneously mother and muse, fertility and infertility, and like the moon, Plath shifts through various phases and tones, describing motherhood and its symbolic relationship to poetic writing in either positive, negative, or neutral lights.

Whereas in these poems, Plath mentions moon imagery only briefly, the motif of the moon features significantly in “The Moon and the Yew Tree.” The association with motherhood is less overt in this poem. It lacks the visceral “body words” of other poems. It does not contain any reference to children, nor does it deal with the tensions between fertility and infertility. In fact, the only reference to a mother at all is when the speaker assigns the title to the moon: “the moon is my mother” (65). This Mother-Moon behaves in conformity with previous poems, exhibiting nothing but utter ambivalence towards the speaker of the poem. The speaker informs the reader that, despite being her mother, the moon “is not sweet like Mary,” the epitome of perfect motherhood. Rather, the moon is “cold and planetary...bald and wild,” with a face “white as a knuckle and terribly upset.” Despite forming the “O-gape of complete despair,” the moon feigns any expression that would empathize with the speaker. The speaker declares, “I have fallen a long way,” but “the moon sees nothing of this.” In response to the speaker’s plea, “I

simply cannot see where there is to get to,” the moon provides no door, no answer, no escape from the dark terrain traversed by the speaker. The moon emits only a meager blue light, illuminating nothing more than the “fumeey, spiritous mists,” the “row of headstones,” the “small bats and owls,” which unsettle the speaker and obscure her vision.

The setting of the poem itself seems to take place within the psychic plane, since both the trees and the moonlight are “of the mind.” Tim Kendall writes about the setting of this poem, claiming that “the features and landmarks which are mentioned...may have objective status, but they exist in the poem as internal realities...Each persuasively physical reference is balanced by a more metaphysical realization” (46). The poem bears a resemblance to “The Disquieting Muses,” in which the Muses beckon the speaker to a similarly surreal and subconscious twilight realm “that never brightens or goes down.” Likewise, in both these poems, the speaker describes a mother figure separate from herself, but still exemplifying the speaker’s attitudes towards motherhood. In the case of “The Moon and the Yew Tree,” the speaker subtly expresses a resentment of the Mother-Moon by pitting her against images of religious mysticism, embodied in the Mother Mary. The speaker conveys her yearning for a mother who’s “sweet like Mary” when she admits: “I would like to believe in tenderness— / The face of the effigy...bending, on me in particular, its mild eyes.” What the speaker wants most from Mother Mary is to be seen, something denied to her by Mother-Moon. However, like a Gothic steeple, “the yew tree points up,” directing the speaker’s vision not to Mary or God, but back to the moon, the sole deity presiding over this nightscape. Even the congregation of saints worship the moon instead of Mary, if one reads closely enough. The color blue permeates the poem in relation to the moon: “the blue garments,” or the blue light cast over the speaker and the scene. The moon’s saints are similarly tinted blue, evidence of their devotion to her.

Given the influence of Robert Graves's theory of the triple moon goddess, it's curious that Plath doesn't assign either red, white, or black to her Mother-Moon, like he does in *The White Goddess*; rather, she gives the moon a color all her own, separate from Graves's notions. Mullenneaux writes that Graves's "goddess is not an art maker...She is there to inspire male poets who want to worship, not compete with her" (130). Necessarily, Plath would have to rework this Moon-Muse/Mother figure for herself, from a female perspective. Plath's Moon-Muse did not always flow through her as easily as she would have liked. The apathy of Plath's moon figure towards the speakers and subjects in her work depicts the struggles she experienced with maintaining the inspiration to write. There are plenty of biographical causes that could account for this, such as her depression, to name one glaring example. Whatever the cause, Plath's creative processes, much like childbirth, were sometimes painful, slow, and strenuous. In her work, the multivalent motif of the moon represents all at once these concepts of fertility and barrenness, creative endeavors and reproductive ones. The moon waxes round and heavy with child, a mother to the poet, but a stony, passive mother. The moon's detachment from the subjects and speakers of these poems in many ways mirrors Plath's own distance from her work, eliminating any suggestion that her poems are merely diary entries in verse form.

By using the mythic moon to represent her struggles with writing paralleled to her struggles with pregnancy and motherhood, Plath depicts a Muse who is realistically difficult to access. In doing so, she successfully reworks Graves's version of the goddess Moon-Muse for female poets, who faced far more hurdles than men in balancing their personal lives with creative work. Furthermore, the moon represents the ultimate convergence of Plath's initial separation of the two roles of women: mother and poet. Symbolizing both fertility and infertility, maternity and creative influences, the multivalent moon motif encompasses the heterogeneity of

womanhood. Finally, the emotional distance between the Moon and the speaker in these poems mirrors Plath's own distance from her personal struggles with poetry and motherhood. Instead of writing them confessionally, she caches her experiences in myth and mystic symbols in order to detach from any biographical similarities in her work. By mythologizing her life, she imbues her creative influences with a supernatural power, contingent upon her goddess, mother, and muse—the moon.

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