

**The Supernatural in Sylvia Plath's Poetry:
From Salem to *Ariel***

**Submitted by Dorottya Tamás to the University of Exeter
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation makes a unique contribution to Sylvia Plath Studies by contextualising her poetry within the cultural and political framework of the mid-twentieth century. The six chapters of my dissertation examine Plath's employment of supernatural concepts, which come from the witch-hunt of the early modern period. I likewise look at representations of the supernatural in various literary texts and popular discourses to interrogate Plath's employment of the term in her poetry to respond to personal and political issues. My interdisciplinary research reconsiders Plath's engagement with literary, historical, and political discourses on different aspects of the supernatural.

The purpose of this thesis is to re-examine previous approaches with a new critical lens. In the past, Plath's relationship to the supernatural has been mythologised, misrepresented, and framed within the sexist rhetoric of women and witchcraft by critics and biographers alike. My thesis looks at the socio-political context in which Plath's poetic deployment of the supernatural is understood to establish her knowledge of the literature of witchcraft, the rhetoric of the witch-hunt in America, and her interest in magical themes. My research uniquely examines Plath's employment of vocabulary and narratives of the supernatural sourced from various literary texts and political discourses from Cold-War politics to the Grimms' fairy tales and Shakespeare's plays. Plath also often engages with the vocabulary of popular culture and public discourses from women's magazines to psychoanalysis in her poetic deployment of supernatural concepts.

This thesis contributes to the broader critical 'renaissance' of Sylvia Plath Studies, engaging with recent scholarship and shedding light on a previously overlooked aspect of her poetry. I rely on archival materials, including both newly available audio files and the more established manuscripts that enrich my research. My doctoral thesis is a timely re-examination of supernatural and magical themes that fills a research gap in Plath Studies and prompts further research, more broadly, on magic and poetry.

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¹ A part of Chapter 1 appeared as "McCarthyism and Witch-Hunts: Sylvia Plath's Perspective" in *U.S. Studies Online* in January 2021, a version of Chapter 2 was published as "Sylvia Plath's reimagination of the Grimms' fairy tales in post-war American culture" in June 2021 in the journal, *Feminist Modernist Studies*, parts of Chapter 6 appeared in *Plath Profiles* vol. 13, "Plath's Bee Poems: Flying, Freedom, and Fertility in Witch Imagery".

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List of Abbreviations

- AR Plath, Sylvia. *Ariel: The Restored Edition*. London: Faber, 2004.
- CP Plath, Sylvia. *The Collected Poems*. Ed. Ted Hughes. New York: HarperCollins, 2008.
- J Plath, Sylvia. *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Karen V. Kukil. New York: Anchor Books, 2002.
- JPBL Plath, Sylvia. *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*. New York: Buccaneer Books, 1979.
- L1 Plath, Sylvia. *The Letters of Sylvia Plath Volume I: 1940–1956*. Ed. Peter K. Steinberg and Karen V. Kukil. London: Faber, 2017.
- L2 Plath, Sylvia. *The Letters of Sylvia Plath: Volume II: 1956-1963*. Ed. Karen V. Kukil and Peter K. Steinberg. London: Faber & Faber, 2018.
- THCP Hughes, Ted. *Collected Poems*. Ed. Paul Keegan. London: Faber & Faber, 2005.
- MS Manuscript from Sylvia Plath Collection, Smith College Special Collections
- TS Typescript from Sylvia Plath Collection, Mortimer Rare Book Collection, Smith College Special Collections

Introduction: Reconsidering Supernatural Images, Narratives, and Figures in Sylvia Plath's Poetry

This thesis brings a fresh and interdisciplinary perspective to Plath's poetry by considering her relationship to the supernatural. I study Plath's likely understanding of the supernatural by examining various historical, cultural, political, and literary discourses and texts. Plath often used the *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* 2nd edition (1949), in which she underlined entries, as we see from her copy of the book held in the Smith College Special Collection. Here, the supernatural is defined in three ways, of which I quote the first two relevant definitions:

adj. 1. Of, or proceeding from, an order of existence beyond nature, or the visible and observable universe. 2. Ascribed to agencies of above or beyond nature; miraculous. – *n.* With *the*, divine operation, intervention etc. hence something miraculous or marvellous. ("supernatural")

The entry foremost understands the supernatural as comprising phenomena beyond the human material world across different beliefs, cultures, and times. The second definition connotes a religious understanding of the supernatural; in Western history and culture, it suggests Christianity. In my research, I employ the concept of the supernatural as an umbrella term, which covers wide-ranging topics from spectrality, religious miracles, magic, to witchcraft in Western thoughts.

My thesis centres on those aspects of the supernatural that are central to Plath's understanding and deployment of the concept within the cultural, historical, and political framework in which she lived. For example, the concept of witchcraft – one of the several subcategories of the supernatural – is rooted in the early modern

witch-hunt and its literature. My thesis investigates what Plath might have meant by the supernatural and how she employed its related concepts to articulate political and personal matters in her poetry. I look at literary, political, and popular discourses in the post-war era to contextualise Plath's vocabulary of the supernatural. I am interested in what cultural models Plath draws on in her poetry when she deploys concepts such as the witch, sympathetic magic, and witches' sabbath. I offer a unique reading of Plath's varied and often-contradictory engagement with the supernatural across different historical periods, classical to contemporary literature, and cultural frameworks. By looking at archival materials, my thesis demonstrates that Plath's knowledge and research on the supernatural go beyond what critics previously established.

Since I started my doctoral research, Sylvia Plath Studies has experienced a bloom that demonstrates the timeliness of re-evaluating and researching her life and art. *The Letters of Sylvia Plath* vol. 1 (2017) and vol. 2 (2018), edited by Karen V. Kukil and Peter K. Steinberg, have encouraged new studies, which not only look at the letters as supporting materials for Plath's poetry and fiction but as texts worth studying in their own right. An until-now-unseen short story has also been published, *Mary Ventura and the Ninth Kingdom* (2019). A new version of *The Poems of Sylvia Plath* (2024), edited by Amanda Golden and Karen V. Kukil, and a likely publication of collected prose writings are likewise underway. Even though not enough time has passed to sufficiently incorporate the newly available materials into Plath Studies, some publications have emerged in recent years. The essay collection *Sylvia Plath in Context* (2019), edited by Tracy Brain, looks at many themes and influences, such as television, visual art, and the countryside of Yorkshire and

Devon. The recently published Plath biographies, Heather Clark's wide-ranging book *Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath* (2020), Gail Crowther's *Kicking at the Door of Fame* (2021), a double biography of Sexton and Plath, Carl Rollyson's *The Last Days of Sylvia Plath* (2020), the essay collection *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Sylvia Plath* (2022) edited by Anita Helle, Amanda Golden, and Maeve O'Brien, and the study guide for high school students *Breaking Down Plath* (2022) by Patricia Grisafi demonstrate that there is still plenty to be said about Plath's life and work.

In early 2020, the *Harriet Rosenstein Research Files on Sylvia Plath 1910-2018* opened at the Emory University, Atlanta, which provided an entirely new scope for Plath Studies. Rosenstein was working on a Plath biography in the early 1970s; however, she abandoned her project, and her research materials were unseen until recently. According to the Emory Library, the archives

include interview transcripts, correspondence between Rosenstein and various individuals who knew Plath, and copies of correspondence between Plath and the individuals named on the file. The collection also includes recordings of Rosenstein's interviews with individuals who knew Plath. ("Harriet Rosenstein Research Files")

While Clark's *Red Comet* was the first biography to incorporate the newly released archives in her research on Plath, the almost one hundred digitised interview recordings with Plath's friends, neighbours, and acquaintances provide significant materials for my research. I am one of the first doctoral students to deploy the audio files in their research, making my thesis timely and original. Though Rosenstein's interrogations of various people about Plath's interest in witchcraft cannot be taken as an established truth, her focus on the supernatural demonstrates the relevance

of my research topic. I argue that the supernatural has always been an underlying theme in Plath's life and writing, and my unique approach allows me to examine this theme from a new critical perspective.

In recent years, Frieda Hughes, Plath's daughter, has put numerous items up for auction, including writings and professional and personal belongings of Plath. The available archival materials on Sylvia Plath have been remarkably rich, varying from her letters and diaries to her wedding ring. Gail Crowther argues that "[c]arrying out archival work for Sylvia Plath Studies is especially magical" (Crowther and Steinberg, *These Ghostly Archives: The Unearthing of Sylvia Plath* 19). There has been a sense of spectrality attached to Plath's archives, particularly to items such as her Tarot de Marseille deck, which was sold for a record £151,200 in summer 2021. Numerous articles tried to understand why such a haunted item – that Plath got for her twenty-fourth birthday from Ted Hughes and was referenced in "Daddy" – would be the highest-grossing piece to be sold (Sheehan; Crowther, "What cost, Sylvia Plath?"). The recent auction exposed the general interest from scholars to collectors in Plath's involvement in magic. Plath's Tarot cards also suggest the long-lasting curiosity about her involvement with the supernatural, which has often been defined through her relationship with Hughes. In one of her interviews, Harriet Rosenstein suggested that for Plath, the Tarot, astrology, and witchcraft were "a kind of garment, a kind of cloak" (M. Rosenthal). Like a stage magician, she argues, Plath put on a costume to feel accepted in the Hughes' family, whose members, notably Edith Hughes, Ted Hughes's mother, were drawn to folkloric magic and clairvoyance. The supernatural was likewise something that Plath encountered through her therapist, Dr Ruth Beuscher (later Barnhouse), who called herself a

“white witch” and practised astrology and Tarot (Clark, *Red Comet* 289). Contextualising the expansion of Plath Studies and how the archives have been resurfaced, sold, and narrated demonstrates that my doctoral thesis fills a substantial research gap concerning Sylvia Plath and the supernatural.

Since the 1980s, critical studies engaging with the different themes associated with Plath’s engagement with the supernatural have been published. Mary Kurtzman’s essay from 1988, “Plath ‘Ariel’ and Tarot”, and more recently Julia Gordon-Bramber’s book *Fixed Stars Govern a Life* (2014), focused on the symbolism of major arcana cards from Tarot in the *Ariel* poems. Plath’s perceived involvement with occult practices has been an interest of researchers, such as Judith Kroll in *Chapters in a Mythology* (1976), Timothy Materer in “Sylvia Plath: Occultism as Source and Symptom” published in *Modernist Alchemy* (1995), and Helen Sword in the essay “James Merrill, Sylvia Plath, and the Poetics of Ouija” (1994). These studies almost always emphasise Plath’s meeting with Ted Hughes, which inspired poems like “Ouija” and “Witch Burning”. In my view, the previous research gives too much credit to Hughes’ introduction of supernatural themes to Plath and overlooks her independent engagement with the subject, which goes beyond the occult. For example, Plath mentions to Hughes ten days before her birthday, on 17 October 1956, that she has been reading Basil Rakoczi’s *The Painted Caravan: A Penetration into the Secrets of the Tarot Cards* (1954), and claims that it is her “favourite book” (L1 1306). The letter demonstrates Plath’s interest in the symbolism

of the Tarot before Hughes bought her the deck. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that exchanges between the two significantly influenced both of their poetry.²

Another aspect of Plath's engagement with the supernatural that critics focused on is the feminist interpretation of her use of witch imagery. The doctoral dissertations, Philippa Susan Little's "Images of Self: A Study of Feminine and Feminist Subjectivity in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Margaret Atwood and Adrienne Rich, 1950-1980" (1990) and Sarah Bruton's "Representations of the Witch in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Women's Writing" (2006), explore the image of the witch in Plath's poetry from an explicitly feminist perspective. It is not surprising that "Lady Lazarus" and "Witch Burning" are crucial poems on the imbalance of gendered power dynamics in Plath's poetry. The two poems present a similar narrative of rebirth through burning and transcendence, while the objectified and tortured female body is also a central theme of both. The feminist studies are relevant for my research; however, they only engage with a one-dimensional understanding of the witch, which became a key symbol of second-wave feminism. They focus more on the socio-political context in which we interpret the poems and less on how Plath might have utilised the witch imagery in her poetry of the 1950s and early 1960s, during which time such concepts were employed by political figures and parties in the United States. My work is not limited to the understanding of the witch as a trans-historical symbol of female oppression, but demonstrates that Plath's understanding of the concept was complexly rooted in the cultural framework of the post-war era.

² Critical works, such as Erica Wagner's *Ariel's Gift* (2000) and Heather Clark's *The Grief of Influence: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (2011), discussed the two-way influence of Plath and Hughes in detail.

Since the early 2000s, critics have also been increasingly interested in interdisciplinary topics, particularly Plath's engagement with political themes. Robin Peel's *Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics* (2002) and Deborah Nelson's *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* (2001) explore Plath's writings in the context of Cold-War American politics. Similarly, the chapters in *Sylvia Plath in Context* (2019), "The Bell Jar, the Rosenbergs and the Problem of the Enemy Within" by Robin Peel and "Plath and War" by Cornelia Pearsall, also emphasise the reevaluation of Plath as a political writer. Criticism of *The Bell Jar* (1963) repeatedly pointed out its allusions to the McCarthy witch-hunt through its portrayal of the electrocution of the Rosenbergs. Critical works on Plath's poetic engagement with the Cold War often focused on her late poetry, in which boundaries between public and private, the self and the other, and the ambiguities of these categories are portrayed. The mentioned studies provide significant background for my research. Yet, none thoroughly explored how historical concepts, such as the witch-hunt, functioned in post-war America to convey certain ideologies. I demonstrate that the concept of the witch-hunt provided a metaphor for the abuse of institutional power in the early Cold-War era, which writers, such as Arthur Miller, compared to the Salem witch trials of the early modern period.

One of the objectives of my thesis is to move away from the narrow understanding of Plath's engagement with the supernatural, which often focused on a sensationalised understanding of witchcraft, ignoring her well-informed knowledge of the broader subject. Biographers and earlier critics frequently labelled her poems witchy, diabolic or occultist without further explanation and understanding of these concepts. Heather Clark highlights that when women poets, such as Sylvia Plath,

are writing about supernatural themes, they are often labelled as playing with “witchcraft, or quasi-occult practices” (“An Iconic Life” 3). She adds that the posthumous identification of Plath with the figure of a priestess or witch is patronising and sexist. My thesis shows we can look at witchcraft as a subcategory of the supernatural, of which Plath had substantial knowledge, engaging with both the history and literature of the witch-hunt period. In the past, no criticism of Plath’s poetry has fully contextualised concepts associated with the supernatural within their historical and cultural framework. I break down and define terminologies that critics and biographers have deployed superficially.

One of the main tasks of this introduction is to clearly describe and differentiate between the main concepts of the supernatural that define the scope of my thesis. In colloquial speech, the lines between magic and witchcraft are often blurred. In *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary*, in which Plath often used and underlined entries, witchcraft is defined as a “practice of witches”; a “power more than natural” (“witchcraft”), and magic is described as “[t]he art which claims or is believed to produce effects by the assistance of supernatural beings or by a mastery of secret forces in nature” (“magic”). Like the *Webster’s* dictionary, I differentiate between the supernatural (meaning all that is beyond our perception of natural occurrences), witchcraft (the supernatural power associated with witches that usually carries a negative connotation and is considered an inner power), and magic (as a learnt supernatural power associated with magicians; a control of supernatural beings and natural forces). We can see that the dictionary definition of the concepts is rooted in the vocabulary and history of the early modern period, particularly the witch-hunt. Of course, there are many interpretations of these complex concepts

belonging to the umbrella term of the supernatural. My employment of key concepts, like magic and witchcraft, aligns with their understanding and origin in the early modern witch-hunt. I build on the well-defined and well-researched field of witchcraft and demonology, which comprises historical, textual, and discourse analyses interpreting the witch-hunt and its causes and outcomes. Bringing together two different scholarly fields, Plath Studies and the historical study of the witch-hunt period, has been a challenge of this thesis. To demonstrate what I mean by the subcategories of supernatural and how I employ them in my thesis, I need to introduce the early modern witch-hunt, from which they originate.

The period we now know as the great witch-hunt covers approximately three centuries; across Europe, it lasted roughly from 1450 to 1750. During this time, communities within most European countries and New England participated in prosecuting alleged witches. The criminalisation of witchcraft was a long process, which developed from the religious fight of the Catholic Church against pagans and heretics. Inquisitorial punishments and prosecutions of heretics defined the medieval Crusades. One of the first witch trial series started in 1428 in Valais, Switzerland, where hundreds of people were executed based on crimes of which previously heretics were accused, such as membership of an organised cult, conspiracy, diabolism, and sorcery (Bailey 121). In the early modern period, the crime of witchcraft was said to be characterised by *maleficium*, i.e., harmful acts such as cursing and blaspheming, and pacts with the Devil, who, according to Christian beliefs, gave magical powers to witches (Levack, *The Witch-Hunt* 7-8). The fight against witches became more widespread after the Bull of Pope Innocent VIII, issued

in 1484, which called for the establishment of an ecclesiastical inquisition in the elimination of witchcraft:

many persons of both sexes, unmindful of their own salvation and straying from the Catholic Faith, have abandoned themselves to devils, incubi and succubi, and by their incantations, spells, conjurations, and other accursed charms and crafts, enormities and horrid offences, have slain infants yet in the mother's womb. (Kramer 19, 1A)

The Pope's main advocates Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger wrote the infamous *Malleus Maleficarum* (1487). The misogynistic text emphasised the belief that midwives, and more generally women, were witches who kill infants and harm men's fertility. This view was particularly recited by second-wave radical feminists, such as Mary Daly in *Gyn/Ecology* (1984), as a key source describing witches and their crimes (188-189). Yet, historians remain critical of the status of *Malleus Maleficarum*. For example, J. A. Sharpe argues that the influence of the text has been overestimated (180). By examining the religious and political context of the early modern witch-hunt, I can pin down Plath's well-informed readings of the history and literature of witchcraft and its role in the mid-twentieth century, particularly in the political discourses of the post-war era.

In the early modern period, magicians who practised "white magic" were regarded as helpers and healers, yet as the fear of witches heightened, they could also be accused of performing diabolic magic (Levack, *The Witch-Hunt* 11). They were often known as "cunning men", "wizards", or "wise men/women" (Thomas 210). The Protestant Reformation also wanted to eliminate Catholic protective magic, such as miracles, the canonisation of saints, and magical attributions to prayers, which increased the fear of magic among the peasant society (Levack, *The Witch-Hunt*

118). In the early modern period, the popularity of cunning folk in the villages suggests that magic was perceived only as fearful when it was linked with the Devil and demonic activities. In early modern plays, we often see the opposition between the “good” white magic associated with the intellectual abilities of the magus and “evil” magic related to a feminised understanding of witchcraft, as in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and *Macbeth*. While it would be an overstatement to say that magic and witchcraft reflect the gender binary, in Western history and culture, the former is often linked to the male magus and the latter to the female witch. To sum up, the key concepts of this thesis are the supernatural, witchcraft, and magic, which are often intertwined in our language and culture. My research unpicks the different references to these in Plath’s writings and contextualises their meaning in the historical period in which they originate.

Sylvia Plath often portrayed supernatural figures who, for example, represented certain aspects of her parental relationships. The magus becomes the larger-than-life paternal figure, and the witch embodies maternal malice. Thus, for her, the witch was a complex and often-contradictory figure. I argue that her dictionary was one of the key sources in her initial knowledge of the concepts of the witch and witchcraft. Throughout my research, I demonstrate that Plath understood the witch similarly to the entry from *Webster’s* dictionary. Below, see the dictionary definition of the witch, in which the underlining replicates Plath’s:

witch *n.* [AS. *wicce*, fem., *wicca*, masc.] 1. One who practices the black art, or magic; one regarded as possessing supernatural or magical power by compact with an evil spirit, esp. with Devil; a sorcerer or sorcerers; — now applied to women only. 2. An ugly old woman; hag; a crone 3. *Colloq.* One who exercises more than common power or attraction; a charming or bewitching person. — *v.t.* 1. To work a spell, esp. an evil spell, upon by

sorcery. 2. To effect by sorcery, or witchcraft 3. To bewitch; fascinate. — **witch**. adj. ("witch")

Her highlights demonstrate that she emphasised the negative connotations of the witch figure, such as association with black magic, haggish look, and her ability to bewitch with spells. On the same page, the dictionary also included entries on “witch broom”, “witchcraft”, and “witches’ Sabbath”. *Webster’s* definition contextualises the concepts in the early modern witch-hunt and shows the highly gendered and sexist perception of witchcraft. The gendered portrayal of the witch, particularly as an old maternal figure, still defines our cultural representation of this supernatural figure. My research demonstrates that Plath draws on varied sources, such as literature, popular culture, psychoanalysis, and political discourses in her portrayal of the witch figure.

Historians of the witch-hunt period, such as Brian P. Levack and Keith Thomas, agree that most witches prosecuted and executed during the early modern period were women. Therefore, the witch-hunt is characterised by a gender imbalance, and the witch is explicitly linked to womanhood and femininity. Male witches were usually accused of non-sex related heresy, political sorcery, and the magic traditionally deemed “male”, such as shamanism (Levack, *The Witch-Hunt* 143). Another feature of the witch most scholars agree on is that a majority of the women accused and prosecuted for witchcraft belonged to a well-defined social category: they were older, often unmarried, or widowed, and had a lower social and economic status (Thomas 620-621). Witches were also often described as having unusual physical characteristics and transgressing strict gender roles (Levack, *The Witch-Hunt* 160-162). Peter Elmer argues that, for nonconformists, “witchcraft was

a powerful explanatory device which enabled those who suffered official persecution to make sense of their plight” (112). Historical studies demonstrate that the witch accusations held double standards about women’s language usage, so that blasphemy, swearing, and cursing were perceived as a “genre of verbal aggression” of female witches (Kamensky 27-28).

Despite the evidence of gendering witchcraft, most (male) historians during the twentieth century avoided analysing the gender power dynamics of the witch-hunt period. Hugh Trevor-Roper’s *The European Witch-craze of the 16th and 17th Centuries* (1969), Alan Macfarlane’s *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (1970), Keith Thomas’s *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971), and Robin Briggs’s *Witches & Neighbours* (1996) focused on the social-economic and religious context of the witch-hunt. Even if they acknowledged that women were most of the victims, they decided not to assess the gendering of witchcraft (Barstow 5-6). The earliest studies of the witch-hunt engaging with gender imbalances were conducted in the last decades of the twentieth century. Christina Larner’s book *Enemies of God: The Witch-hunt in Scotland* (1981) has been regarded as one of the most influential studies of gender and witchcraft. She highlighted that the witch-hunt was not sex-specific but sex-related (Larner 92). Since then, the scholarly field of witchcraft studies has been treated as an independent discipline classified under history and became part of a broader social and academic discussion of gender. The feminist approach to witchcraft studies became more widespread with the second-wave feminist movement and the establishment of women’s and gender studies as an interdisciplinary academic field. Feminist critical works included Carol Karlsen’s *The*

Devil in the Shape of a Woman (1987), Diane Purkiss's *The Witch in History* (1996), and Christina Larner's *Witchcraft and Religion* (1984).

Yet, prior to the feminist movements, some initiatives by women drew attention to the gender element of witchcraft. The nineteenth-century American suffragette Matilda Joslyn Gage reviewed the history of male oppression against women in her book *Woman, Church and State* (1890). Women of Theosophy, like Helena Blavatsky, also contributed to a feminist approach. However, it was only during the second-wave feminist movements when the witch figure emerged as a metaphor for women's oppression. Mary Daly and Andrea Dworkin, who published their works after Plath, reworked some unsubstantiated claims about the witch-hunt. They echoed the sentiment of Matilda Joslyn Gage, stating that "wise women" were also regarded as the enemy of the Church because they healed while Christianity advocated suffering and emphasised the guilt of humanity, particularly of women (74). Indeed, many women accused of committing witchcraft were midwives or healers; however, Daly and Dworkin overstated their persecution. Instead, women were often victims of witch accusations due to their limited professional options (Levack, *The Witch-Hunt* 147). While Plath's poetry anticipates some of the popular claims of second-wave radicals, she had substantial knowledge of the witch-hunt and referenced historical and literary sources.

Another widely incorrect claim radical feminists liked to recite is that witches participated in an underground society: a viewpoint influenced by Margaret Murray's witch-cult hypothesis, which became popular in early twentieth-century England. Murray articulated her theory in *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* (1921), and she further revisited it in *God of the Witches* (1931) and *The Divine King in England: A*

Study in Anthropology (1954). Her witch-cult theory became one of the foundations of the Neo-Pagan movements in the 1950s in England, which I introduce in detail in Chapter 6 and show Plath's engagement with this concept. Plath's well-informed knowledge of the witch-hunt period and her judicious use of the witch-cult in her poems were more sophisticated and well-researched than many depictions of the second-wave feminist writers. For many feminist activists, the witch-hunt meant a metaphorical and personal struggle: not history but a marker of the current state of women's oppression (Purkiss, *The Witch in History* 13). Many of Sylvia Plath's writings foreshadow the understanding of the witch-hunt as a gendered concept, particularly the embodiment of witches as persecuted and prosecuted groups. Yet, unlike many of the second-wave radicals, Plath's frequent portrayal of the witch as a woman who defies male authorities, her representation of witches and the witch-cult hypothesis do not fall into the trap of over-emphasising or over-simplifying the role of misogyny and midwifery.

The central research methodology of my thesis is a close reading of primary texts, such as Sylvia Plath's poems and other sources, for example, correspondence, journals, and archival materials. Each chapter explores concepts associated with the supernatural, which I read within their socio-cultural context to establish how Plath understood and employed them in her writings. I am also interested in the broader framework of the post-war era and how certain concepts associated with the supernatural have been deployed in political discourses and popular culture. My research studies the vocabulary and discourses Plath drew on from newspapers and magazines, such as *The New York Times*, *The Observer*, *Seventeen*, and *Ladies' Home Journal*. I consider digitised newspaper and

magazine archives as primary sources to investigate Plath's employment of concepts associated with the supernatural in the 1950s-1960s US and Great Britain. I likewise rely on literary texts Plath read, which I understand within their cultural context, to consider her knowledge of witches and other supernatural concepts.

One of the most original contributions my research makes to Plath Studies is the special attention I pay to Plath's manuscripts to identify her deep-rooted poetic allusions to the supernatural. Critics such as Marjorie Perloff in "The Two Ariels: The (Re)making Of The Sylvia Plath Canon" (1984), Lynda K. Bundtzen in *The Other Ariel* (2005), and Susan Van Dyne in *Revising Life: Sylvia Plath's Ariel Poems* (1993) studied Plath's manuscripts, particularly from her *Ariel* poems. However, no research has explicitly paid attention to the supernatural themes. I look at the digitised archival materials from the Smith College Special Collection. I am interested in Plath's writing process of her poems, particularly her drafts. She often utilised emotionally charged language with supernatural allusions, which she deleted from the finished versions. My thesis focuses on the pattern in Plath's creative writing process and gives answers to the question of why she repeatedly erased expressions that directly deploy the imagery of witch prosecutions, sympathetic magic, use diabolic expressions, or allude to the magic powers of (spoken or written) words. As mentioned, I am also one of the first to rely on both the newfound Harriet Rosenstein audio materials and Plath's published letters, which I use as primary sources.

Instead of writing in a linear or chronological order, my chapters follow a themed structure moving from politics to literary discourses, examining the different geographical and historical discourses and cultural frameworks Plath draws on.

While each chapter centres on a concept or concepts associated with the supernatural, these are only the key terminologies to which I limited my doctoral research. My thesis starts with an introduction to the cultural framework of late-1940s and early-1950s America. The first two chapters demonstrate Plath's varied engagement with the supernatural across politics, literature, and popular culture in post-war America. They discuss the contemporary political and social context in which Plath encountered supernatural themes. Then in Chapter 3, Chapter 4, and Chapter 5, I move to literary narratives and the vocabulary of the supernatural to examine the language Plath builds on from classical to early modern literature. Finally, Chapter 6 returns to the social and political context. Here, I look at Plath's encounter with a particular modern hypothesis about the history of witches when she lived in England. My reading of Plath's bee poems considers the influence of discourses circulating in the United Kingdom. Next, I summarise the purpose of each chapter, highlighting the supernatural concept or theme they emphasise.

Chapter 1 begins with the socio-political framework of post-war America in which Plath encountered the concept of the witch-hunt. This chapter looks at Plath's knowledge of the history of the witch-hunt in America and Europe. During the McCarthy era, the concept of the witch-hunt was revived as describing the prosecution of "witches associated metaphorically with communists and subversion of other kinds" (Gibson, *Rediscovering Renaissance Witchcraft* 99). I investigate the deployment of the witch-hunt metaphor in 1940s-1950s America as an abuse of institutional power in literature and public discourses, which Plath directly drew on in her writings. Some of Plath's poems, such as "Witch Burning", explicitly build on the early modern witch-hunt and demonstrate her knowledge of witch trials. Plath's

perception of the gendered power dynamics of the witch prosecutions also plays a significant part in her late poems. For Plath, the historical witch figure often functions as an embodiment of the marginalised and prosecuted groups with whom she expressed sympathy in her poems. The second half of the chapter demonstrates Plath's employment of the concept of the witch-hunt as a metaphor for certain aspects of Cold-War politics. She likens the horrors of nuclear warfare to inquisitorial burning in "Fever 103" and "Lady Lazarus". Reading Plath's portrayal of the Cold War, I pay attention to the parallels she draws on, particularly in her manuscripts, which contextualise the concept of the witch-hunt in mid-twentieth-century political discourses and culture.

In Chapter 2, I continue with contextualising Plath's poems in the culture of post-war America. Here, I trace the function of the Grimms' fairy tales in Plath's poetic imagination. This chapter proposes that Plath draws on the language and narratives of fairy tales, such as representations of gender and magical power, embedded in the cultural discourses of post-war America. While previous critics have looked at the function of the Grimms' tales in Plath's poetry, none yet have examined the textual and visual influence of her German copy of the tales. On the other hand, Plath encountered the fairy tales in the post-war era, during which they were marketed, commodified, and targeted to a young female audience through Disney films and advertisements in women's and teen magazines. My close reading of Plath's juvenilia suggests that her early retellings of fairy tales centre on narratives to which she could relate her life events. Likewise, her allusions to the tales inform us about post-war gender roles. Plath's early poems are often narrated by a young female protagonist, a princess, who navigates between good and bad choices. The

second part of this chapter focuses on a psychoanalytical reading of the fairy tales in which the wicked witch embodies the controlling mother figure. This metaphorical understanding of the witch is sourced from popular Freudian and Jungian theories. I introduce the culture of mother-blame defined by Philip Wylie's concept of "momism", which drew on popular ideas from Freud and gained popularity in the post-war era. I argue that the vocabulary Plath uses in her late 1950s poems, such as "The Disquieting Muses", suggests a link between the fairy-tale witch figure and deceitful and devouring motherhood, which helped her to express ambivalent feelings towards her mother. This chapter demonstrates that Plath's poetic retellings of the Grimms' fairy tales are framed by their broader status in post-war America, which offered her accessible metaphors and narratives to express her ambivalent feeling towards her identity as a young woman and towards her mother.

Chapter 3 carries on the study of how Plath's supernatural figures were influenced by literary texts. This chapter focuses on the gendered understanding of the witch and the magician, which, for Plath, often aligns with her parental relationship. I rely on two significant early modern texts, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *The Tempest*, which Plath encountered throughout her childhood and studied in various stages of her education. The first section of this chapter looks at the unique influence of *Macbeth's* Weird Sisters in Plath's poetry, who appear as sinister hag-like figures whose inescapable presence influences the speaker's fate, originating their power from mythological female figures. In the two poems from early 1957, "All the Dead Dears" and "The Lady and the Earthenware Head", we can see the influence of the trio of supernatural female figures who materialise as spectral maternal hags and a sinister hag-head with paralysing powers. In "The Disquieting

Muses”, written in spring 1958, Plath merges the fairy-tale witch into the Weird Sisters as a representation of maternal malice. My reading argues that the three poems express a pattern of employing *Macbeth’s* witches to demonstrate the ambivalent feelings towards the mother, alluding to an ominous fate associated with the maternal lineage. For Plath, the Weird Sisters are more-than-witch figures. They embody a variety of supernatural female figures from mythology and literature. In contrast to *Macbeth’s* witches, the influence of *The Tempest* has been highlighted by previous criticisms of Plath’s poetry which I will discuss in more detail later. Yet, no research has made a detailed comparison between her portrayal of the father figure and Prospero’s character. I establish a parallel between Prospero’s magical power and the father figure’s beekeeping. They both embody a desired scholarly knowledge and paternal control. Some of Plath’s bee poems and short stories express her likening of her father’s beekeeping to a magical power. My reading of “Full Fathom Five” and “On the Decline of Oracles” also demonstrates her engagement with the play’s imagery on the inaccessible father figure. Ultimately, this chapter assesses the influence of supernatural figures in Shakespeare’s plays as a representation of the binary divide of magical powers in Western culture and literature, which Plath draws on to express her ambiguous feelings towards her parental relationship.

Chapter 4 moves away from the contextual influences of Plath’s poetry and studies poems directly engaging with how the language of magic operates. Here, I focus on ritual magic, which I define in detail in the introduction of this chapter. In short, ritual magic is a formal or informal performance that employs ritualistic, incantatory language, such as chants, spells, and ritualistic acts. Ritual magic has a

set intention to create a physical change by supernatural means, for example, by conjuring spirits or using magical objects. This chapter argues that some of Plath's poems can be read as ritualistic performances employing supernatural aids to create change. I use the medieval and early modern understanding of ritual magic, which I bring into parallel with J. L. Austin's speech act theory, to demonstrate that the performative language in "Daddy" and "Burning the Letters" is similar to spellwork. My research relies on the drafts of the two poems to make a unique contribution to Plath Studies, highlighting her attribution of magical powers to poetic language, which is enhanced with repetitions. The concept of ritual magic offers a new way of reading Plath's poems. I move away from the narrow understanding of her engagement with the supernatural to demonstrate that she had substantial knowledge of how magic, particularly the language of magic, functions. Her poetry likewise interrogates what constitutes ritual magic. By transforming everyday objects to magical aids, which reads as a metanarrative about magical elements of informal domestic practices, she demonstrates the blurred boundaries between mundane and magical rituals.

Chapter 5 looks at supernatural transformations in Plath's poetry to interrogate women's access to power and autonomy through supernatural means. I draw on previous research studying her representations of transformation narratives. I argue that Plath's employment of the concepts of supernatural transformations questions normative ideas about gender, agency, and the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman. The first part of this chapter focuses on the concept of metamorphosis associated with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, through which Plath explores women's powerlessness regarding their bodies, sexuality, and reproductive

choices. During the involuntary transformation, the female body transforms into a vegetal form. Poems such as “Virgin in a Tree” and “Edge” portray women’s entrapment in their gendered bodies, which suggests their lack of agency regarding their bodies and sexuality. The second half of this chapter turns towards positive transformation narratives in which the renewed form liberates women and grants them autonomy. Here, I deploy the concept of shapeshifting, a transformation into an animal form, which traditionally has been regarded as a power of magical women, such as witches. Plath alludes to shapeshifting in several of her poems, such as “Lady Lazarus” and the bee sequence. Even “Goatsucker” foreshadows the association between flying creatures and the autonomous female poetic persona, which shows the influences of witch-like creatures. She also experiments with the fluid borders between the human and the nonhuman, which my reading of “Ariel” demonstrates. Here, the hybridity challenges binary thinking as she portrays a non-hierarchical bond between the horse and the rider. By focusing on the poetic narratives of supernatural transformations, I propose that Plath reaches back to mythology and folklore to re-examine women’s gendered existence and struggle for autonomy.

Chapter 6 continues the study of Plath’s poetic narratives of flying nonhuman creatures, in which I close read the bee sequence. This chapter centres on the discourses of witchcraft in 1950s-1960s Britain, particularly the association of darkness with otherness framed in the post-war political landscape, which I bring into parallel with Plath’s portrayal of the bees. I argue that her bee sequence challenges ideas about (magical) power. By moving from the human community and developing a closer relationship with the beehive, the speaker subverts the

opposition between the humans and the nonhuman bees. My reading of “The Bee Meeting” and “The Arrival of the Bee Box” establishes that Plath utilises elements from contemporary discourses of witchcraft to portray the bees as similar to witches. She alludes to the racial rhetoric of witchcraft portrayed in, for example, *The Tempest*, which originates from colonialism. Plath’s poems deploy supernatural references, demonstrating that the fear of the other and the fear of witchcraft originate from the same sources. In “Stings” and “Wintering”, Plath turns towards the speaker’s relationship with the bees. I pay particular attention to the manuscripts of the poems, in which Plath is more expressive of the association of the bees with diabolic creatures and witches. I propose that the speaker’s kinship to the bees, whom Plath’s poetic persona genders as women, is based on the shared experience of female survival, which alludes to the prosecution of witches. My reading returns to the themes of Chapter 1, emphasising the influence of the McCarthy witch-hunt in Plath’s life that accounts for her paralleling twentieth-century racial injustices to the early modern witch-hunt.

What all my chapters share is the reading of Plath’s poetry from an interdisciplinary approach, centring on the patterns of supernatural themes, vocabulary, and narratives from her juvenilia to her last poems. My thesis deploys the rich resources that the archival materials offer, particularly the drafts of Plath’s poems kept in the Smith College Special Collections, in which the supernatural imagery previously has been overlooked and unexamined. I also use the newly available Harriet Rosenstein tapes and archival materials to expose the many ways Sylvia Plath interpreted and engaged with the supernatural. My research relies on the changes Plath made in her the drafts of her poems. I use square brackets to

indicate the lines or words Plath crossed out in the manuscripts. I also use question marks showing that there is a word written there, which I cannot read from Plath's muddled handwriting. In Chapter 4, I also include photocopies of the manuscripts as visual aids to track Plath's development of her poem. While this thesis on Plath's engagement with and interest in the supernatural demonstrates the possibilities for new reading and research of her poetry, it does not exhaust every aspect of the subject. Rather, my research offers a series of case studies, focusing on a set of key concepts and themes that illuminate Plath's engagement with the supernatural. I carefully examine her well-informed knowledge of the history and literature of witchcraft, the political and cultural framework in which she encountered these discourses, and the rich poetry and other art her interaction with the subject produced. To demonstrate this, I turn to Chapter 1, where I uncover Plath's extensive knowledge of and interest in the early modern witch-hunt.

Chapter 1: The Metaphor of the Witch-Hunt in the Cold War

Introduction

This chapter examines the concept of the witch-hunt, specifically its deployment as a metaphor in the early Cold-War era. I study Sylvia Plath's engagement with the politics of the Cold War in her poetry by paying close attention to the metaphor of the witch-hunt. I am also interested in Plath's knowledge of the early modern witch-hunt of New England, particularly of her understanding of the Salem witch trials in America as the embodiment of the abuse of intuitional power and prosecutions of marginalised groups. The main research focus of this chapter is the way in which Plath responds in her poetry to the rhetoric of the early Cold War by employing the metaphor of the witch-hunt. Unlike other studies that looked at Plath's political thoughts in her writings, the originality of my approach lies in the specific focus on her deployment of the concept of the witch-hunt.

Plath's engagement with Cold-War politics has been an interest of critics. Deborah Nelson argues that Plath's poetry is often preoccupied with the question of privacy and surveillance in the Cold War: she "registers the pervasiveness of surveillance in ordinary life and links it to a transformation of confession" (*Pursuing Privacy* 80). According to Christina Britzolakis, Plath's "work speaks to an optic that is arguably foundational for Cold War studies: a global imaginary of 'containment', whose 'domestic' reflex connects the familial and the political" ("Sylvia Plath's Cold War Modernism" 265). Indeed, studies of the Cold War have frequently focused on

the domestic politics of America.³ Elaine Tyler May's *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (1988) defines containment as the domestic ideology of the Cold War: "the family, in turn, could protect the nation by containing the frightening potentials of post-war life" (90). The heightened national security was not only against the external threat of Communism but against internal subversions. "Contained" sexuality within the nuclear family, strict gender roles, and the culture of conformity defined normality in post-war America (Creadick 9-10). Peel argues that *The Bell Jar* (1963) is one of the first novels that portray the culture of containment, focusing on Cold War anxieties about the binaries of uniformity and otherness and the private and the public ("The Problem of the Enemy Within" 203). While the studies on Plath's political engagement are useful to consider her understanding of the concept of witch-hunt situated in the politics of the Cold War, my research takes a different approach. I argue that the metaphor of the witch-hunt in Plath's poetry informs us about the culture and politics of early Cold War. For this, I contextualise the deployment of the witch-hunt metaphor in the United States during the late 1940s and 1950s.

While in post-war America, the witch-hunt was associated with McCarthyism, in the reports from the archival collection of the FBI's House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), the term first appeared in a different context. In 1940, a report was written by J. Edgar Hoover in which he stated: "There is attached hereto a copy of an editorial entitled 'The Best Guarantee Against Witch-Hunting', which

³ For more, see Alan Nadel's *Containment Culture: American Narrative, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (1995), Stephanie Coontz's *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (1993), and Pamela Robertson Wojcik's chapter "Domestic Containment for Whom? Gendered and Racial Variations on Cold War Modernity in the Apartment Plot" in *Cold War Film Genres* (2018) edited by Homer B. Pettey.

appeared in the *Philadelphia Record* on November 23, 1940, which I thought you might like to read" ("Dies Committee"). The piece from *The Philadelphia Record* newspaper called for more "witch-hunters" to secure the national defence, which demonstrates that the concept had been in circulation in American political discourses before it became a metaphor for McCarthyism. However, the witch-hunt as a metaphor gained more significant momentum when it was associated with the anti-communism of the McCarthy era.

In his infamous speech delivered in West Virginia in 1950, Senator Joseph McCarthy claimed that "we are engaged in a final, all-out battle between communistic atheism and Christianity" ("Enemies from Within"). He equated Communism with atheism, against which the only hope was the (capitalist) Christian democracy of the United States. However, it was not only McCarthy who employed biblical narratives. In 1954, the Evangelic preacher Billy Graham called Communism "Satan's religion", in a publication in which he asked, "What does Communism have that would make Ethel and Julius Rosenberg go to death rather than confess?" (42). For Graham, the Rosenberg couple, who were electrocuted on 19 June 1953 for allegedly giving out information about American nuclear weapon designs to Russia, appear as a devil-worshipping Adam and Eve. Newspapers, such as in *The Washington Post*, also partook in the religious rhetoric ("Christianity vs. Communism"). The biblical rhetoric of McCarthyism did not only create an analogy between the Communist "red-hunt" and the New England witch-hunt, but it referenced the Salem witch trials as an embodiment of moral debates. To fully understand the status of Salem in American national memory, I review its significance as a metaphor in the cultural history of the United States.

In the nineteenth century, the witch trials were regarded as the highest metaphor of moral debate (Adams 102). The Salem mayor Charles W. Upham's two-volume book *Salem Witchcraft* (1867, 1869) was one of the first interpretive accounts that criticised the trials for the abuse of institutional power embodied in the Puritan ministers, judges, magistrates, and legislatures. In the nineteenth century, the change of perspective also affected the new spiritualist movements, including mesmerism and hypnotism, which provoked hostility and scepticism from Puritans, fearing another "delusion" or religious fanaticism similar to the Salem witch trials (Adams 68-69). Matilda Joslyn Gage was the first to take a feminist stand on the witch-hunt; she "asserted that women accused of witchcraft had in fact been early scientists, mesmerists and workers with plant extracts" (Gibson, "Retelling Salem Stories" 88). In contrast, George Miller Beard's influential study argued that the fits of many of the victims of witchcraft were a form of nervous and mental "exhaustion" (Gibson, *Witchcraft Myths* 103-104). Plath likely encountered some of these changes of view through, for example, Nathaniel Hawthorne's writings. In *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), Matthew Maule, who is executed for witchcraft, is suggested to have practised mesmerism on Alice Pyncheon, who "awoke from her strange trance. She awoke, without the slightest recollection of her visionary experience" (155). Plath gained significant knowledge of the New England witch-hunt through studying Hawthorne's novels, in which the representation of Puritanism echoed the anticlerical attitude of his time. In her senior high school paper on *The House of the Seven Gables*, Plath quoted from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* on witchcraft laws: "[t]he fear of witchcraft, again impels men at all stages of culture to purify their spiritual surroundings by wiping out the witch" ("Lawes"). The quotation understands

the witch-hunt as a “cleansing”, meaning a spiritual purification. In the same high school essay, Plath likened the racial injustices in post-war America to the prosecution of witches: “[t]here may come the time, when our descendants laugh at our cruel, thoughtless prosecution of different racial groups. Yes, we may wonder how intelligent people could murder ‘witches,’ but how similar are the race riots and skirmishes of today!” (qtd. in Clark, *Red Comet* 102). Plath’s identification of the witch-hunt with the persecution of minorities contextualises her understanding of the concept within the twentieth-century political debates.

In post-war America, several writers fictionalised the Salem witch trials, including most notably Arthur Miller in *The Crucible*, which debuted on Broadway on 22 January 1953, during the peak of the trial of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg. Miller’s drama was praised as “the most notable new play by an American so far” (Brooks). The play brings the witch-hunt into parallel with the anti-communism of McCarthyism. However, Miller acknowledged that “there never were any witches but there certainly are Communists” (“Why I Wrote *The Crucible*”). In the same interview, he also acknowledges the influence of Charles W. Upham’s writings on the role of institutional authorities in the prosecution of witches. However popular Miller’s play, it was not the only fictionalised account of the Salem witch trials during the McCarthy era. William Carlos Williams’s play *Tituba’s Children* (1948), Ann Petry’s children’s book *Tituba of Salem Village* (1956), Marion L. Starkey’s historical fiction *The Devil in Massachusetts: A Modern Inquiry into the Salem Witch Trials* (1949), and Shirley Jackson’s *The Witchcraft of Salem Village* (1956) stressed the slave Tituba’s role, who was the first to be accused on the trials. Indeed, Tituba, “who, according to the politics of the early 1960s, gained power because a working mother paid insufficient

attention to her family ... appears in the overwhelming number of narrations as the central figure in the genesis of the witch trials” (B. Rosenthal 10). By centring the witch accusations on a racially marked woman, the writers reinterpret the Salem witch trials within mid-twentieth-century American society.⁴ Several fictionalised accounts changed Tituba’s representation from Native American to half to fully black, which expressed an “involuntary lapse into racism” (Gibson, *Witchcraft Myths* 131). The changes in her representation mean that in American witchcraft history, the witch is not only gendered, but a racially marked figure, which runs in parallel with the history of racism in the United States. In Europe history of the early modern witch-hunt was also one with racism: for example, in Germany, the prosecution of witches and hostile treatment of Jews were interrelated (Roper, *Witch Craze* 41-42). Popular beliefs about the crimes of witches originate from antisemitism, such as ritual murder, blood sacrifice, the killing of infants, and cannibalism (Owens 75-76).

While Tituba’s example demonstrates that the fear of witchcraft and the fear of the other originate from the same racial stereotypes, the Salem witch trials also put women, particularly young women, at the centre of witch accusations. Mary Beth Norton suggests that “[t]he attention scholars have paid to that core group [young girls] ... has largely obscured the significant role played by confessors” (305). By focusing on the largely girls’ accusations, hysteric attacks, fits, and delusions, the Salem trials reveal the preoccupation of the strict Protestant community with the behaviours of women. Miller’s play also “ascribed this misogynistic sexualization of

⁴ Witchcraft beliefs in early modern New England were also embedded in racial stereotypes. Purkiss argues that Europeans could not grasp the diverse worldview of Indians; therefore, they produced different interpretations, such as identifying their religion with Devil worship (Purkiss, *The Witch in History* 253).

the story” by making Abigail Williams the sexually promiscuous antagonist (Gibson, *Witchcraft Myths* 64). The historical and fictionalised accounts of the Salem witch trials reveal the association of witchcraft with the subversions of gender and race.

In May 1953, a month before the Rosenbergs were executed, Sylvia Plath saw *The Crucible* in New York while travelling with her friends. She reported to her mother that it was “[a] very good play about the witch hunt in Salem” (L1 610). Plath did not elaborate on the play’s political allusions, yet in her journals, she shows awareness of the parallels between the Salem witch trials and the Communist witch-hunt. Her emotionally charged journal entry, on the day Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were electrocuted, likens their prosecution to the public executions:

The execution will take place tonight; it is too bad that it could not be televised ... so much more realistic and beneficial than the run-of-the mill crime program. Two real people being executed. No matter. The largest emotional reaction over the United States will be a rather large, democratic, infinitely bored and casual and complacent yawn.

.....

All right, so the headlines blare the two of them are going to be killed: Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were executed on 19 June 1953 by the United States government for conspiracy of espionage. (J 541; 699)

Clark suggests that for Plath, the Rosenbergs’ death penalty was about making them exemplary “like the women in the Salem witch trials” (*Red Comet* 253). Though Clark does not represent fully the Salem trials – not only women were executed – she also suggests a significant connection Plath draws on from the McCarthy witch-hunt. Elizabeth Winder quotes Ann Burnside, who also partook in the *Mademoiselle* Guest Editorship in June 1953, claiming that while “Sylvia was agonizing over the execution of the Rosenbergs and McCarthyism; others were delighting to dream over

trousseau lingerie at Vanity Fair's showroom" (148). Burnside's phrasing frames the electrocution of the Rosenbergs in the gender politics of the Cold War, in which women's bodies functioned as a site of the public versus private debate (Nelson, *Pursuing Privacy* 116). Nelson also argues that in *The Bell Jar*, Plath links Esther with Ethel Rosenberg; "she casts Esther's rebellion against 1950s codes of femininity in Cold War terms" ("Plath, History, and Politics" 24-25). I propose that Plath's preoccupation with the Rosenbergs' trial, along with her encounter with *The Crucible*, prompted her to engage with the witch-hunt metaphor, particularly the witch as a gendered figure who stands for the marginalised and prosecuted groups.

Plath also used the term witch-hunt, alluding to McCarthyism. After the presidential election of October 1952, when Eisenhower became President, Plath debated with her mother on her voting choices:

Really, I can't see why you didn't vote for him [Adlai Stevenson II]. Do you think the change of administration, which of course is partially desirable if only to make the opposition party more responsible – is worth the power it will give to the red-witch hunts of McCarthy, the southern snobbery of Jenner, the reactionary foreign policy of Taft???(L1 516).⁵

Plath's rhetoric mimics the newspaper articles, which argued that Eisenhower made an immoral pact to secure his win ("Eisenhower is Assailed"). Her political opposition to the Communist witch-hunt was a personal matter: in 1953, her teacher was also investigated for allegedly committing "Un-American Activities" (Clark, *Red Comet* 191). During her years at the Smith College, several professors were called in for

⁵ William E. Jenner, state Senator of Indiana (1934-1942) and Republican Senator (1944-1945, 1947-1959), supported McCarthyism and probably Robert Alphonso Taft, Republican politician, who also sought the presidential nomination in 1952.

hearings; even, in 1954, a letter was sent to alumni students asking them not to donate to the college "whilst it employed Communists" (Ferretter 95). Margaret Shook, one of Plath's professors at Smith, disclosed in a lecture about *The Bell Jar* that the Young Republican Club association invited McCarthy to give a speech at the university. She also mentioned that the college paper conducted a survey revealing three-quarters of the undergraduates supported Eisenhower; among the faculty, it was "of course, the opposite" (Shook). Though Plath was never interrogated as some of her teachers were, she had first-hand exposure to McCarthyism and articulated her disapproval of the modern witch-hunt and the politics of fear.

In her writings, Plath expresses sympathy towards marginalised groups, such as witches, Jews, heretics, and abuse victims, condemns the authoritarian politics personified by the priest, God, Führer, executioner, and male lover alike. I argue that Plath's poetic imagery on the abuse of institutional power is reminiscent of her experiences of the politics of post-war America. Identifying the many discourses and sources Plath encountered in the early Cold War demonstrates her broad knowledge of witch prosecutions and the portrayal of the witch-hunt in her poetry. By focusing on the witch-hunt metaphor in post-war America, I demonstrate the multifaceted political perspective of the subject contextualised in the early Cold War. To move on, next, I study Plath's early representation of the witch prosecutions and knowledge of the witch-hunt.

Witch-Hunt History in Plath's Early Poems

In 1957, Plath returned to the United States after studying in Cambridge, England. During her relocation to her homeland between 1957-1959, her engagement with witches frequently shows the influence of Ted Hughes. For example, in 1958, Plath noted in her journal: "he [Hughes] accusing me of throwing away his awful old cufflinks 'as I had done away with his coat', and, for that matter, his book on Witches, since I never could stand the torture parts" (J 372). The book in question is not identified; however, Plath likely refers to a historical overview of the witch-hunt period, as she alludes to the "torture" of witches. Her phrasing suggests an emotional resonance to the witch-hunt, particularly the torture that defines the link between the witch prosecutions and the political persecutions of the twentieth century in her late poems, as she did in her high school essay on Hawthorne's novel. Hughes's influence on Plath's poetic engagement with witches is likewise demonstrated by an anecdote when the couple were residents in Yaddo. Hughes wrote down topics on a piece of paper for Plath as poetic inspirations, which included the theme for Plath's "Witch Burning" (Clark, *Red Comet* 577). We can see a pattern that Hughes is initiating the subject of witches as inspiration for Plath, which corresponds to his lending a book to her about witches.

In 1958, Plath wrote the short poem "The Times Are Tidy", which is not among her best works, yet it is one of the most significant accounts of her poetic representation of the witch-hunt period. The poem comprises three five-line stanzas that portray the dullness of modern life in a playful tone. The speaker is positioned as a storyteller who evokes the witch prosecutions as the "Burning Times". The first

stanza of Plath's poem starts with the portrayal of contemporary society in which heroes are not needed anymore: "Unlucky the hero born / In this province of the stuck record" (CP 107). The rhyming couplet ("born" / "record") creates a nursery-rhyme-like effect to the verse; this rhyme reappears in the last line of the verse ("accord"), which reinforces mundanity. In the second stanza, the speaker further elaborates on the banality of modern life: "There's no career in the venture / Of riding against the lizard, ... / History's beaten the hazard" (CP 107). The lines contextualise the poem in the early peace period of the post-war era. It is a satirical portrayal of the culture of conformity and the affluence, alluding to "the man in the grey flannel suit".⁶ The rhyme between lizard and hazard stresses the danger it represents.

Whilst the first two stanzas describe the dullness of contemporary life, the last stanza centres on the hazardous past alluding to the witch-hunt period:

The last crone got burnt up
More than eight decades back
With the love-hot herb, the talking cat,
But the children are better for it,
The cow milks cream an inch thick. (CP 107)

Plath contrasts the crone to the previously mentioned male hero, which references gender roles and expectations of post-war American culture. The male, like the soldiers, is the saviour of the country, whereas the crone, the woman, is the dangerous figure of the past. Plath's portrayal of the gendered places/spaces is embedded in the sexist rhetoric frequently employed in the early 1950s, for example, in the books of Philip Wylie, which I discuss later in the next chapter, by equating the

⁶ In 1958, Plath also used this idiom in her journals, referring to a certain type of man (J 361; 370).

suburban landscape with dangerous femininity (Gill, "Quite the Opposite of a Feminist" 428). Jo Gill suggests that the association between "the city, rationality, masculinity and the public world of work and the suburbs, irrationality, femininity and a privatised domestic sphere" pervaded the post-war era, even, it was adapted by Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) ("Quite the Opposite of a Feminist" 431). Plath reflects on the misogyny ideas of post-war America by evoking the early modern witch-hunt during which the feminised figure of the witch embodied irrationality and danger. In Plath's poem, the witch is burnt; she returns to the expressive imagery in "Witch Burning" a year later. Yet, in New England, witches were hanged; only in some countries, such as Germany, the prosecuted witches were burnt in public before being executed (Roper, *Witch Craze* 64-65). I am the first scholar to point out that in "The Times Are Tidy", Plath references an actual witch trial. She keeps the historical accuracy of the date ("More than eight decades back" (CP 107)), which she reimagines as a metaphor for the misogynistic post-war American culture.

The witch trial from 1878, to which this poem refers, grasped the public's attention, and was famously named "the second Salem witch trial": it took place at the Supreme Judicial Court at Salem (Davies 96). Yet, the incident happened in Ipswich, a town close to Salem in which several of the victims of the 1692 Salem witch trials lived (Larner 138). In 1878, the witchcraft accusation was based on mesmerism (or animal magnetism), which was believed to give "its possessor the ability to hypnotize victims and compel them toward their doom" (Gibson, *Witchcraft Myths* 111). Daniel H. Spofford, a Christian Scientist, was accused of committing harm with Malignant Animal Magnetism on Lucretia Brown, a disabled woman whom

he treated as a patient for her spinal injuries. The “charge reads remarkably like the indictments for witchcraft two centuries earlier, and the trial’s location further underscored the association in the minds of commentators” (Davies 96). The trial of 1878 frames the historical reference in Plath’s poem. It also demonstrates the shifts in the concept of witchcraft in America and how such changes shaped the understanding of the Salem witch trials.

“The Times Are Tidy” alludes to the beliefs about witches and their craft: “With the love-hot herb, the talking cat / But the children are better for it / The cow milks cream an inch thick” (CP 107). The lines refer to the herbal knowledge and healing powers attributed to witches in the popular imagination. Likewise, a cat is the most well-known familiar spirit of a witch (Thomas 530). In the film adaptation of the witchcraft comedy *Bell, Book, and Candle* (1958), which Plath saw in the theatre in 1953, the modern witch Gillian has a cat as her familiar (Gibson, “Retelling Salem Stories” 92-93). The allusion to the children evokes the imagery of fairy tales, which is supported by the light verse and playful rhyme scheme (ABBCC). My reading argues that Plath’s poem references some tangible aspects of the witch-hunt. Her imagery focuses on the tensions in society, which she frames in a binary of the (modern) hero and the (old) crone, revealing the threat that gender-nonconformist women pose in a male-dominated society. The opposition suggests the superstitious past, for which the Salem witch trials became a metaphor in America. The references to popular beliefs about witchcraft demonstrate Plath’s knowledge of folk and literary representations of the witch figure, which point to a highly gendered understanding of the witch, associating the crone with the “wise woman”.

The last line “The cow milks cream an inch thick”, probably refers to the beliefs about witches’ power to transform milk or even steal it. During the early modern period, it was commonly believed that witches attacked farmers (Hutton, *The Witch* 250). Plath’s allusion to the superstitions regarding witches’ powers further references their hazardous character. Lyndal Roper argues that witch accusations often “rested on a whole economy of bodily fluids”, evoking the beliefs and fears about the mother’s breast milk and her inability to feed her child (*The Witch* 5). Although “The Times Are Tidy” is not centred on the witch figure or witch prosecutions, it displays the witch-hunt as a poetic inspiration for Plath and her deployment of the concept as a metaphor situated in post-war American culture. The poem opposes the crone – who suffered from accusations throughout history – with the contemporary “unlucky” male hero demonstrating Plath’s early engagement with the gendered power dynamics of the witch-hunt. The tone remains light and nursery rhyme-like, which are significant distinctions from Plath’s later poems.

Plath wrote her next “witch-hunt” poem a year later. In “Witch Burning”, she uses the figure of the executed burning witch as an alter ego of the poetic self. Yet, like in many of *The Colossus* poems, the voice remains distant. “Witch Burning” is the sixth poem of the “Poem for a Birthday” sequence and is centred on the images of burning. While I discuss the sequence in more detail in the next chapter, some of the themes of “Poem for a Birthday” are central to “Witch Burning”, such as the process of rebirth and recovery. Plath reflects on the horrifying experience of undergoing electroshock therapy (Rose 57). She brings the electric burning into parallel with the fiery burning of a witch through the metaphor of torture. In the poem, the witch’s burning also alludes to the understanding of witch-hunt as purification or

cleansing, similar to the *Britannica's* definition Plath used in her high school paper. Like "The Times are Tidy", in "Witch Burning", she deploys the popular imagery of the burning woman, which suggests that her poems want to arouse the imagination. Plath's reference does not accurately portray the witch prosecutions in America, which suggests she alludes to the European witch-craze, such as Germany and Scotland, where, as clarified earlier, they burnt witches. Her blending of the imagery of the witch-hunt is notable regarding her dual, American and German national identity. "Witch Burning" likewise builds on Ted Hughes's 1957 poem, "The Martyrdom of Bishop Farrar", which tells the story of the ancestor of Hughes who was burnt in a marketplace. The imageries of martyrdom, public execution, and hellish fire that "come from Hell even, / ... As he fed his body to the flame alive" are mimicked in Plath's poem (Hughes, THCP 48-49).

"Witch Burning" comprises four sestet; the stanzas often end with a full stop, which creates a slower reading experience. The poem moves from the marketplace to the speaker's psychic landscape, putting the female body on display: "In the marketplace they are piling the dry sticks. / A thicket of shadows is a poor coat. I inhabit / The wax image of myself, a doll's body" (CP 135). The market alludes to the public space where witches were burnt and hanged. It is also a centre of Hester's public shaming in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Sarah Burton argues that the poem expresses "female bodily fragmentation" and wants to "inscribe the witch's fate of pain, death and suffering, rather than reveal any of her historical subversion" (133-134). "Witch Burning" might be compared to Anne Sexton's "Her Kind", written around the same time, in which the speaker takes up the witch persona who is isolated and dislocated from her environment (Gill, *Anne Sexton* 25). In Plath's

poem, the speaker distances herself from her body by calling it a “wax image” and a “doll’s body”. The expressions allude to the popular witchcraft belief that witches made wax images or dolls as a form of sympathetic magic and pierced needles into them to harm others (Gibson, *Rediscovering Renaissance Witchcraft* 9). Plath’s imagery shows that she was familiar with the wax doll as a tool of malicious magic. By stating that “I inhabit / The wax image of myself, a doll’s body”, the speaker becomes both the perpetrator (witch) and the object used for magical harm (wax figure), which suggests an ambiguity of the speaker’s identity. The wax melts under the fire; it changes shape, anticipating the speaker’s transformation at the poem’s end. The burning body embodies the gendered power dynamics similar to Plath’s later poems, such as “Lady Lazarus”, which I discuss later in more detail.

In “Witch Burning”, black is a dominant colour that appears ambiguous: it evokes danger and the unknown. Yet, in the second stanza, the speaker resists this identification:

Sickness begins here: I am a dartboard for witches.
Only the devil can eat the devil out.
In the month of red leaves I climb to a bed of fire.

It is easy to blame the dark: the mouth of a door,
The cellar’s belly. They’ve blown my sparkler out.
A black-sharded lady keeps me in a parrot cage. (CP 135)

In the stanzas, the speaker perceives the confinement both as a physical (“cellar”; “cage”) and mental imprisonment (“sickness”). The reference to the devil reinforces the darkness and confinement. In the poem, the redness of fire symbolises rebirth and freedom, but it is also a danger, paradoxically, the cause of death. We can observe Plath’s imagery of fiery burning, particularly her deployment of the female

body, which in her mature poems becomes the sight of gendered struggles. In “Witch Burning”, Plath identifies the jailor with a “black-sharded lady”, who reappears as the “Mother of beetles” (CP 135), implying a maternal prison, which I consider further in the next chapter.

From the third stanza, the narrative shifts from the external to the internal world of the speaker: “If I am a little one, I can do no harm. / If I don’t move about, I’ll knock nothing over. So I said, / Sitting under a potlid, tiny and inert as a rice grain” (CP 135). Critics have interpreted the lines as an expression of passive femininity and victimhood, which the witch-speaker rejects by the poem’s end (Bassnett 38). In my reading, the lines highlight the speaker’s bodily experience of torture. She is subject not only to being burnt but to being confined, even shrinking, which implies the torture of the body. The stanza ends with growth and self-development, which is described as a painful process: “They are turning the burners up, ring after ring. / We are full of starch, my small white fellows. We grow. / It hurts at first. The red tongues will teach the truth” (CP 135). The short sentences highlight the stages of growth. The burning rings evoke a cooker’s electric rings, suggesting an association between the domestic space and the burning imagery. In the second line, the speaker identifies with starchy rice grains indicating that whereas the fiery burning is painful, it is necessary for growth. By contextualising the witch-burning within the feminine-coded kitchen, the poem engages with the conflicted place of the kitchen in the domestic ideology of post-war America. “Witch Burning” was written some months after the infamous Kitchen Debate that took place in Moscow between Nixon and Khrushchev.

The line from the second to the last stanza, “The red tongues will teach the truth” (CP 135), further alludes to the fiery rebirth, which helps the speaker reach the authenticity of the self. Vincent Balitas calls this the “*process of becoming a witch*” (28). In “Witch Burning”, the speaker distances herself from the fire; she does not embrace it as her power, like the poetic persona of “Lady Lazarus”. The poem demonstrates that Plath employs a similar vocabulary in her poetry, portraying the burning of a female poetic persona. For example, “red tongues” are also evocative of the “tongues of hell” (CP 231) from “Fever 103°”. The lines at the end of the poem portray a rising or flying (“My ankles brighten. Brightness ascends my thighs. / I am lost, I am lost, in the robes of all this light” (CP 136)) is also similar to the ascending in “Fever 103°”. The speaker demands change (“Give me back my shape” (CP 136)) but we do not know what happens to her body, whether she is reborn from the painful burning or escapes by flying away. “Witch Burning” demonstrates that burning often has a contradictory meaning: it signifies both rebirth and torture, and this ambiguity is a significant characteristic of Plath’s late poetry. The poem expresses Plath’s empathy towards the victims of torture – as identified earlier in a journal entry on Hughes’s book on witches –, associating her experience of electroconvulsive therapy with the early modern witch-hunt.

In the poem, the images of witch-burning evoke Joan of Arc’s figure. Clark argues that poems such as “Lady Lazarus” demonstrate Plath’s fascination with female martyrs (*Red Comet* 787). Plath also saw the film *Joan of Arc* (1948) and a French play by Charles Peguy, “Joanne D’Arc”, by which she was tremendously moved (L1 1068; 1078). In her writings, she alluded to the martyr several times. In a journal entry from 1958, Plath writes about a nightmare in which the martyr appeared

to her: "Joan of Arc's face as she feels the fire and the world blurs out in a smoke, a pall of horror" (J 386). The citation anticipates Plath's comparison of the horrors of nuclear annihilation to religious burning in her later poems. Peel likens Plath's journal entry to Ethel Rosenberg's identification with Joan of Arc upon the judge dismissing her request of the ease of the death sentence ("The Problem of the Enemy Within" 208). His argument frames Plath's allusion to the burning martyr figure in the politics of McCarthyism. In my view, Plath's engagement with Joan of Arc's figure suggests that, for her, the imagery of witch-burning signified the legacy of McCarthyism. Throughout her poetry, the image of the burning witch develops from the literal to a metaphorical subject, embodying gendered power struggles, political prosecutions, and religious purification associated with the witch-hunt.

To conclude this section, "The Times Are Tidy" and "Witch Burning" exhibit Plath's poetic engagement with the burning witch figure and the politics of the witch prosecutions before the *Ariel* poems. She transforms, exaggerates, and reimagines the historical witch-hunt period to create a folkloric narrative of the American witch-hunt history. As Plath's poetic voice develops, her focus shifts to the witch persona. For Plath, the witch was an ambiguous figure. One aspect of her understanding of the concept was influenced by the McCarthy witch-hunt, which prompted the association between the witch figure and the prosecuted groups. In these poems, Plath's voice remains descriptive. She narrates mainly an external, not an internal struggle of the speakers. In the next section, I further examine Plath's development and interest in the subject of the witch prosecutions. She embraces the witch-hunt as a historical event that corresponded to some aspects of the political, personal, and gender struggles in her life.

The Metaphor of the Witch Prosecutions

This section examines two poems from *Ariel*, in which the religious prosecutions of the medieval and early modern periods function as a metaphor expressing the anxieties of the Cold War. Plath's poetic employment of the metaphors of witch-burning and the witch-hunt shows the influences of the Holocaust, McCarthyism, and the fear of nuclear annihilation, which she often frames as a gendered struggle between an authoritarian male figure and the female poetic persona. These poems bear the direct influence of political events of their times, such as the intensified Cuban missile crisis, Eichmann's trial, Hiroshima, and the Holocaust (Peel, *Writing Back* 183; 186). Plath wrote the poems I study here not in America but in England, which gave her the physical and temporal distance to respond in her writings to the political events of the Cold War. Clark also suggests that by the early 1960s, Plath could look back on the events of 1953 with distance to write *The Bell Jar* (*Red Comet* 646).

Plath's preoccupation with the Cold War escalated as she became more politically active in England. For example, she attended the "Ban the Bomb" march in London in April 1960. Elizabeth Sigmund, Plath's neighbour, remembers that Plath often criticised American nuclear warfare and capitalism; and she was happy to find another "committed woman" in the village ("part two, undated"). Plath's letters also give evidence of condemnation of the politics of the United States:

One of the most distressing features of about all this is ... ministers & and priests preaching that it is all right to shoot neighbors who try to come into

one's bomb shelter. Thank goodness none of this idiotic shelter business in England... (L2 697).

Her letter from December 1961 foreshadows the imagery of the *Ariel* poems. The male institutional figures stand for the enemy; they embody the horrors of the Cold War. In the poems such as "Lady Lazarus", Plath brings the horrors of the twentieth century into parallel with the burning of a heretic and witch prosecutions. During the week when Plath wrote "Lady Lazarus", 23-29 October 1962, she criticised her mother for finding her daughter's poems too disturbing: "but you have always been afraid of reading or seeing the world's hardest things --- like Hiroshima, the Inquisition or Belsen" (L2 888). Plath's wording highlights her likening of political crimes of the twentieth century to inquisitorial prosecutions. In "Fever 103", she explicitly links burning martyrdom with nuclear annihilation. Her comparison of religious and political prosecutions alludes to the rhetoric of the early Cold War.

Plath's poetic association between the religious prosecutions and political authoritarianism was also heavily influenced by her encounter with the Anglican rector in North Tawton who, as she told her mother in a letter, was not the religious leader she was looking for:

I honestly dislike, or rather, scorn the rector. I told you about his ghastly H-bomb sermon, didn't I, where he said this was the happy prospect of the Second Coming & and how lucky we Christians were compared to the stupid pacifists & humanists & "educated pagans" who feared being incinerated... (L2 738).

Her description of the rector's sermon, who argued that the nuclear warfare was a "Second Coming", anticipates the religious and political vocabulary in Plath's late poems, such as the fiery annihilation and burning in "Lady Lazarus" and "Fever

103°". Plath's description of the rector's language is also reminiscent of the biblical rhetoric of McCarthyism. For her, the priest embodied the prosecutor figure, who appears in some of her poems. Sigmund described an anecdote when the rector went to see Plath after her separation from Hughes. Plath reported to Elizabeth that the rector was talking about such "monstrous things; she said, 'I became so angry that I chased him out of the house waving my broom like a witch'" ("part five, undated"). Plath's 'self-identification' with a witch figure, who stands up against religious authority, echoes the power dynamics of the witch prosecutions. The imagery reoccurs in poems, such as "Lady Lazarus", in which the speaker defies the religious authority: "Herr God, Herr Lucifer / Beware / Beware" (CP 246). Plath not only condemned the rector's political views but ridiculed his religious teaching: "When he talks of sinfulness, I have to laugh" (L2 669). The reversal of religious morality is a central motif in "Fever 103°". My reading of the two poems proposes that Plath drew on her personal experiences with the religious authority figure and her opposition to the Cold War to combine the near-present political events with the religious persecutions. In her poems, the tortured female body is a central metaphor embodying the gendered power dynamics between the marginalised and prosecuted groups, such as witches and Jews, and the authority in the figure of a torturer, God, and priest identities.

My close reading of "Lady Lazarus" focuses on the narrative of torture and argues that the poem associates the prosecution of marginalised groups embodied in the witch-hunt metaphor with the abuse of patriarchal institutional powers, which the speaker attempts to defy. I also pay attention to the poem's development, particularly the initial metaphor of witch prosecutions. For this, I briefly introduce the

manuscripts of “Lady Lazarus”. The Smith College Special Collections hold one holograph of “Lady Lazarus”, which is likely the first version of the poem. This undated manuscript, written on pink memo paper on the back of pages from *The Bell Jar*, lacks a consistent narrative. The six-page long holograph includes several revisions, which are the most noticeable in Plath’s uncertainty about the speaker’s identity. On the second page, she calls herself a “wax madonna”, “[blooming] virgin”, and a mother of two girls, then on the third page, she rather resembles a prosecuted witch (MS “Lady Lazarus”, undated). The draft reveals Plath’s struggle with ending the poem. She was uncertain whether the speaker was a human, superhuman or nonhuman after her rebirth. The holograph employs imagery similar to “Witch Burning”; however, Plath’s allusions to witch prosecutions are violent and expressive. The manuscripts also include revised typescripts written between 23-29 October, in which Plath crossed out some stanzas, but the narrative resembles the final version of the poem. During the week Plath wrote “Lady Lazarus”, she may have produced other holographs before typing a revised narrative from which she erased the explicit metaphor of the witch-hunt.

“Lady Lazarus” has several characteristics that define Plath’s *Ariel*, such as tercet form, repetition of sound, words, and structures, and frequent enjambment and full stops. Though the poem often employs religious language, it subverts the biblical narratives like the resurrection of Lazarus. Crowther argues that Plath’s re-gendering of the resurrection story has one aim: to “eat men like air” (“Religious Contexts” 216-217). My reading proposes that the retelling of the biblical story as a narrative of torture, resurrection, and revenge not only portrays gendered power dynamics, but engages with the broader discourse of political struggles between the

powerful and powerless. The speaker rejects and mocks the religious authorities. For example, she describes her return from the dead as “A sort of walking miracle” (CP 244). A miracle is a supernatural phenomenon that has religious connotations. In the Bible, the resurrection of Lazarus is considered a miracle (John 12:17-18). However, in “Lady Lazarus”, the speaker dismisses the miracle label when others assign it to her: “Amused shout: // ‘A miracle!’ / That knocks me out” (CP 246). The dismissal of her comeback as a “miracle” suggests her rejection to be an object of doctors (“Herr Doktor”) who are often compared as “miracle workers”. Plath uses a similar narrative in, for example, “Surgeon at 2. a.m”. Clark highlights that “Lady Lazarus” shows the influences of news articles, such as “unethical drug experiments on humans”, which were circulating during the period Plath wrote the poem (Clark, *Red Comet* 788). “Lady Lazarus” also echoes Plath’s critical view of Christianity, particularly the rejection of the male deity whom she merges with the Doktor/executioner figure embodying the authoritarian practices.

In the poem’s structure, three is a recurring number; the tercet form and the three times repeated “ash” accentuates the phoenix-like rebirth. The number three, of course, is a symbol of the Trinity; however, it also carries connotations of the symbolism of magic and witchcraft. In *Macbeth*, whose influence on Plath’s poetry I look at in Chapter 3, the three witches utter the sentence alluding to the magical power of three times three, which may have influenced Plath: “Thrice to thine, and thrice to mine, / And thrice again, to make up nine” (1.3.33-34). The poem names three enemies (Doktor, Lucifer, God), whilst the speaker has “nine times to die” (three times three). Unlike the resurrection of Lazarus, the speaker’s comeback happens three times: “And like the cat I have nine times to die. // This is Number

Three" (CP 244-245). Here, the number is employed as her "lucky charm". In a later part of the poem, the speaker mocks the biblical narrative on resurrection by bringing attention to death:

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell. (CP 245)

In the quote, the adjective "exceptionally" highlights that she "can take care of herself and furthermore boasts about her ability to cheat death" (Crowther, "Religious Contexts" 217). While Crowther names the speaker's rejection of the male-focused miraculous resurrection "secular", I suggest that the poetic persona ridicules those concepts of Christianity that are associated with male supernatural powers, such as miracles and the Holy Trinity. The speaker positions herself as a heretic/witch who is burnt because she has powers more extraordinary than the Christian idols.

"Lady Lazarus" draws on the religious prosecution of heretics. In Plath's poetry, the imagery of the prosecution of heretics, witches, and Jews is often intertwined. In, for example, "Mary's Song", which Plath wrote some weeks after "Lady Lazarus", she likens the burning of heretics to the Holocaust:

The fire makes it precious,
The same fire

Melting the tallow heretics,
Ousting the Jews. (CP 257)

While heresy is a religious concept, Plath was aware of its political allusions employed during the McCarthy era. In 1952, Plath listened to a lecture by the Dutch

mathematician-Marxist theorist, Dirk Jan Struik, "Academic Freedom and the Trend of Conformity", on which she wrote an article titled "Heresy Hunt" (L1 425n1). The title suggests that Plath draws on the vocabulary of the early 1950s; newspaper articles occasionally called McCarthyism a "heresy hunt" ("Communists Decry 'Hunt'"). Even Miller argues that during McCarthyism, Communism was identified as heresy ("Are You Now?"). In "Lady Lazarus", Plath returns to political parallels. The Jew-prosecutor power dynamics accentuate the similarities between the horrors of the twentieth century and the religious prosecutions of the medieval and early modern period. By placing the suffering, resurrected, and tortured female body in the centre of the narrative, Plath exposes the gendered body politics of prosecutions.

The imagery of "Lady Lazarus" evokes the imagery of Plath's 1959 poem "Witch Burning". In both poems, the female body is disassembled, bruised, buried, and eventually transformed through rebirth. Plath depicts the body as gruesome, which results from torture:

Do I terrify? —
The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
The sour breath
.....
I may be skin and bone (CP 244-245).

Rather than becoming a victim of the torture, the speaker deploys her alienated body to create a terrifying effect. She knows this torturous performance has "a charge // For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge / For the hearing of my heart —" (CP 245-246). Tracy Brain suggests that the speaker positions herself as a stage magician who is selling her body whilst performing the "magic trick", of her resurrection ("Sylvia Plath and You" 88): "Gentlemen, ladies / These are my hands /

My knees” (CP 245). The speaker turns away from the conventional feminine sex appeals to perform this bizarre strip tease: “The peanut-crunching crowd / Shoves in to see / Them unwrap me hand and foot” (CP 245). She presents her scars, bones, hands, and knees to mock the staging of the female body.

The undated holograph includes several revisions and has no clear stanza structure. Here, Plath includes the stanza on the second page, explicitly calling the speaker’s performance an execution:

[Why do they choose me!]
What a million filament!
[And each time an execution]
[a? different]
The peanut-crunching crowd
Shores in to see. (MS "Lady Lazarus", undated)

The lines allude to executions and martyrdom, redefining the power dynamics of the poem. In the holograph, the speaker is more passive than in the final version of the poem, here, she is chosen by the crowd. Clark originates the poem’s “ultimate spectacle – her own death” from Plath’s interest in female martyrs, such as Joan of Arc (*Red Comet* 787). Joan of Arc’s ambiguous figure as a saint, martyr, and witch demonstrates a pattern in Plath’s poems in which the female figure manoeuvres between sainthood and heresy, which recalls the imagery of “Fever 103”. Despite the power of the authorities, the speaker’s body is imperishable. Whereas in the beginning, the speaker does not specify her opponent, only uses the smaller case word, “enemy”, by the last third of the poem, she names him: “Herr Doktor. / So, Herr Enemy” (CP 246). The doctor figure is accompanied by the two opposing figures of Christianity, God, and Lucifer, whom the speaker also names “Herr”.

The third page of the holograph emphasises a greater presence of the religious executioner that Plath rigorously abandoned:

[And there's always a mob & an executioner]
[A priest & and a torturer]
.....
[They pay very high today // There aren't many like me]
[Who do it publicly]. (MS "Lady Lazarus", undated)

The lines show Plath's references to the politics of religious prosecutions. The second part of the citation is filled with sexual connotations, suggesting that the speaker is prosecuted for sexual crimes. During the medieval and early modern period, witches and heretics were believed to be sexually transgressive and promiscuous: "a stereotype of the heretic as a secret, nocturnal, sexually promiscuous devil worshipper"; likewise, "it was believed that the witch often made a pact with the Devil because of sexual temptation and then engaged in promiscuous sexual intercourse at the sabbath" (Levack, *The Witch-Hunt* 43; 145-146). Plath's portrayal of the priest, executioner, torturer, and the mob as the speaker's opponents implies the public prosecution of witches and heretics. The holograph demonstrates Plath's knowledge of religious prosecutions, which she articulates within the context of the Cold War.

At the end of the poem, the speaker is reborn as a phoenix who eats "men like air". Whereas the torture continues, the speaker transforms; she claims that

there is a charge, a very large charge
For a word or a touch
Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes. (CP 246)

In the poem, “charge” shows a financial exchange for her body; it is described as something precious. The verb “touch” proposes that the body is adored, objectified similar to a relic in a museum. It can also be read as the speaker has something which is sought after by the doctor/enemy, which is reinforced by her claim: “I am your opus, / I am your valuable” (CP 246), portraying the speaker as a possessor of a treasured skill, which suggests her supernatural powers. The third meaning of “charge” refers to a feeling of excitement, which reads as a sadistic expression from the speaker. In the holograph, the tortured body appears more gruesome: “There is a charge / For fingering my scars” (MS “Lady Lazarus”, undated). The violent imagery is evocative of the torture the speaker suffers, yet she survives.

In the holograph, Plath stresses the ecstasy the speaker experiences through this performance: “[to give the crowd that] [an extra] its thrill. / The extra kicks [they] it pays for” (MS “Lady Lazarus”, undated). Van Dyne also argues that while the lines portray the “mob’s voyeurism”, the speaker finds enjoyment in this (“Fueling the Phoenix Fire” 416). During the torture, the speaker “turns and burns”, which echoes the line “They are turning the burners up” from “Witch Burning” (CP 135; 246). We see another resemblance between the two poetic personas whose portrayal was influenced by the torture and prosecution of witches. However, unlike the speaker of “Witch Burning”, who ascends during the burning, Lady Lazarus “melts to a shriek” (CP 246). The imagery suggests a painful and torturous burning. It also recalls the death of the Wicked Witch of the West in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), which further contextualises her encounter with the witch figure in American culture. For the speaker, torture is necessary for her transformation, which Plath highlighted in her

radio reading of the poem: she “has the great and terrible gift of being reborn. The only trouble is, she has to die first. She is the Phoenix, the libertarian spirit, what you will. She is also just a good, plain, very resourceful woman” (CP 294n198). Her wording focuses on the speaker’s identity. She refers her as a woman and a phoenix, evoking the merging of human and nonhuman subjects in “Ariel”, which I examine in Chapter 5.

In the holograph, Plath attributed a greater power to the speaker. On the fourth page, she deploys the fire as her supernatural power: “I eat fire” (MS “Lady Lazarus”, undated). Plath also gave the transformed phoenix figure a more dominant presence in her draft: “I rise with my red [hair] [terrible, feathery hair] hair / My incendiary feathers, and I eat men like air” (MS “Lady Lazarus”, undated). Here, she rises with her powers like “an avenging female who was both erotically tempting and fearsomely destructive” (Van Dyne, “Fueling the Phoenix Fire” 409). The manuscript demonstrates the instability of the identity of Lady Lazarus. She could be a woman, a witch, or a shapeshifting being who can change into a phoenix form. We can observe the tendency of Plath’s portrayal of the fluid transformation of nonhuman and human identities, particularly in the *Ariel* poems, which I examine in detail in later chapters. In the later typescripts, Plath somewhat reduces the uncertainty of her persona. Instead of the fire, she only consumes men who are likely to reference her torturers. The poem’s final version keeps the speaker wrestling with the male authority figures: “I eat men like air” (CP 247).

To sum up, Plath’s creative writing process reveals that “Lady Lazarus” engages with a broad understanding of the witch-hunt metaphor. Her poem, particularly the holograph, centres on a power struggle between the speaker and the

doctor/religious leader/torturer, which builds on the power dynamic between the prosecuted female witch and the male figure who embodies institutional abuse of power. The poem heavily references questions about body politics and autonomy, for example, by portraying the speaker's torture as a striptease. The staging of the female body is perceived as an object, a wonder, even a miracle for the male authorities. "Lady Lazarus" alludes to the politics of exclusion of the World War II and early Cold War with the metaphor of the witch prosecution by opposing the speaker to the many male authorities who "see", "touch", and "unwrap" her body. Next, I explore Plath's deployment of the metaphor of the witch prosecutions in "Fever 103°".

Plath introduced "Fever 103°" for a BBC reading: "it is about two kinds of fire—the fires of hell, which merely agonize, and the fires of heaven, which purify" (CP 293n188). Her wording expresses the ambiguous narrative on the burning, which alludes to religious purification. In the poem, Plath merges Catholic imagery, the fear of nuclear annihilation, and feverish hallucinations to narrate the speaker's burning, which appears both as torture and ecstasy. Plath's poem subverts the biblical rhetoric of McCarthyism and the politics of the Cold War by focusing on the sinfulness of the religious figures. "Fever 103°" deploys religious imagery to convey the hellish reality of nuclear warfare in which the speaker alone ascends to Heaven. Purkiss argues that in several of Plath's poems, "being burned is a metaphor for a caress that accepts the body's responsiveness, and pain a symbol of passion" (*The Witch in History* 23). Indeed, the ambiguities between burning as ecstasy and torture are present equally in "Fever 103°" and "Lady Lazarus". However, the erotic passion is not in the poem's focus; rather, it deploys it to question the concept of purity. Lucy

Tunstall likewise argues that the speaker “embarks on a spectacular display of physical suffering, disease and immolation all serving to purge the woman/artefact/patient/burlesque/performer/saint of her inessential identities as she ascends, theatrically, to paradise” (“Plath and the Lyric” 95). This interpretation highlights the instability of the speaker’s identity, who navigates in the blurred boundaries of heresy to sainthood, alluding to Joan of Arc’s figure.

Plath’s initial version of the poem presents a quite different narrative. The manuscripts, kept at the Smith College Special Collections, confirm that the first draft was titled “Fever in Winter”. Another undated holograph, now titled “Fever 103^o”, focuses on the nuclear threat and destruction of the natural environment but also includes some allusions to Joan of Arc’s figure:

The nerves see in my hands, little red, burnt trees
Along their filaments, what a gossiping!
Voices possess them that they know nothing about

.....

They glow. They glow. Angels & winds converse (MS "Fever", undated)

This narrative of the draft is inconsistent, and Plath did not divide the poem into stanzas. While the beginning is suggestive of Joan of Arc, Plath abandons her figure on the second page of the draft. In the more developed drafts of “Fever 103^o”, Plath centres the narrative on the ambiguous meaning of burning, linking nuclear annihilation to inquisitorial prosecutions. There are two holographs of “Fever 103^o”, which include several corrections. The first is written in dense handwriting and includes heavy revisions; it comprises two pages, numbered 2 and 3. The second, three-page long holograph has a clearer stanza structure; it is dated 20 October

1962. The additional typescript is much neater. In each draft, the narrative and structure remain similar.

“Fever 103” starts with a question, evoking the religious purification:

Pure? What does it mean?
The tongues of hell
Are dull, dull as the triple

Tongues of dull, fat Cerberus (CP 231).

The lines understand burning as a purification, which recalls the *Britannica's* definition of witchcraft laws that define the witch-hunt as a spiritual cleansing from the sin of witchcraft. The adjective “dull” implies that the hellish fire does not affect the speaker because she burns stronger than Hell. In the poem, Plath heavily relies on religious imagery. She employs the symbolism of the number three, as she does in “Lady Lazarus”. Karen V. Kukil argues that Plath’s poem was influenced by “the three realms, the Trinity, and the number three [which] are prominent in *The Divine Comedy* like the tercet structure” (“The Fires of Heaven and Hell”). Indeed, the first part of the poem frequently references the inferno. For example, the second stanza evokes the triple-tongued mythological dog, Cerberus, who is the guardian of the gates of the Underworld. The number three also reappears in the second half of the poem, suggesting the speaker’s purgatory: “Three days. Three nights. / Lemon water, chicken / Water, water make me retch” (CP 232). The stanza alludes to a religious ritual in which water counteracts the fiery burning. In the lines, the purifying function of the water evokes the Holy Water. The third-day resurrection of the speaker parallels “Lady Lazarus”, which reinforces Plath’s poetic imagery, particularly the significance of number three. As opposed to Lady Lazarus, who

defies the religious authorities and uses burning as her rebirth, the speaker of “Fever 103°” does not reject the religious imagery. Instead, it is the backbone of the poetic narrative. Plath subverts the rhetoric employed by Christian authority figures who also supported nuclear warfare. Her poem argues that modern-day politicians are just as immoral and harmful as those in the early modern period who advocated the burning of heretics and the prosecution of witches.

The poem deploys varied imagery to describe burning. The speaker calls it hell, fever, radiation, lantern, candle, even smoke, which only implies the presence of the fire. Further, the smoke foreshadows mass death produced by nuclear annihilation:

Such yellow sullen smokes
Make their own element. They will not rise,

But trundle round the globe
Choking the aged and the meek,
The weak (CP 231).

In the lines, Plath alludes to the process when the bomb fuses into a “mushroom” shape, and yellow smoke appears with other toxic elements. The lines also portray the fears of nuclear annihilation from which there is no escape; it goes “round the globe”. The speaker calls the atom bomb a “ghastly orchid”, suggesting its shape; then it is transformed into “Devilish leopard! / Radiation turned it white” (CP 231). Here, nuclear bombing is understood as a devilish act, suggesting the reversal of religious rhetoric. The poem portrays the nuclear war as *maleficium*, linking the language of the early modern witch-hunt to the politics of the Cold War. The lines also create a contrast between the dark imagery of the bomb and the whiteness of the radiation. Peel notes that “Fever 103°” recalls Plath’s early political opposition to

the nuclear bomb and the Korean War, which she could respond to in her poetry once she had “a global perspective offered by her late experience” (“Political Education” 40). For the young Sylvia Plath, the nuclear bomb could only be a sin: “[t]hat the A-bomb was ever dropped seems like a sin to me” (L1 168). The citation from her letter from 1950, written to her German pen pal, anticipates Plath’s provocative imagery in “Fever 103”. For her, the political and religious authority figures are the real perpetrators of sin. In her letter and her poem, Plath subverts the religious rhetoric authority figures employed to justify the horrors of wars. Her disapproval of the “ghastly H-bomb sermon”, which took place in March 1962, likewise shows the merger of the vocabulary of Christianity and the Cold War. After this sermon, Plath wrote to her mother: “I’ve not been to church since. I felt it was a sin to support such insanity even by my presence” (L2 738). Plath’s condemnation of the rector through the rhetoric of Christianity, alluding to the Original Sin, argues that Plath was aware of the parallels between the early Cold-War politics and religious prosecution. She employed supernatural concepts to draw attention to the horrors of the nuclear war.

In the poem, the speaker explicitly asserts the sinfulness of the nuclear bombing: “Greasing the bodies of adulterers / Like Hiroshima ash and eating in. / The sin. The sin” (CP 231). Previously, critics highlighted that the stanza was influenced by the film *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (1959), which Plath saw in the cinema (Steinberg, “Sylvia Plath: Film Buff”). Tracy Brain demonstrates that the images in the stanza “come straight from the film’s opening scenes”: the ash from the nuclear bomb falls on the two naked bodies of the lovers (*The Other Sylvia Plath* 118). Plath’s speaker also alludes to the monologues of the film’s heroine: “the apparent

meekness with which the temporary survivors of Hiroshima adapted themselves to a fate so unjust that the imagination"; "I was hungry. Hungry for infidelity, for adultery, for lies, hungry to die"; "love is the great sin" (Duras 20; 77; 90). "Fever 103°" questions what is sinful, sexual desire or the bombing of Hiroshima. Laura Perry argues that Plath's engagements with purity and cleanness in her poems "emerge from sexual, racial and national containment during the Cold War years" (191). Plath parallels sexual connotations of sin and purity prominent in the sexual containment of the Cold War with the early modern period, in which the crimes of witches included promiscuity and adultery (Levack, *The Witch-Hunt* 161).

The speaker associates both purity and sin with the imagery of fiery burning. The former appears ambiguous ("What does it mean?" (CP 231)) and is linked to her ascending as a form of spiritual purification. On the other hand, sin is associated with nuclear imagery, which is compared to the inquisitorial burning. Plath's poem borrows the imagery of Joan of Arc as a martyr and heretic. Before ascending, the speaker is purified by the sexual burning: "Darling, all night / I have been flickering, off, on, off, on. / The sheets grow heavy as a lecher's kiss" (CP 231). The lines associate the feverish burning with sexual desire. Purkiss argues that in the poem, "only fire can affirm the sexuality of the female body" (*The Witch in History* 23). The speaker is "a huge camellia / Glowing and coming and going, flush on flush" (CP 232). Her sexuality is not a sin but signifies purity and martyrdom as she transcends into the divine: "I am too pure for you or anyone. / Your body / Hurts me as the world hurts God" (CP 232). Here, she condemns God, whom she makes responsible for the sins of humanity, such as nuclear warfare. In "Fever 103°" and "Lady Lazarus", the female body is not only the site of torture, suffering, and sin, but of sexuality,

transformation, and power. The poetic personae clash with the religious and political male figures for bodily autonomy. Similar to “Witch Burning”, “Fever 103°” portrays the female figure torn between agonising torture and ascending, which reinforces the shared imagery of witch-burning in Plath’s poetic response to purification.

In the holograph of “Fever 103°”, Plath included direct language alluding to inquisitorial punishment and the witch-hunt, which further critiques the ecclesiastical authorities and their approval of the Cold War. In the holograph, written on 20 October 1962 on the back of *The Bell Jar*, Plath included some more lines at the first part of the poem: “O auto-da-fé! / The purple men, gold crusted, thick with spleen // Sit with their hooks and crooks and stoke the light” (MS “Fever 103”, 20 October 1962). Brain highlights that the concept auto-da-fé originated from Plath’s dictionary, in which she underlined the definition: the “ceremony accompanying the pronouncement of judgment by the Inquisition, followed by the execution by the secular authorities, hence, the execution, esp. the burning of a heretic” (qtd. in *The Other Sylvia Plath* 28). She further argues that the manuscripts resist a “finality”: the quoted lines were included in the radio reading, and Plath kept them in the poem until the fourth typewritten version (Brain, *The Other Sylvia Plath* 28). The uncertain status of the lines in “Fever 103°” continues the pattern of frequently used emotionally charged and expressive imagery with supernatural allusions that she erased from the final versions of the poem. The allusions to the ritualistic burning of a heretic critique the inquisitorial past of Christianity. In the second deleted line, the speaker references “purple men”. Purple has been associated with power, both as a royal colour – because it was hard to produce – and the high-ranking Christian clergy (Elliott 183; 192). The last line (“Sit with their hooks and crooks and stoke the

light”) suggests the condemnation of the inquisitorial figures who use their powers to “stoke the light”. Here, Plath describes the violence of the ecclesiastical authorities by alluding to the expression, “by hook or by crook”, which means by “any means necessary”. The stanza evokes Joan of Arc’s burning, which continues the poetic imagery of religious purification associated with the martyr figure.

The last part of the narrative creates a parallel between sexual purity and burning, suggesting that those who are morally pure suffer the most from the nuclear annihilation:

I think I am going up,
I think I may rise
The beads of hot metal fly, and I, love, I

Am a pure acetylene
Virgin
Attended by roses

By kisses, by cherubim,
By whatever these pink things mean. (CP 232)

The lines are filled with long vowels of /rise/fly/metal, which slow down the reading of the poem. Throughout the poem, Plath’s representation of whiteness is ambiguous. It appears as virginal, it is the colour of nuclear radiation, the clouds of Heaven, white moon, and white paper in “My head a moon / Of Japanese paper,” and white acetylene. Therefore, whiteness resists the traditional association with pureness and virginity and associates it with nuclear annihilation. The speaker is in a feverish delirium throughout the poem; she is both a victim of the inquisitorial authorities and the purified virgin who rises to Heaven. Like Joan of Arc, who was burnt as a witch but became a saint, the speaker's identity shifts between heretic, witch, and holy saint, who exceeds the religious and political authorities.

The last lines of the poem express a complete annihilation and ascending, which is neither a positive purification nor destruction but a rejection of male authorities:

Not you, nor him

Not him, nor him

(My Selves dissolving, old whore petticoats) —
To Paradise. (CP 232)

The repetitions function as a final break between the speaker and the lover/God/inquisitor. She is dissolved in the process of burning-as-purification, which questions the positive connotations of ascending to Paradise. If we exclude the line in parentheses from the reading, the stanza remains “Not him, nor him / To Paradise”, which proposes a provocative ending. By becoming “too pure”, the speaker suggests more subtle revenge than the poetic persona of “Lady Lazarus”. She exceeds the ecclesiastical and political male authority figures – even God –, who do not have the power to make her a heretic or a saint. “Fever 103°” challenges the binary system of purity and sin prescribed by the religious and political authorities through the metaphor of religious prosecutions. She deploys supernatural imagery, more notably, the Christian teachings on purity and sin and alludes to the early modern prosecutions of witches and heretics. Plath subverts the rhetoric used by political and clerical figures in the Cold War who compared the “hell” of nuclear warfare to a Second Coming. Her speaker rejects the moral superiority of the male authority figures and follows the rebellious heretics, witches, and martyrs who were prosecuted for standing up against the institutional power, similar to the political nonconformists in Cold-War America.

Conclusion

Plath's employment of the concept of the witch-hunt, as understood within the early Cold-War era, demonstrates her knowledge of its significance in American politics. The poems from the late 1950s studied in this chapter look back at the witch-hunt history of the United States. However, they lack direct references to the rhetoric of McCarthyism and the witch-hunt metaphor in the early Cold-War politics. Both "The Times are Tidy" and "Witch Burning" employ the imagery of the burning witch, which becomes more significant and metaphorical in Plath's late poetry. In the *Ariel* poems, her deployment of the witch-hunt expresses parallels to the early Cold War. These poems are characterised by an anticlerical attitude influenced by her hostile encounters with religious figures who also spoke about Cold-War politics. While "Lady Lazarus" and "Fever 103°" centre on gendered power dynamics between the speaker and the male figures embodying authoritarianism, they also articulate her broader usage of the metaphor of the witch-hunt that describes the horrors of World War II and the early Cold War. The earlier manuscripts bring the fear of nuclear annihilation into parallel with the burning of a heretic in "Fever 103°" and the witch prosecutions with the Holocaust, McCarthyism, and the Cold War in "Lady Lazarus". The rhetoric of the McCarthy era prompted Plath's metaphorical deployment of the witch-hunt and her understanding of the concept was influenced by the historical and political framework of post-war America. My close argues that her portrayal of the witch-hunt is not exclusively framed in the history of the United States. She employs emotionally charged imagery, such as religious burning and public executions, responding to the fears and anxieties of the Cold War.

Chapter 2: Plath's Reimagination of the Grimms' Fairy Tales in the Post-war Era

Introduction

This chapter studies the role of the Grimms' fairy tales in Sylvia Plath's poetry as representations of post-war gender roles, focusing on the princess and the witch. In contrast to the first chapter that uncovered the concept of the witch-hunt as a historical and political metaphor of Plath's poetry, here, I look at Plath's engagement with the narratives of the fairy tales embedded in post-war American culture. The Grimms' tales influenced Plath's poetic imagination and accompanied her adult life. I demonstrate that her childhood readings about princesses and witches were a significant subject for her early poetry, functioning as narratives to retell her life events. For example, Plath reimagined fairy tales to portray her romantic relationships, reflect on gender roles, and evaluate her relationship with her mother. This chapter also investigates the place of the Grimms' fairy tales in post-war America by paying attention to their increased popularity and participation in consumer and popular culture targeted at women and young girls, cultivating traditional gender roles. Further, I examine the relationship between the wicked witch figure and ambiguous maternal love.

Previously, critics have identified the influence of fairy tales in Plath's poetry, such as Kathleen Connors in "Living Colors: The Interactive Arts of Sylvia Plath" published in *Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath's Art of the Visual* (2007) and Sherry Lutz

Zivley in "Sylvia Plath's Transformations of Modernist Paintings" (2002). Jessica McCort establishes the role of children's literature in Plath's self-perception and self-presentation, particularly her employment of fairy tales to reflect on American girlhood (121-123). In my close reading of Plath's juvenilia, I build on McCort's interpretation to look at Plath's allusions to narratives of the fairy tales. Recently, Heather Clark notes that "[f]airies played an important role in Sylvia's young imagination. In the mid-1940s, she began working on a fairy story that was supposed to be her first novel" (*Red Comet* 56). Like many of the Grimms' fairy tales, Plath's story *Stardust* was centred on the adventures of a young female protagonist, who is chosen by the fairies. Similar narratives of a young girl (often princess) who encounters supernatural beings reappear in Plath's juvenilia. Clark rightly highlights Plath's early "fascination with the themes of exile, revenge, rebellion, purity, and the supernatural" influenced by fairy tales (*Red Comet* 56). Yet, she does not regard the Grimms' tales as a unique influence in Plath's early poetic imagination.

My research sheds light on the different themes and narratives Plath borrowed from her beloved Grimms' tales. Like Anne Sexton's poetry book *Transformations* (1971), which revises the fairy tales from a feminist standpoint, Plath engaged with gender politics in her fairy-tale-inspired poems. She critically assesses the morals of fairy tales, particularly those that allude to women's disobedience to rules. I consider Plath's juvenilia as the start of her writing about the supernatural. I also look at some of her more mature poems that revisit the subject influenced by the culture-specific meaning of the tales in post-war America and her engagement with the original German tales. My study of three of Plath's juvenile

poems focuses on finding a pattern among the poems to establish what kinds of fairy-tale motifs and narratives grabbed Plath's attention.

The second section focuses on Plath's more mature poems and interprets them with the psychoanalytic approach, which I contextualise in the post-war American culture. I pay attention to the symbolic power of the wicked witch who embodies maternal malice. Such identification of the witch with the "bad mother" figure pervaded post-war America. Philip Wylie's book *Generation of Vipers* (1942) discussed "momism", which popularised the culture of mother blame. Previously, some critics highlighted Plath's encounter with the book and its significance in the post-war era. Gill argues that *Generation of Vipers* had a profound influence on American culture and its attitude toward women, particularly mothers; she notes that Wylie continued to express his view in print in the 1950s, with an article in *Playboy* magazine from 1956 on the "abdicated male" ("Quite the Opposite of a Feminist" 428). Jacqueline Rose likewise situates Plath's encounter with Wylie within the misogyny in popular culture (166-167). Despite the critical engagement with *Generations of Vipers*, none considered the vocabulary of fairy tales that Wylie draws on in his book. My reading of poems such as "The Disquieting Muses" argues that they express an interpretation of the tales prompted by the culture of "momism" that particularly appealed to Plath, who had an ambiguous relationship with the mother.

Another line of thought on Plath's engagement with the Grimms' fairy tales is her dual cultural encounter with them, standing for her two national heritages, German and American. By looking at Plath's German copy of the tales and post-war reproduction of those from magazine adverts to the Disney film adaptations, I

establish her dual perception of the visual and textual representations of the tales. Zipes argues that between 1920 to 1960, “the Americanized models of the Grimms’ tales were exported to countries throughout the world as books, films, advertisements, and comics so that the notion of fairy tale or a Grimms’ fairy tale is generally associated with American standards and norms” (*Grimm Legacies* 85).

Yet, Plath’s first encounter with the tales was through the German book. She received the copy of *The Grimm Brothers’ Fairy Tales* printed in 1937 from her mother in 1954.⁷ For Plath, the fairy tales were linked to her German heritage and the language of her ancestors. For example, during the summer of 1958, while living with Hughes in Massachusetts, Plath revisited the tales associated with her childhood. She wrote to her mother, feeling “extremely moved” by her memories of her German background (L2 260). To my knowledge, Plath did not read the tales in English but tried to translate them into English to practise her German language abilities (L2 262). Plath often stressed her European heritage when her American nationality was in question. In a letter to her German pen-pal from 1950, she writes: “You may be amused to know that I feel my German background very strongly” (L1 1163). In an interview from 1961, Plath said: “[w]ell now, you are talking to me as a general American. In particular, my background is, may I say, German and Austrian. On one side I am a first generation American, on one side I’m second generation American” (Orr 169). Although several Grimms’ tales are not originally German, the fairy tales remain associated with the German language and culture in the popular imagination. Tales such as “Bluebeard”, “Little Red Riding Hood”, and “Cinderella”

⁷ From the inscription, it is concluded that Plath received the book from her mother for Christmas 1954: “Sylvia [Plath], für ein gutes Kind von ihrer liebende Mutter, 12/25/54” (Steinberg, “Library of Sylvia Plath”).

were sourced from French writer Charles Perrault (Blécourt 92). On the other hand, Plath grew up in post-war America and was familiar with the American adaptation of the tales: for example, Disney-produced films, which became widespread from the early twentieth century and continue to define some elements of American culture today. I argue that while Plath associated the Grimms' fairy tales with her German background, her poetry and correspondences express focus on their status in American culture.

The Walt Disney Company started making short, animated films from the Grimms' fairy tales in the 1920s. Their first full-length film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, premiered in 1937. *Snow White* eliminated any upsetting or violent content from the original story and highlighted the romantic relationship and the queen's transformation was altered from peasant to witch (Bronner 209). Consequently, many American parents did not let their children watch the film because they thought the witch disguise was too frightening (Tatar, *Off with Their Heads!* 138). The alteration of the villainous character explains the significance of the witch as the evil female figure in American culture, whose importance I further discuss later. The enormous success of *Snow White* resulted in the Disney adaptation of other Grimms' tales, such as *Cinderella* (1950) and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959). Today, these films may seem problematic in their portrayal of the female leads as mainly passive princesses who instantly fall in love with a prince and marry for a happily ever after. However, the Disney films were revolutionary at that time; they had young women as the lead characters who began to play a more central part in the Disney-produced animated short films from the mid-1930s (A. M. Davis 84). Amy M. Davis also argues that Walt Disney himself acknowledged the female majority in his audience, and the Disney

films have also been associated with the genre referred to as “Women’s Film” (123). In short, the Disney films brought women into the heart of popular culture who, compared to the age, played central but limited roles. Sylvia Plath was familiar with several of the film adaptations: she saw Disney’s *Snow White* in 1944, the film *The Glass Slipper* (1955) based on “Cinderella”, and a theatre performance of “Hansel and Gretel” in 1954 (Steinberg, “Sylvia Plath: Film Buff”). It is also likely she knew of additional Disney adaptations and was aware of the commercial presence of fairy tales in the post-war era. To understand better the dual visual influence of the fairy tales on Plath’s writings, I look at the two sources – the German book and American representations – through which she encountered them.

Visual Representations of Grimms’ Tales

Plath’s copy of the *Märchen der Brüder Grimm* (1937) includes many illustrations highlighting certain traits of characters and the narrative elements of the tales. The first impression of the German book is the black letter in which the tales are printed; the illustrations in the book follow a similar pattern. Many of the princesses have medieval-style dresses, such as Snow White, who is portrayed wearing a blue gown and a crown. Fairy-tale heroines often mimic the traditional depiction of the Virgin Mary, whose association with blue alludes to her virginal and celestial character (Silva 248). Davis also notes that Disney’s *Snow White* kept a lot of “the influences of various European children’s book illustrators” (101). Indeed, in the film, Snow White’s top dress is also dominated by blue. The significance of her appearance as a visual and cultural signifier can be observed in Plath’s writings and

art. In 1948, Plath wrote to her mother that she was elected to play Snow White in a school theatre performance, where she was wearing “a lacy white blouse and blue silk skirt” (L1 121). Her description somewhat mirrors Snow White’s dress in the Disney film. During her adolescence, Plath painted portraits of Snow White and Little Red Riding Hood (Connors, “Living Colors” 5; 27). Her portrayal of Snow White exemplifies the dual cultural representations of Grimms’ fairy tales, giving Plath a rich visual experience of the tales from an early age. However, a striking difference between the American film and the German book is the portrayal of the evil queen, who appears as a young and attractive woman with long blond hair. This illustration is placed next to the page where the queen inquires of the mirror, who is the most beautiful woman on earth. Plath’s poem “Mirror” evokes the scene from the fairy tale: “I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions. / ... I am not cruel, only truthful” (CP 173). The poem subverts the fairy tale, in which the mirror describes itself as a lake, in which the woman searches herself.

The tale “Cinderella” includes one illustration that portrays the hard-working girl, standing next to the hearth holding a big bowl full of peas. In the German version of the tale, magic is primarily associated with the dead mother and the pigeons who help Cinderella. In Disney’s *Cinderella*, the pigeons are replaced with the Fairy Godmother.⁸ For Plath, the fairy tale, portraying the fatherless hard-working girl whose life is controlled by an evil mother figure, expressed a personal significance. She often retold her life events in the narrative of “Cinderella”. In a letter written in 1953 to her brother telling him about her acceptance to the *Mademoiselle*

⁸ Although the Grimms’ tale does not include a fairy godmother, in the original version written by Charles Perrault, “Cinderella; or, The Little Glass Slipper”, the fairy godmother provides the magical aid to the girl.

magazine's Guest Editorship contest, Plath identifies herself with Cinderella: "I feel like a collegiate Cinderella whose Fairy Godmother suddenly hopped out of the mailbox and said: 'New York'" (L1 621). Plath frequently used the expression of "fairy godmother" to identify the "good" mother figures in her life, particularly poets, such as Marianne Moore and Gertrude Claytor, an editor of the poetry magazine *Lyric* (L1 909; 939-940). In spring 1954, Plath revisited the self-identification with Cinderella's character when going on dates. On one occasion, she looked "like a tan cinderella in silver & white ball gown"; some days later, she writes that in her date, some passer-by "called me Cinderella and treated me like a queen" (L1 738; 744). Plath's self-assertation as a modern Cinderella is based on the clothes and accessories she wore, demonstrating the influence of visual representations of the fairy tale to retell events in her life. Her reference to the borrowed outfit reinforces the "poor and hard-working girl" narrative with which she often identified.

Plath's likening her success at *Mademoiselle* to Cinderella's dream-come-true also mimics the narrative circulating in women's and teenage magazines. An article from the *Seventeen* magazine published in 1947, asks "Who is your fairy godmother?" and informs the adolescent readers that "[n]o miracle is going to make you beautiful or smart or beloved. You must create your own magic!" (Stover). The article refers to "magic" as personal and professional achievements. It blends public recognition (romantic relationship and being the popular girl) with academic success encouraging girls not to wait for the fairy godmother but act, sometimes by lowering the bar on their chosen partner. The writing interprets the fairy tale within the post-war culture, which "celebrated nondomestic activity, individual striving, public service, and public success" (Meyerowitz 1458). Magazines, such as *Ladies' Home*

Journal and *Seventeen*, advertised shoes “For little feet only Cinderella of Boston!” and “Cinderella frocks for girls”, alluding to the tale (“Advertisement: Cinderella”; “Cinderella Sofa”). The 1946 advertisement of dress for girls claims that

Cinderella’s “Magic Touch” has worked sheer magic this time! These young queens are beautifully gowned in Swiss-Dot Sheer, a fabric that washes like a dream. Always remember — ask by name for Cinderella Frocks —the most popular of all children’s dresses. (“Advertisement: Cinderella”)

Femininity and domesticity were key selling points of the fairy tale: the 1943 advertisement of “Cinderella Hats” in *Parents’ Magazine* asserts that “She will look prettier with a becoming hat”, whereas the 1947 poster in *Ladies’ Home Journal* “Cinderella Seedless Raisins” suggests the effortless baking (“Advertisement: Cinderella Raisins”; “Advertisement: Cinderella Hats”). By looking at above-mentioned magazine archives, we might conclude that even before Disney’s film adaptation premiered in 1950, “Cinderella” had the most prominent role in the post-war era, particularly in the consumer and popular culture targeting young women. My reading of Plath’s “Cinderella” focuses on her employment of the visual culture of the tale, which I will close read in the next section.

The German book illustration of “Hansel and Gretel” includes the most important representation of the witch figure. In the background, there is the gingerbread house in the middle of a meadow. In the front, the witch gestures towards the children to come closer. She wears a headscarf and has a big, long nose with a wart on, her dress is peasant-like, and her use of a walking stick shows her old age. Rachel Freudenburg notes that “[d]uring the nineteenth century, the most popular images by far are the confrontation between children and witch in front

of the candy house and the siblings alone in the forest” (269). This interpretation highlights the power of the wicked witch; she lures the siblings with sweet food. The illustration was likely in Plath’s mind when she wrote the lines in “The Disquieting Muses”: “Mother, whose witches always, always / Got baked into gingerbread” (CP 75). In both the poem and the fairy tale, the maternal figure causes suspicion with her food, which I discuss later in detail. “Hansel and Gretel” presents an almost-absent, passive father figure and controlling maternal figures. Though Disney did not make a film of this tale, the visual appearance of the witch in *Snow White* resembles the wicked witch, who is dressed in a black gown, has bony fingers and a big nose with a wart.

Like in “Hansel and Gretel”, in “Little Red Riding Hood”, the German book contains the portrayal of the child’s encounter with danger. The illustration depicts the wolf confronting the little girl. She wears a small red cap, and her dress is blue. Plath was exposed to the consumer culture that used the imagery of “Little Red Riding Hood” in post-war America. Yet, she did not write poems directly referencing the tale. The sexual connotations of “Little Red Riding Hood” were alluded to by Max Factor’s 1953 lipstick, named “Riding Hood Red”, which claimed it brings “the wolves out” (“Advertisement: MAX Factor”). During Plath’s *Mademoiselle* guest editorship, the fairy-tale inspired lipstick was among the fashionable shades recommended for use by the editors (Winder 46). Thus, Plath likely knew of Max Factor’s lipstick. In her correspondences, Plath alludes to the sexual connotations of “Little Red Riding Hood” when writing a letter to her friend Marcia Brown, in July 1952 (L1 473). The tale also reappeared in Plath’s adult years when she and Ted Hughes dressed up as Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf in 1959 for the New Year’s Eve party (Clark,

The Grief of Influence 45). Plath's choice of costume suggests the dominant role of the fairy tales in her life, particularly given the sexual connotations "Little Red Riding Hood" carried.

Moving to Disney's visual representation of the female protagonists, the post-war era films portray princess gowns that still define children's visual perception of how a princess should look. Such dresses are also part of fashion history. For example, Cinderella's look has a "definite 'Grace Kelly' quality", whereas Aurora's dress from *Sleeping Beauty* represents Dior's "New Look", which debuted in 1947 (A. M. Davis 101). Anne Sexton references the significance of the princess' dresses in her poem "Cinderella": "From diapers to Dior / That story" (255). Plath, who was a lover of fashion, often used the visual appearance of the fairy-tale princesses as a narrative element for her poems and personal writings, which I will discuss more in the next section. For her, the visual representation of princesses functioned to relate events or characters in her life to the world of fairy tales. In the early 1950s, Plath compares a girl, possibly a friend, to the female protagonists of fairy tales: "She personifies the word cute. She's short and luscious. You notice her short 'thumpable' nose, her long lashes, her green eyes, her long waist-length hair, her tiny waist. She is Cinderella and Wendy and Snow White. Her face is cute" (J 38). Plath's journal entry identifies the visual appearance of the fairy-tale heroines with innocent femininity, which shows the influence of post-war beauty ideals. Although the writing is sympathetic, there is some irony in her voice regarding the princesses' "sweet femininity" she also criticised in "The Disquieting Muses". Looking carefully at the cultural framework in which Plath encountered the fairy tales offers a greater understanding of her engagement with them as visual and textual influences for her

poetry and personal writings. Next, I study Plath's juvenilia and explore the narrative elements of the Grimms' tales that influenced her poems, particularly the allusions to women and gender roles and magical powers.

Fairy Tale Narratives in Plath's Early Writings

The three early poems I study were written in the first half of the 1950s when Plath was a young adult. During this time, Plath's perception of the Grimms' fairy tales shows a degree of revision. She is not looking at them anymore from a child's perspective. Some of her poems contain direct references, such as "Bluebeard", while others allude to fairy tales, for example, "Admonitions". Plath's poems are usually narrated by an omnipotent storyteller but describe the point of view of the young female protagonist. The Grimms' tales and the Disney films use a similar narrative strategy (Bottigheimer 52-53; 71). Punishment and desire are central themes in many of the juvenilia; they either restrict or motivate the protagonist. Plath's heroines desire either a romantic relationship ("Cinderella"), knowledge ("Admonitions"), or an adventure ("The Princess and the Goblins"). The young protagonists are adventurous and curious, but such boldness is not without consequences. Their adventures often end with internal guilt or punishment, usually executed by the wicked witch. My close reading of the juvenilia focuses on the themes of desires and punishment. I consider Plath's poems as responses to expected gender roles in post-war America.

Plath was likely aware of the perception of the tales in American society as cultivating moral values, such as obedience to rules and restricted sexuality. Such

an interpretation of the tales was also suggested by W. H. Auden (Plath's favourite poet at the time), who wrote an article in 1944 in *The New York Times Book Review* on Margaret Hunt's new translation of the Grimms' tales. Auden argues that the Grimms' fairy tales are "among the few indispensable, common-property books upon which Western culture can be founded ... these tales rank next to the Bible in importance" (qtd. in Haase, "Yours, Mine, or Ours?" 383). Auden's words link the morals of the fairy tales to biblical teachings and reinforce a religious reading, which was a preferred reading in post-war American society. The tales have "some pinches of Christianity sprinkled by Wilhelm" Grimm (Zipes, *Grimm Legacies* 153). Donald Haase argues that the universalisation of "the Grimms' tales in the post-war era derives significantly from the war itself and from the Anglo-American attitude toward the German as the other" ("Framing the Brothers Grimm" 64). Due to the hostility against Germany after World War II, the Germanness of the tales was erased. Though for Plath, the Grimms' fairy tales originated from her German heritage, she often merged the narratives of fairy tales with religious morals and biblical stories, which suggests the influence of the American reading of the tales.

The poem "Cinderella" was written in sonnet form and was published under the title "Twelfth Night" in the December 1952 issue of *Seventeen* magazine. The poem narrates the ballroom dance and the romance between the prince and a modern Cinderella. In the first line of the poem, Plath evokes the most significant element of the tale, the glass shoes: "The prince leans to the girl in scarlet heels / Her green eyes slant, hair flaring in a fan" (CP 303). The alteration of glass slippers to scarlet heels can also refer to Dorothy's shoes from the *Wizard of Oz* (1939) and *The Red Shoes* (1948). It is also likely that Plath merged the symbolic element of

the fairy tale with her red shoes. She mentioned to her mother approximately the same time she wrote the poem: “Bought a black-fitted coat! ... and will look very trim with my black heels – or *my red shoes* & the red bag” (L1 518, emphasis added). Some years later, in 1958, Plath writes about her red shoes in her journals. She describes them as worn; therefore, they are likely the same shoes: “Slipped into my dirty red down-at-the-heel ballet shoes...” (J 364). The citations reinforce Plath’s association of certain clothes and accessories with the fashion choices of fairy-tale princesses.

Plath’s poem employs the familiar elements from the fairy tale to narrate the girl’s enjoyment of the dance:

The whole revolving tall glass palace hall
Where guests slide gliding into light like wine;
Rose candles flicker on the lilac wall
Reflecting in a million flagons’ shine, (CP 304).

The “glass palace” is reminiscent of the glass slippers and the prince’s palace, in which the ball took place. Plath also could draw on the promotional movie posters of Disney’s *Cinderella* in which the glass palace and the prince appear in the background. Suzie Hanna suggests that the palace/castle is a recurring image in Plath’s fairy-tale poems (206). In “Cinderella”, the transparency of the glass stays in the background and is in contrast with the colourfulness of the poem. Red (shoes, rose), green (eyes), lilac (walls), and silver (rondo) are the defining colours that give a vivid impression of the ballroom dance. Perhaps the eclectic imagery of the colours wants to emphasise the blurredness of vision caused by the circling during the dance. Plath also uses poetic techniques, such as alliteration (“Where guests slide

gliding into light like wine”), imitating the soft movement of the dancing. However, the party is interrupted by the clock reaching twelve, which warns the girl that the pleasure of the dancing and romantic relationship is over: “Until near twelve the strange girl all at once / Guilt-stricken halts, pales, clings to the prince” (CP 304). The poem focuses on desire and punishment (or, in this case, internal guilt), which is a central theme of the film *Cinderella*. In one of the movie posters, the clock tower also takes up a dominant position in which the arms reach twelve, suggesting its influence in the poem. The end of “Cinderella” mimics the fairy tale; however, here, there is no happy ending, only the threatening time of midnight when the magic ends: “As amid the hectic music and cocktail talk / She hears the caustic ticking of the clock” (CP 304). The last two lines are filled with the sounds of *k* and *t*, which imitate the ticking of the clock and create a more ominous end. We do not know what happens to the girl after leaving the ball. Plath’s revision of the tale finishes with an uncertain ending. By focusing on the uncertainty and danger, Plath subverts the romance and courtesy associated with the sonnet form and “happily ever after” emphasised in the film adaptation of the fairy tale. The poem might reflect on the expectations of dating in post-war America; perhaps this prince is not suitable for the girl in “Cinderella”.

The poem was likely inspired by dates Plath went on, which she commemorated in her letters and journals. Writing to Marcia Brown in July 1952, Plath compares herself to Cinderella: “I leapt back to my room, tore off the proletarian black uniform and got all swish in my aqua cotton we bought in Boston last summer” (L1 464). In her journals, Plath extensively narrates the date with Phil Brawner that involved waltzing. Like the poem, the entry is written in third person narrative, and

she refers to herself as “the girl”. This narrative style frequently appears in Plath’s private writing; she considered journaling a creative writing practice. The journal entry also describes her outfit resembling a princess dress, which suggests the imagery of *Cinderella* (J 111-112). It is also probable that Plath’s poem was inspired by dates she went to in summer 1952. In the early 1950s, the *Cinderella* narrative frequently appears in her personal writings and poems, which suggests that the tale’s imagery bore personal significance to Plath. My reading of “Cinderella” argues that the filmic representation accentuated post-war gender roles through its visual elements. By portraying the glass slipper, the palace, and the clocktower, the poem emphasises the “happily ever after” highlighted to the American readership. Plath’s journal and letter writings also emphasise the romance in the tale instead of the morals of goodness and hard work stressed in the German version.

In the villanelle, “Admonitions” (1953), Plath employs the theme of female disobedience and links the morals of fairy tales with biblical imagery. Her merger can be considered a poetic response to the perception of the Grimms’ tales Auden articulated, cultivating universal teachings. The poem alludes to Dylan Thomas’s “Do not go gentle into that good night” (1951), likewise written in a villanelle form and iambic pentameters. Plath employs the strict form of the villanelle to highlight the subject of the poem: obedience, submission to rules, and discipline. The first line “Oh never try to knock on rotten wood” (CP 319)), which serves as one of the refrains of the poem, evokes the custom present across cultures that knocking on wood creates protection. The “rotten wood” implies that the object is dead; thus, knocking on it would cause misfortune. The second and the third lines of the stanza (“or play another card game when you’ve won; / never try to know more than you should” (CP

319)) are concerned with disobediences or the biblical sins, such as greed and the Original Sin. The reference to forbidden knowledge evokes Eve's figure, which genders the admonitions. Female disobedience is also the theme of "Bluebeard", which Plath reimagined in a poem with the same title.

The poem continues the merger between fairy tales and biblical teachings in the second stanza with the significant symbol of the apple: "The magic golden apples all look good / although the wicked witch has poisoned one" (CP 319). The lines allude to the poisonous apple that the evil queen offers to Snow White. Plath's word choice shows the influence of the film *Snow White*, as the German version names the disguised evil stepmother a peasant woman. Only in the Disney adaptation was she named a witch. The evocation of the apples highlights the similarities between the fairy tale and the biblical admonition since both Snow White and Eve desire the apple, and they get punished for their curiosity and disobedience. McCort argues that in the poem, the witch "represents the girl's fall from bliss"; she "will punish the girl who tries to learn, to be, and to do too much" (122). Plath often alludes to the conspirator or plot-maker character of wicked witches who later reappear in, for example, "The Disquieting Muses", which I further discuss later in the next section. In the third stanza of "Admonitions", the narrative takes a turn: "From here the moon seems smooth as angel-food, / from here you can't see spots upon the sun" (CP 319). Angel food is an emblematic American cake, which was included in Plath's favourite cookbook, *Joy of Cooking* (1931) by Irma S. Rombauer (536). In post-war America, when baking sponge-based cakes like angel food, the emphasis was on decoration and visual pleasure (Shapiro 78). Focusing on the visual appearance rather than the taste is also a form of deception, which Plath's poem warns against

(“nothing is what it seems”). The line can be read as an allusion to “Hansel and Gretel”, where the witch’s sweet food deceives the children. Plath’s poem frames the admonitions of the fairy tales within the post-war domestic culture, alluding to gender roles and expectations from young women.

The subsequent two stanzas use images of deception and mischief by evoking the Snake from the Garden of Eden who seduced Eve: “The suave dissembling cobra wears a hood”, who “swaggers like a proper gentleman” (CP 319). The biblical imagery is reinforced by the “wakeful” figures of the angels who conclude that “disguise beguiles, and mortal mischiefs done” (CP 319). The last stanza of the villanelle repeats the refrain lines, which warn against carelessness and curiosity and desire for knowledge:

For deadly secrets strike when understood
and lucky stars all exit on the run:
never try to knock on rotten wood,
never try to know more than you should. (CP 319)

The first two lines imply that disobeying rules leads to discovering “deadly secrets” and misfortunes and hardship. The stanza concludes that it is better not to tempt fate and remain obedient. To sum up, “Admonitions” does not portray the female protagonist, yet the themes of desire and punishment follow the pattern of Plath’s juvenilia through which a girl and her adventures are narrated. The poem has an ironic undertone when cautioning about disobedience and desire for knowledge, which suggests Plath’s condemnation of the gendered perception of admonitions.

Another poem that bears the influence of the Grimms’ fairy tales is “The Princess and the Goblins”, written in 1955. The tale-poem borrows the title from

MacDonald's children's book *The Princess and the Goblins* (1872), which revises "Briar Rose" (McCort 134). In the poem, Plath reverses the gender roles familiar from fairy tales; her portrayal of the princess is bold and adventurous. McCort suggests that "The Princess and the Goblins" is embedded in the genre of twentieth-century women's poems that "turned to the fairy tale to help them make sense of their own and their contemporaries' socialization" (128). The poem comprises three parts, and tercet is the dominant stanza form. The symbolism of the number three familiar from fairy tales is a recurring element. The first part centres on the adventure, the second portrays the quest and resolution, and the third part of the poem adds a twist to the narrative and concludes the female-centred narrative. "The Princess and the Goblins" portrays a more daring protagonist who goes on an adventure during the night: "From fabrication springs the spiral stair / up which the wakeful princess / climbs to find the source of blanching light that conjured her" (CP 333). The tercet suggests that the story is a fantasy. The lines explain that a light summons the princess who goes up to an imaginary staircase. She is curious and desires knowledge.

In the first part, the witch is portrayed as a plot-maker, suggesting the significance of her character:

With finger bandaged where the waspish pin
flew from the intricate embroidery
and stung according to the witch's plan

she mounts through malice of the needle's eye
trailing her scrupulously simple gown
along bright asterisks by milky way. (CP 333)

The stanzas reference the fairy tale “Briar Rose”, where Aurora’s finger touches the spinning wheel. The princess’s finger is pricked by the needle, which was according to “the witch’s plan”. The narrative highlights the themes of desire and punishment represented by the curiosity of the princess. In the poem, the witch signifies the executor of the girl’s punishment. She is described as malicious, a conspirator and wears “scrupulously simple gown”. The portrayal of her dress might allude to the all-black garment of the portrayal of the wicked witch figure, for example, in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). The “simple” description also mimics the illustrations of the German Grimms’ book in which the witch from “Hansel and Gretel” wears a peasant dress. Throughout the poem, women’s handiwork is a central motif that signifies the theme of punishment and desire. In the stanza, the “malice of the needle’s eye” alludes to the sewing and spinning wheel, which ties the princess and the witch.

In later stanzas, Plath evokes the biblical angels who “nod her in / where ancient, infinite, and beautiful, / her legendary godmother leans down” (CP 333). The lines demonstrate the pattern of merging biblical themes with fairy tale narratives. The godmother alludes to the Fairy Godmother from *Cinderella*, another figure from the tales, who reappears in Plath’s writings. The assonances in the stanza (“angels”; “ancient, infinite”) identify the godmother as the “good” maternal figure. She is “spinning a single stubborn thread of wool” (CP 333). Like the witch’s, the godmother’s magical power is associated with needlework, which the alliteration accentuates. Splitting the maternal figures into good (fairy godmother) and bad (witch) mother is a common characteristic of fairy tales, which has been interpreted from a psychoanalytic point of view. I discuss this in detail in the following section. The second part of “The Princess and the Goblin” focuses on the princess’s quest

and obstacles: "...the girl goes down / the darkening stair, undoes the palace latch / and slips unseen past watchmen on the lawn" (CP 334). In fairy tales, such adventures rarely occur with princesses. Plath's poem seeks a revision of the passive female heroine and tells the story of an active and adventurous girl: "the princess frees the miner, stone by stone, / and leads him home to be her chosen knight" (CP 334). The reversal of gender roles suggests her critical perception of fairy tales.

In this last part of the poem, the narrative returns to the spindle highlighting its presence as a dark and ominous object, possibly signifying danger ahead. The princess

hears the twittering machine

which quaintly wove the fabric of her fate
behind the zodiac on attic door
with abracadabra from the alphabet. (CP 334-335)

The lines propose the spindle has magical powers; the weaving tells "the fabric of her fate". The imagery also evokes Penelope's weaving in the *Odyssey*, determining her fate. In the poem, women's handcraft is "the carrier" of the narrative in which the story spins like a wool thread highlighting the focus on women of the poem-tale. The alliterative line "abracadabra from the alphabet" alludes to the magical power of language. In Chapter 4, I investigate Plath's deployment of performative language in some of her later poetry, which imitates the power of spellwork. By associating the magical power of the female figures with domestic activity, "The Princess and the Goblins" critiques the ideas about women and power. In the poem, the miner boy does not bow in front of the "great goddess of the air" (CP 335), suggesting he does

not respect her (female) art. "The Princess and the Goblins" ends with the girl's return home from the magical adventure. However, the happy ending soon takes another turn when the godmother punishes the boy: "At his words, the indignant godmother / vanishes in a labyrinth of hay / while sunlight winds its yarn upon the floor" (CP 335). The poem revisits the themes of desire and punishment; however, here, the miner boy is the one who gets disciplined. Plath's witty reversal of gender roles suggests her awareness of double standards of women's and men's behaviour.

Plath closes off the poem with a revisiting of some of the themes from the previously discussed fairy-tale poems. The last stanza suggests that obedience is necessary to achieve the happily ever after:

O never again will the extravagant straw
knit up a gilded fable for the child
who weeps before the desolate tableau
of clockwork that makes the royal blood run cold. (CP 335)

The first line is reminiscent of "Admonitions", whereas the "clockwork" evokes "Cinderella". The clock's ticking also signals "the real prospect of marriage" (McCort 136). The stanza highlights once more that the magical adventure can end quickly if the godmother and her powers are not respected. There is a parallel between the witch and the godmother who are referred to by their art of needlework. The poem portrays the power of the female supernatural figures as ambiguous, who can reward or punish. "The Princess and the Goblins" is filled with alliterations and sound plays, making its language similar to children's literature. Plath's poem gives a livelier character to the princess who goes on an adventure, whereas the badly-behaved miner boy gets punished. By centring the tale-poem on women and their magical

powers, “The Princess and the Goblins” highlights the post-war perception of fairy tales targeted at a female audience.

My reading of the juvenilia reveals Plath’s early interest in the Grimms’ fairy tales as sources of poetic inspiration. She was likely aware of the market for fairy-tale narratives due to their significant presence in post-war culture. For example, in the *Seventeen* magazine, some of the previously mentioned Cinderella-themed advertisements and writings, such as the “Who is Your Fairy Godmother?” “I’m Cinderella—Just for a Day”, both written in 1947, were featured in the late-1940s early-1950s. Even, there was an increase in the reference to this fairy tale in 1952, the year Plath published her poem in the magazine. “Cinderella”, “Admonitions”, and “The Princess and the Goblins” also demonstrate her awareness that the different poetic forms can accentuate the subject. In the three poems, Plath keeps traditional elements of the Grimms’ fairy tales, such as the emphasis on the romantic relationship, the theme of desire and punishment, the typified character of plot-maker witch figure, the supportive godmother, and the significant role of the princess. The early poems express some revision of the fairy tales by focusing on the female protagonist’s adventures as a response to the gender roles of the post-war era. Next, I examine the culture of mother blame and describe the link psychoanalysis provided between the “bad mother” and the wicked witch figure.

Witches and Momism in Post-war America

In fairy tales, food is regularly associated with the witch figure and is used as a tool for deception; particularly, sweet food is used to trick the protagonist. For

example, in “Hansel and Gretel”, both the wicked witch and the evil stepmother use food for deception. In “Cinderella”, food is deployed as a punishment. The stepmother and stepsisters pour peas and lentils into ashes, which Cinderella has to separate all day. In the Grimms’ tales, wicked witches, stepmothers (or rarely, biological mothers) use food for trickery; they are the opposite of the nurturing mother. Their characters suggest that maternal love is deceitful. My analysis demonstrates that the psychoanalytical interpretation of the witch as a malicious maternal figure offered a narrative for Plath to unleash negative feelings about her mother. Plath associated witch figures from literature with her ambiguous feelings towards her mother throughout her poetry, which I further explore in the next chapter. Here, I look at the specific interpretation of the Grimms’ tales, linking the culture of mother-blame of the post-war era with the wicked witch figure. To fully understand how the fairy-tale witch came to represent the “bad mother”, first, the conflicted perception of motherhood in post-war America needs to be considered.

The author Philip Wylie claimed in *Generation of Vipers* (1942) that “[m]om is an American creation. Her elaboration was necessary because she was launched as Cinderella” (197). His successful book launched an attack on American motherhood; he defines “momism” as the domination of the mother in American society, whom he holds responsible for the “mealy look of men today” (Wylie 210). Wylie’s book understands “momism” within the post-war political landscape and argues that McCarthyism, “the rule of unreason, is one with momism: a noble end aborted by sick-minded means, a righteous intent — in terrorism fouled and tyranny foundered” (196). According to Wylie, moms (who used to be wives) are one of the main problems of American society. He argues that women are Satanic: “never

before has a great nation of brave and dreaming men absent-mindedly created a huge class of idle, middle-aged women. Satan himself has been taxed to dig up enterprises enough for them” (Wylie 200). Wylie asserts that girls, who are disillusioned that they cannot be princesses, are inclined by Satan “to institute mom-worship” (200). He also compares the “mom” to monstrous female figures, such as witches, Medusa, Lilith, harpies, and the three Fates. Many of these names reappear in Plath’s poems portraying the ambiguous mother figure, such as “The Disquieting Muses” and “Medusa”.

What is striking in Wylie’s book is the continuous use of the “Cinderella” analogy. For Wylie, Cinderella becomes a “mom” and consumes the material goods produced by hard-working men. His interpretation of the tale is – to put it mildly – unconventional. He claims that Cinderella is every young woman who uses her attractive looks to bewitch the prince and only wants material gain and financial stability, but notes that there are “not enough Princes” for each American girl (Wylie 49). In short, women have to “compete” with men to live Cinderella’s lifestyle. In popular and consumer culture, the message was somewhat the same. Beauty products in women’s magazines alluded to “bewitching” female sexuality (“Advertisement: Filene’s”; “Advertisement: Dana”). The same year Wylie’s book was published, *I Married a Witch* debuted, which has a similar narrative. The film was based on Thorne Smith’s *The Passionate Witch* (1934), finished in 1941 by Norman Matson. In *I Married a Witch*, the story was significantly altered. *I Married a Witch* has a happy ending in which the female witch bewitches a wealthy engaged politician and seduces him with her witchcraft to marry her; in the end, she becomes an ordinary housewife. Marion Gibson argues that the book and its film adaptation

created the cultural narrative in America that “domesticated witches, whether women or children or both, are the only good kind ... women are particularly dangerous” (*Witchcraft Myths* 197). The message of *I Married a Witch* can be compared to Wylie’s book: that female sexuality is dangerous, and women use their powers against men. Even if his interpretation is a twisted narrative and a misogynistic attack on women attributing to them demonic powers, it demonstrates the significance of the Grimms’ tales, such as “Cinderella”, in post-war American culture.

Plath was familiar with Wylie’s book. Her poem “The Babysitters”, written in 1961, portrays her friend Marcia Brown reading the book in summer 1951: “And rented an old green boat. I rowed. You read / Aloud, crosslegged on the stern seat, from the *Generation of Vipers*. / So we bobbed out to the island. It was deserted” (CP 175). Two decades after, Marcia remembers the book: “that kind of pitchy, caustic, tough talk was very appealing” to her and Plath, particularly Wylie’s writing on “momism” (“interview recording, undated”). Her wording interprets Plath’s encounter with “momism” as a kind of rebellion. Clark likewise suggests that Plath’s negative feelings towards her mother were “influenced by Dr. Beuscher and the sexist Freudian and ‘Momist’ rhetoric” (*Red Comet* 542). Rose notes that in the poem, by “naming this book, Plath situates herself – or her memory of herself – firmly within the framework of popular culture” (165). My research incorporates both the psychoanalytic reading of fairy tales and looks at the cultural context of “momism”, offering a new approach to the presence of the devouring mother figure in Plath’s poems. I look at the role of food, particularly the mother’s association with food as a link between wicked witches from fairy tales and Wylie’s *Generation of Vipers*, which

reminisced about the pre-war domesticity, in which motherhood was often synonymous with home-cooked meals.

In post-war America, food had a conflicted place. During this time, hundreds of cookbooks flooded the market targeting white middle-class mothers (Shapiro xix). Nevertheless, the cultural consensus was that a mother should cook and spend quite a long time preparing food. Despite the growing number of kitchen appliances and household products, working- and middle-class women did the same amount of housework as in the 1920s (more than the hours of a full-time job today). Only food preparation and cooking time have decreased to some degree (Shapiro 46). Ruth Cowan also argues that “the basic material conditions of life have become homogenized for all Americans”, meaning that housewives of all classes were spending the same time doing the domestic chores by themselves (196-197). With the traditionally considered “male chores” mechanised, “the most time-consuming activities around the home” remained for women who often juggled between the domestic and the professional (Cowan 200-201). For some, like Wylie, working mothers were seen as the doom of childcare and pre-war domestic bliss. Mothers served as scapegoats for shifts in society, including changes in the domestic life and attitudes and behaviours of the next generation, particularly about men. The arrival of Freudian psychoanalysis to America reinforced the mother-blame. Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) states that “[u]nder the Freudian microscope, however, a very different concept of family began to emerge ... It was suddenly discovered that the mother could be blamed for almost everything” (151). The ambiguous attitudes towards motherhood in post-war America were echoed in popular culture, for which fairy tales often served as metaphors. I argue that the

conflict was resolved by shaping the witch, who is also often the stepmother of the protagonist, as the “bad mother”.

A popular reading of Grimms’ fairy tales includes the psychoanalytic interpretation of maternal figures. While this approach suggests an outdated and essentialist reading, it was a popular interpretation available to Plath. In the past, Melanie Klein’s object-relations psychoanalytical theory has been deployed to interpret the struggle between the evil stepmother and the child – often the daughter – in tales like “Little Snow White” and “Cinderella”, in which the child splits the mother into “bad” and “good” mother (Krzywinska 135). Klein argues that “the first object [is] the mother’s breast which to the child becomes split into a good (gratifying) and bad (frustrating) breast” (2). The child resolves the internal conflict by splitting her into the good and bad mother. I highlighted earlier that such splitting is already prevalent in Plath’s juvenilia; the Fairy Godmother from *Cinderella* represents the good, whereas the witch/evil queen from *Snow White* embodies the “bad mother” figure. Bruno Bettelheim’s Freudian analysis also argues that in “Hansel and Gretel”, the children project their anxious fantasies of hunger onto the maternal figure who is embodied in the child-devouring wicked witch figure (166). The psychoanalytic approach argues that, in fairy tales, witches’ deception with food creates an association between maternal love and malice. The psychoanalytical reading remained popular throughout the twentieth century.

More recently, it was critiqued, for example, by Jack Zipes, who claims that the Freudian and Jungian approaches “have little regard for history or textual matters” (*The Brothers Grimm* xiii). Modern scholarship understands the alluring food, particularly the gingerbread known from “Hansel and Gretel”, from the historical

materialism approach. The tale reads as an analogy to food in the post-industrial capitalist society, in which the consumption of (sweet) food by children is in the centre of control and regulation of hunger/overconsumption (Honeyman 196). Diane Purkiss argues that the witch signifies the modern “bad mother” who is blamed for overfeeding the children with “‘Americanised’ convenience fast food or ‘empty calories’ of crisps and fizzy drinks” (*The Witch in History* 281-282). While these modern approaches are useful, I consider the vocabulary available to Plath on the interpretation of the tales, mainly Freud’s and Jung’s psychoanalytic theories.

Plath often drew from the popular understanding of psychoanalysis to describe her ambiguous feelings towards her mother, which was also influenced by the post-war-era “mother-blame”. While Philip Wylie’s “momism” (influenced by Freudian thought) prompted Plath to a metaphorical reading of fairy tales in post-war America, her reading of Freud is also in parallel with his prominent place in American culture and society. In the late 1950s, Plath’s journal entries frequently mention reading Freud, such as his essay “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917). She argues that the essay interprets her relationship with her mother:

a transferred murderous impulse from my mother onto myself: the “vampire” metaphor Freud uses, “draining the ego”: that is exactly the feeling I have getting in the way of my writing: mother’s clutch ... How can I get rid of this depression: by refusing to believe she has any power over me, like the old witches for whom one sets out plates of milk and honey. (J 447)

Freud’s essay does not refer to a vampire metaphor or witches. It is Plath who associates the supernatural figures with her mother. In the entry, Plath likely refers to the discussion of the identification of the ego with the abandoned object (person), which, Freud argues, generates melancholia (249-250). The citation references the

folk custom that leaving out “milk and honey” functions as a protection against supernatural figures; however, it is usually an offering for fairies, not witches (Magliocco 342). Previously, some critics discussed Plath’s engagement with Freudian psychoanalysis regarding her feelings towards her mother. Liz Yorke notes that Plath’s mother-representation is associated with “images of hag’s head”, who appear as dangerous, grotesque, and devouring (54; 56). Her analysis is reminiscent of Plath’s portrayal of the witch-like dummies in “The Disquieting Muses”. Britzolakis also recalls Plath’s interest in Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia” essay; she remarks that Plath could have experienced transference of the mourning of her father as hate towards the mother who becomes “obstructing or inhibiting her writing” (*Sylvia Plath* 24-25). While both Yorke and Britzolakis approach Plath’s mother-representation from a psychoanalytic view, they do not explore why the witch imagery is so appealing to Plath. My reading of Plath’s poems demonstrates her awareness of the psychoanalytical association between the witch’s deception with food and the “bad mother” figure.

“The Disquieting Muses” portrays the mother as an ambiguous figure who controls the speaker with her excessive maternal love signified by her cooking and food. The poem is written in iambic tetrameter in octaves and borrows its title from Giorgio de Chirico’s artwork. The painting, portraying three statuesque headless figures in surrealist setting, inspired Plath’s poem that “uncovers a treacherously double legacy within the seemingly cozy paraphernalia of a suburban girlhood” (Britzolakis, “Conversation” 176). “The Disquieting Muses” starts with an allusion to the curse from “Briar Rose”. In the tale, the evil fairy Maleficent was not invited to the christening of Aurora, so she curses the little girl that upon her sixteenth birthday,

she will die by pricking her finger on a needle of a spinning wheel. "The Princess and the Goblins" also reproduces this narrative element, which explains its significance in Plath's poetic imagination. The poem alludes to "Briar Rose" to express the speaker's feeling of being doomed. She perceives the mother and the three eerie female dummies as conspirators:

Mother, mother, what illbred aunt
Or what disfigured and unsightly
Cousin did you so unwisely keep
Unmasked to my christening, that she
Sent these ladies in her stead
With heads like darning-eggs to nod
And nod and nod at foot and head
And at the left side of my crib? (CP 74)

The first stanza is one long rhetorical question addressed to the mother about the presence of the uncanny female figures whom the speaker recognises as her curse, which I discuss in detail in the next chapter. The poem is filled with repetitions of words ("I learned, I learned, I learned"), sounds ("stead"; "head"; "left"), and internal rhymes ("unwisely keep"; "these ladies"), suggesting the child's perspective and create the effect of a nursery rhyme (Britzolakis, "Conversation" 177). The repetition of "Mother, mother" functions as her invocation, summoning the figure, whom the speaker solely blames.

In the next stanza, the uncanny figures appear as witches associated with the mother figure: "Mother, whose witches always, always / Got baked into gingerbread" (CP 75). In her poetry reading, Plath accentuated "always, always" and "gingerbread", with the former sounding like an accusation ("The Disquieting Muses"). The lines evoke the gingerbread house of the wicked witch in "Hansel and

Gretel”, yet the reference to “witches” (and not only one wicked witch) suggests a more threatening presence of maternal malice. In many tales, women play the role of controller and distributor of food in the family; however, they also often poison the protagonist with their food, for example, in “Snow White” (Carr 19). In Plath’s poem, the mother’s baking recalls contradictions of maternal malevolence and love: “you fed / My brother and me cookies and Ovaltine /... But those ladies broke the panes” (CP 75). The speaker expresses suspicion about the mother as a collaborator with the witches. They are both associated with sweet food. Plath further links the sweetness of “cookies” and “Ovaltine”, a sugary milk flavouring product given to children, with internal rhyme. Similar to Klein’s theory of good versus bad breast, the “good mother” feeds the children with cookies, and the “bad mother” causes distrust with her transgressive baking signified by the witches as ingredients. Britzolakis notes that the poem also narrates “lost primal oneness with the maternal object” (“Conversation” 176). My reading argues that the child’s perception mirrors the attitude to motherhood in the post-war era. She is an ambiguous figure whose cookies evoke the domestic bliss of pre-war times. Nevertheless, the witches in the gingerbread represent distrust and deceit.

The speaker condemns not only the mother’s control and suspicion of her food but her emphasis on traditional “gentle” femininity:

When on tiptoe the schoolgirls danced,
Blinking flashlights like fireflies
And singing the glowworm song, I could
Not lift a foot in the twinkle-dress

.....
Mother, you sent me to piano lessons
And praised my arabesques and trills
Although each teacher found my touch

Oddly wooden in spite of scales (CP 75).

Here, the speaker blames the mother for forcing her into the activities associated with little girls (ballet dancing, singing, and piano practice) in which she failed. She could not satisfy the mother, who is perceived as controlling. Therefore, she associates herself more willingly with the uncanny ladies: "I learned, I learned, I learned elsewhere, / From muses unhired by you, dear mother" (CP 75). The three-times repeated verb "learned" accentuates the speaker's dissatisfaction with the mother. Sally Bayley argues that the sweet and innocent womanhood often represented by the princesses in tales is despised by the poetic persona (199). The speaker claims that although the disquieting muses are "Mouthless, eyeless, with stitched bald head", she would sooner choose them as her companions than the mother's prescribed femininity. "The Disquieting Muses" proposes that the mother is inadequate to defend the child and to satisfy her needs: "And this is the kingdom you bore me to, / Mother, mother. But no frown of mine / Will betray the company I keep" (CP 75). The poem's end repeats the calling out of the mother who is criticised for insufficiency of her love, which makes the child chooses to the disquieting muses. Although the reference to witches only appears once in the poem, they point towards the interpretation of associating the mother's love and food with deception, trickery, and power, like the wicked witch figures in the fairy tales. Thus, the speaker's suspicion towards the disquieting muses is transferred to the mother. She is portrayed as insufficient and controlling, which likens her to the post-war "mom" figure.

The themes of the devouring mother and excessive and ambiguous maternal love reappear in Plath's later poems, such as in the "Poem for a Birthday" sequence,

written in 1959, which marks a transition in her poetry. "Poem for a Birthday" centres on transformation, rebirth, and separation. My reading proposes that some of the poems in the sequence portray the devouring mother figure from whom the speaker wants to separate. I use the psychoanalytical approach to argue for the influence of the Grimms' fairy tales in the poems. Just a month before finishing the sequence on 4 November, Plath was reading Jung's *Psychiatric Studies* on 4 October 1959 (J 513-514; 522). Plath was also likely familiar with Jungian archetypes. He argues that archetypes of the evil mother include "the witch, the dragon (or any devouring and entwining animal, such as a large fish or a serpent)" (Jung 81-82). The emphasis on the act of devouring as a characteristic of evil maternal figures is a recurring element in Plath's sequence. Jung's ideas were likely familiar to Plath since her psychiatrist "considered herself a Jungian analyst"; for Plath, his case studies of mother-daughter relationships "gave permission, as Dr. Beuscher had, to hate her mother" (Clark, *Red Comet* 572-573). Writing about Jung's *Psychiatric Studies* in her journal, Plath employs psychoanalysis to merge the images of the devouring mother figure and witches from the fairy tales:

The child who dreamt of a loving, beautiful mother as a witch or animal: the mother going mad in later life, grunting like pigs, barking like dogs, growling like bears, in a fit of lycanthropy ... Then the image of the eating mother, or grandmother: all mouth, as in Red Riding Hood (and I had used the image of the wolf). All this relates in a most meaningful way my instinctive images with perfectly valid psychological analysis. (J 514)

Although "Little Red Riding Hood" does not portray a wicked witch or a malicious mother, Plath's journal entry associates the wolf's disguise of the grandmother with the deceitful and "beastly" mother. Here, Plath somewhat misrepresents Jung's case

studies. She probably refers to the following passages from the first volume of his *Collected Works*:

A 30-year-old lady with *grande hysteric* had delirious twilight states in which she was tormented by frightful hallucinations. She saw her children being torn away from her, devoured by wild beasts, etc. She had no remembrance of the individual attacks.

A girl of 17, also a severe hysteric. In her attacks she always saw the corpse of her dead mother approaching her, as if to draw her to itself. No memory of the attacks. (13-14)

Comparing the case studies with Plath's writing demonstrates her employment of psychoanalytic theory. My reading of "Poem for a Birthday" demonstrates the influence of psychoanalytic reading of the Grimms' tales and the devouring mother figure in Plath's sequence.

"Poem for a Birthday" was heavily influenced by Theodor Roethke's poetry, particularly "The Lost Son" (Clark, *Red Comet* 579); in Plath's words, the poems had "Roethke's influence, yet mine" (J 521). The first poem of the sequence is "Who"; it is written in tercets and is filled with grotesque images of heads and mouths. In the first stanza, the speaker evokes the act of devouring: "The fruit's in, / Eaten or rotten. I am all mouth" (CP 131). The opposition between eaten and rotten fruits evokes the ambiguous maternal love from "The Disquieting Muses". The "good" is accepted as nourishing and the "bad" characterised as "rotten", suggesting suspicion and that it is unconsumable. Previously, I highlighted that in the Grimms' tales, the witch often uses food to deceive or trick children. Images of the mouth and the act of devouring reappear in "Who", which signifies the ambiguous mother-daughter relationship. At first, the speaker is described as the devourer; the line "I am all mouth" evokes the children's hunger from "Hansel and Gretel". By the end, the mother becomes the

devourer: "Mother, you are the one mouth / I would be a tongue to. Mother of otherness / Eat me" (CP 132). The lines evoke Klein's object-relations theory. The speaker perceives the mother as "one mouth", associating her with nourishment. The speaker takes up an ambiguous role; she expresses the desire to be devoured by the maternal mouth, similar to the children's demolition of the witch's food in "Hansel and Gretel". At the same time, the speaker is the tongue, which suggests her interdependence from the mother-mouth. "Who" utilises the psychoanalytical approach to portray the oppressive maternal relationship, which Plath links with the symbolism of fairy tales.

In the poem, the speaker identifies with passivity and smallness: "This is a dull school. / I am a root, a stone, an owl pellet"; "I said: I must remember this, being small" (CP 131-132). Such images are evocative of the child-speaker in "The Disquieting Muses". Here, the speaker links her smallness, not to childhood, but to the world of inanimate objects. On the other hand, the women, including the mother, are described as active, large, and free. In stanza seven, the reference to flying women is suggestive of the witches: "These halls are full of women who think they are birds" (CP 131). This line prefigures Plath's "Wintering" ("The bees are all women" (CP 218)) linking women to flying creatures, which recalls the belief about witches' power to fly and transform into an animal form, which I discuss in detail in Chapter 5 and 6. In a later part of the sequence in "Witch Burning", Plath also opposes the freedom of birds with confinement: "A black-sharded lady keeps me in a parrot cage / ... I'll fly through the candle's mouth like a singeless moth" (CP 135). The association between flying creatures and female autonomy is a recurring image in Plath's poetry. "Who" ends with an electric burning, alluding to burning martyrdom:

“Now they light me up like an electric bulb” (CP 132). The imagery suggests the speaker’s suffocation, which opposes the flying birds. Harriet Rosenstein claimed in an interview that Plath did not know “that she should be fighting against her mother as part of her adolescent development”; she “realised” the separation from her mother during her breakdown and in her subsequent psychotherapy (Fainlight and Sillitoe). Although this is only an assumption, Clark comes to a similar conclusion in that Plath’s encounter with psychoanalysis from 1953 onwards influenced her negative portrayal of her mother. “Who” closes with the uncertainty of identity and anticipates the separation from the maternal mouth.

The third poem of the sequence, “Maenad”, continues the theme of separation and growth. The central motif of the poem is the devouring mouth, which is associated with the beastly mother figure, suggesting the influence of the fairy tales mentioned above. “Maenad” starts with the speaker’s description of her past, which she identifies with the father figure: “Once I was ordinary / Sat by my father’s bean tree / Eating the fingers of wisdom” (CP 133). The lines associate the father figure with a positive consumption of food, love, and knowledge, which is opposed to the mother’s portrayal as the “Dog-head, devourer” (CP 133). The speaker narrates: “The old man shrank to a doll. / I am too big to go backward” (CP 133). The opposition of the kind but passive father and the controlling maternal figure often appears in fairy tales, such as in “Hansel and Gretel”, “Little Snow White”, and “Cinderella”. The inadequate maternal love is associated with the act of devouring: “The mother of mouths didn’t love me”; “Feed me the berries of dark” (CP 133). The mother feeds the speaker, however, not what she needs. Plath’s portrayal of the mother figure was influenced by the “momist” rhetoric and the witch figure signifying the “bad mother”

who devours and deceives children. In the poem, the speaker wants light instead of the maternal darkness, which is evocative of the maternal womb: "Time / Unwinds from the great umbilicus of the sun // I must swallow it all" (CP 133).

The speaker demands more space from the mother for her growth and separation: "A red tongue is among us. / Mother, keep out of my barnyard, / I am becoming another" (CP 133). The red tongue, which is a metonymy, could relate to both the mother and the speaker linking the mother-daughter relationship to the act of devouring. The repeated reference to the mouth suggests Plath's engagement with psychoanalytic theory. The end of the poem repeats the imagery from "Who", ending with the light and the loss of the self: "In this light the blood is black. / Tell me my name" (CP 133). From the preceding line, the red tongue is transformed into the blackness of the blood, which suggests the unknown, death, and darkness. Blood turns into a darker shade when oxidised, which suggests that the "red tongue" has been injured. The tongue is also the tool of speaking; therefore, the speaker is unable to say her name. She separates from the maternal mouth/devouring mother figure, yet she cannot form a separate identity. Only in later poems, such as "Witch Burning" and "Stones", does the speaker experience a rebirth and freedom from the constraints.

My reading of "Poem for a Birthday" demonstrates Plath's engagement with the theme of separation from the mother figure influenced by the Grimms' fairy tales. In "Little Red Riding Hood", the separation from the wolf-grandmother occurs when the beast's belly is cut, similar to a Caesarean birth. In "Hansel and Gretel", the witch's death signifies their separation from the devouring mother figure. Whereas the first half of the sequence is centred on the suffocating mother-child relationship

in which the self has no identity, it ends with separation and rebirth, which presents a hopeful narrative as opposed to “The Disquieting Muses”. I suggest that the psychoanalytical reading of fairy tales provided an accessible metaphor for Plath to explore her relationship with her mother. In particular, the witch figure offers a significant identification with the ambiguous mother figure. “Who” and “Maenad” make it clear that Plath was aware of psychoanalytical readings of the hostile and controlling maternal figure represented in the wicked witch and its implication in the post-war era, to which she responded in her poetry building on her personal experiences.

Conclusion

This chapter concludes that Plath was aware of the significant role of the Grimms’ tales in post-war American culture. Despite her claim that the tales were associated with her German background, the American representations of the fairy tales in Disney films, psychoanalytical discourses, and consumer culture had more impact on Plath’s poetry. The glass slippers and poisonous apple reappear in her poems and private writings that stress certain narrative elements of the fairy tales, such as the romantic relationship or the deceitful maternal love. My reading of the juvenilia demonstrates that Plath was aware of the significant role of the tales in post-war American culture, and her poems often narrate the adventures of the female protagonist. Despite some revisions, they typically accept the image of the villainous witch, who has a more significant role in her late poetry. In the more mature poems, Plath shows an awareness of the psychoanalytic reading of the tales, particularly the

links between food and transgression against nurturing motherhood, which reflected in the “momism” of the post-war era. These poems often articulate her struggle with her maternal relationship and are poetic responses to the cultural perception of the witch as the embodiment of the devouring and controlling mother figure. Fairy tales were one of Plath’s first encounters with supernatural female figures, such as the witch and the Fairy Godmother, who frequently reappear in her writings. They remained a considerable influence throughout her life in her portrayals of magic, witches, and female power.

In the next chapter, I continue exploring Plath’s poetic representation of the witches signifying evil maternal presence. I argue that the Shakespearean witches express a different aspect of malicious motherhood, focusing on their mythological origin. I also study Plath’s representation of her father figure relationship embodied in the magician from *The Tempest*. I argue that the Shakespearean supernatural figures offered Plath ways to respond in her poetry to her ambiguous parental relationships.

Chapter 3: Shakespearean Supernatural Figures

Introduction

This chapter continues the study of literary sources in relation to Plath's understanding of the supernatural. Here, I look at Plath's portrayal of her parental relationship in her writings, considering the influence of the supernatural figures from Shakespeare's two plays, *Macbeth* and *The Tempest*. I examine the function of the maternal witches and the paternal magician as poetic representations of her mother and the father figures. The first section of this chapter concerns literary witches as embodiments of the ambiguous mother figure in Plath's poetry. In the second half of this chapter, I argue that the magician from *The Tempest* and the play's sea imagery prompted Plath to write about her relationship with her father. Though several literary and cultural portrayals of supernatural figures influenced Plath's poetic imagination, my chapter highlights the significance of Shakespeare's works as representations of gender and magical powers. The early modern portrayal of the sinister witch and the intellectual magician offered Plath ways to express ambivalent feelings towards her parent figures. Neither should Plath's engagement with Shakespeare's works be underestimated. During her final year at Smith College, Plath took a unit on Shakespeare; at Cambridge she studied Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedies (L1 753; 975-976). She often discussed Shakespeare with Hughes, who quoted lines by heart to her from his plays (L1 1167; 1236). Her letters likewise give evidence of Shakespearean allusions in Plath's writings well before her relationship with Hughes, demonstrating her knowledge of his plays (L1 751; 756; 1024).

This chapter continues the discussion of Plath's association of witches with maternal malice by looking at the influence of the Shakespearean supernatural female figures and their origin in classical mythology. The previous chapter established that Plath's vocabulary of the association between witches and maternal powers originated from sources available to her, such as fairy tales, Freud, Klein, and Wylie. *Macbeth's* witches are no different. My reading of Plath's poems relies on the interpretation of the Weird Sisters in the mid-twentieth century as a representation of the metaphysical evil. I also argue that their mythological origin prompted her to consider them more than just witches; they are supernatural female figures with prophetic abilities. Whereas I differentiate between the fairy-tale witch and *Macbeth's* Weird Sisters regarding their function in Plath's poems, I want to highlight their similar origin. For example, the tale "Frau Holle" was influenced by the goddess Holda/Holle from Germanic mythology, who has an "ambiguous quality of witch and fairy" (Zipes, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale* 70). Early modern representations of witches also reach back to classical literature and mythology (Purkiss, "Witchcraft in Early Modern Literature" 124). Plath's poems demonstrate that she was aware of the origin of the Weird Sisters, who share characteristics of mythological goddesses and magical women, such as Circe, Hecate, and the three Fates, which I discuss later in more detail. In the three studied poems, the witches from *Macbeth* are associated with a maternal curse, bad luck, and doom, which is expressed in the inescapable presence of monstrous female figures. The Shakespearean Weird Sisters show a specific link between literary witches and maternal malice, which comes from the ominous presence of hags as an alleged maternal curse.

As opposed to *Macbeth*, which Plath encountered during her studies, *The Tempest* had a more personal significance for her, which she associated with her childhood spent at the coasts of the Atlantic Ocean. Plath's first theatre experience was *The Tempest* in 1945; her mother also prompted the reading of the play (Wagner-Martin 37). Previously, several critics highlighted the function of Shakespeare's play in Plath's poetic imagination, particularly the influence of Ariel and Prospero in her writings. For example, Britzolakis explores the imagery of *The Tempest* in Plath's poetry in *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning* (1999). Lynda K. Bundtzen highlights the influence of the play in the bee sequence in *The Other Ariel* (2005), which I will discuss in Chapter 6 in detail. Parallel to Plath, modernist poets, for example, Wallace Stevens and T. S. Eliot, also reimagined *The Tempest* in their poetry (Axelrod 66). Yet, no critical study fully has considered Plath's identification of the father figure with the magician from the play. My reading of Plath's writings proposes a parallel between Prospero's magic and her father's beekeeping. They both signify the scholarly knowledge of the patriarch, who appears as an ambiguous figure. I demonstrate that *The Tempest* and its sea imagery functioned as a medium for Plath, through which she gained access to the dead father figure. I refer to the association between the water and the father as Plath's seascape. To move on, first, I study how the influence of *Macbeth's* Weird Sisters in Plath's poems is associated with the ill fate of the speaker, which I call a maternal curse. I focus on the witches' prophetic ability and spiritual presence as a representation of maternal malice in Plath's poetry.

The Maternal Curse of Witches

Despite the lack of direct references to *Macbeth* in Plath's poetry, she alluded to the play in her personal writings. In her journals, she mentions reading *Macbeth* during her Cambridge years (J 204). Plath wrote a letter to her mother in April 1954, in which she made up a creative birthday wish based on the lines spoken by the witches: "Double, double toil and trouble / fire burn and champagne bubble / I'm stirring up a witches brew / That will, I hope, bring luck to you / HAPPY BIRTHDAY" (L1 734). The lines prefigure the associations of the witches with the mother figure, which directly influenced "The Disquieting Muses". To fully understand how Plath might have understood the presence of the three witches, I introduce their origin and role in the play.

Though Shakespeare was influenced by the historical and political context of the early modern period, the Weird Sisters are not only the product of the witch-hunt but represent a "mass of diverse stories, inscrutable in another sense" (Purkiss, *The Witch in History* 207). Shakespeare was influenced by other contemporary sources, such as Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles*, in writing the character of the Weird Sisters. Holinshed's Weird Sisters have been linked to Scandinavian mythology and the figures of the Norns who influence people's destiny (Gibson and Esra, *Shakespeare's Demonology* 196). Shakespeare likewise relies on the reputation of the Weird Sisters as prophetic divines, yet they also show the influence of Thomas Middleton, the author of *The Witch* who possibly added some of the "witchcraft scenes" to *Macbeth* (Findlay 434; 463). In the literary works that inspired Shakespeare, the Weird Sisters appear in the world of dreams or are represented

as mythological creatures – goddesses, fairies, and nymphs – who can see the future (Shamas 9-11). Critics likewise suggested that the Weird Sisters’ prophetic knowledge and ability to vanish make them more than just witches (W. C. Curry 396). The classical counterparts of the witches include Circe, Medea, and Hecate. The latter is the leader of the Weird Sisters in *Macbeth*, who reappears in other Shakespeare’s plays and is also the chief witch in Middleton’s *The Witch*. *Macbeth*’s witches likewise share similarities to other female trios from mythology, such as the Fates and the Gorgons. By looking at the development of the Weird Sisters, I can trace the origin of their powers, which are often sourced from mythological goddesses and other female supernatural beings.

Though the Weird Sisters have been understood several ways, I focus on a mid-twentieth-century understanding Plath likely came across in her education and critical readings. I also look at how the female trio was presented on the stage at the time. During the 1930s-1950s, the interpretation of *Macbeth*’s witches focused on their presence as a representation of evil. They manifest “the opposite of the holiness and grace which their presence in the play itself calls into the mind” giving an “explicitly Christian quality” to the play (Jack 184). W. C. Curry also argues that the Weird Sisters are associated with “the powers of hell” (231). Such criticism fell in line with Margaret Webster’s Broadway production of *Macbeth*, which debuted in 1941. The Webster production wanted “darkness and black magic” and focused on the spectral presence of the witches who only materialised when Macbeth appeared on stage (Smith 165-166). Milly S. Barranger suggests that “[s]eeing no modern equivalents for the witches, they played them as instruments of darkness” (127). For instance, among the three witches, the Third Witch was played by a man William

Hansen, who was also the Porter in Webster's *Macbeth*, highlighting the ambiguous gender of the witches ("Macbeth"). While in these interpretations, the gender of the Weird Sisters is not the focus of criticism, they function as representations of evil whose gender is ambiguous. Subsequent criticism brought attention to the gender power dynamic in the play, focusing on the witches as a representation of malicious maternal presence. Janet Adelman, writing in 1987, argues that "[m]aternal power in *Macbeth* is not embodied in the figure of a particular mother ... it is instead diffused throughout the play, evoked primarily by the figures of the witches and Lady Macbeth" (90). While Plath lived before the gender of the Weird Sisters was in the centre of critical interpretations, even in the 1930s, some acknowledged the femaleness of the witches: Shakespeare's "witches are not solely Elizabethan hags any more than they are Norse wyrds, classical Circes, fates, goddesses, or prophetesses. They are a quintessence of all of these" (Tonge 236). Plath's poems likewise point towards an understanding of the trio as sinister beings whose similarity to other female supernatural figures genders them as women and associated their powers with maternal malice.

In Plath's poems, we also see the variety of mythological and literary sources associated with the Weird Sisters. They are deities, hags, fates, and spiritual beings who, for Plath, are embodied in amorphous sinister female figures, maternal ancestors, and a paralysing hag-head. The three poems I study are "The Lady and the Earthenware Head", "All the Dead Deers", and "The Disquieting Muses". While Hughes's chronological ordering in *The Collected Poems* dates several poems composed in later years, such as "The Disquieting Muses" to 1957, Plath recorded in her journals that she wrote the poem between 22-27 March 1958 (Hargrove 103;

140). "All the Dead Dears" was written on 7 April 1957 and "The Lady and the Earthenware Head" is dated 3 February 1957 (Steinberg, "Index of Works"). The poems represent the sinister maternal hag-figures similarly, and Plath included both in her poetry collection titled *Two Lovers and a Beachcomber* submitted for her Cambridge Tripos exam. On the other hand, "The Disquieting Muses" is the only poem in which Plath directly references the influence of *Macbeth's* witches. My reading of the poems focuses on their shared imagery of female supernatural figures whose haunting power alludes to a maternal curse.

Besides the fairy-tale imagery, "The Disquieting Muses" also bears the influence of *Macbeth's* sinister female trio, whom Plath explicitly names as an inspiration for the haunting dummies:

All through the poem I have in mind the enigmatic figures in this painting – three terrible faceless dressmaker's dummies in classical gowns, seated, seated and standing in a weird, clear light ... The dummies suggest a twentieth-century version of other sinister trios of women – Three Fates, witches in *Macbeth*, De Quincey's sisters of madness. ("The Disquieting Muses")

Plath's emphasis on the shapelessness of the dummies is reminiscent of the metaphysical appearance of the Weird Sisters. Her identification of the female figures with other "sinister trios" aligns with the interpretation that questioned whether the Weird Sisters are witches or, rather, an embodiment of metaphysical evil and goddess-like creatures who influence the speaker's destiny. In her introduction to her poetry, Plath likens the dummies to Thomas De Quincey's female trios from his essay "Levana and Our Ladies of Sorrow", published in his collection *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845). De Quincey was an English essayist and writer; his essay narrates

the death of one of his sisters during his childhood and personifies grief in the three haunting and sinister sisters, whom he names the Ladies of Sorrow. Plath's comparison of the dummies to female supernatural trios from literature and mythology proposes her understanding of *Macbeth's* witches as evil spectral figures who are the speaker's companions. Plath's wording likewise suggests that she foremost considered them as gendered beings with malicious supernatural powers.

In "The Disquieting Muses", the weird dummies are shapeless dolls whose physical appearance is strange and deformed: "Mouthless, eyeless, with stitched bald head" (CP 75). They resemble the three witches Banquo describes as bearded and deformed:

By each at once her choppy finger laying
Upon her skinny lips; you should be women,
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
That you are so. (1.3.41-44)

In the poem, the mother's baking mixes the witches with the familiar and the unfamiliar, which evokes the cauldron scene from the play. Gibson argues that, in *Macbeth*, "[m]ixing familiar and unfamiliar, especially in imagining foraging, cooking and consuming, the sisters define the uncanny" (*Rediscovering Renaissance Witchcraft* 33). In Plath's poem, the gingerbread house, well-known from "Hansel and Gretel", is combined with witches, which alludes to the mixing of familiar and unfamiliar ingredients: "Mother, whose witches always, always / Got baked into gingerbread" (CP 75). In a later stanza, The speaker evokes a hurricane during which "those ladies broke the panes" (CP 75). The line evokes the entrance of the witches in the play who create a tempest: "Thunder and lightning. Enter three WITCHES" (1.1). In *Macbeth*, metaphorical and literal darkness is frequently

associated by the ominous presence of the witches and Hecate: "Hover through the fog and filthy air"; "I am for th'air. This night I'll spend / Unto a dismal and a fatal end". (1.1.12; 3.5.20-21). Likewise, in the poem, the speaker is haunted by the three weird women, who cast a shadow over the sky: "In the shadow cast by my dismal-headed / Godmothers, and you cried and cried: / And the shadow stretched, the lights went out" (CP 75). "The Disquieting Muses" draws on the portrayal of night-time caused by the shadow of female figures, which "never brightens or goes down" (CP 76). The line recalls Macbeth's words to the Weird Sisters: "How now, you secret, black, and midnight hags!" (4.1.46). The internal rhyme between "black" and "hags" accentuates the Weird Sisters' malicious presence. Further, we can see an influence of Hecate in Plath's poem, who is the goddess of the underworld: therefore, is associated with darkness. In the play, Macbeth calls her "black Hecate", suggesting her dark presence (3.2.41).⁹ Similar to *Macbeth*, in "The Disquieting Muses", there is no escape from the infectious and haunting hag-like figures.

In both the poem and *Macbeth*, the female figures bring bad luck, which is a recurring pattern in the three studied poems. While at the beginning of "The Disquieting Muses", the speaker's ill fate alludes to the fairy tale "Briar Rose", in a later part of the poem, Plath moves away from the imagery of the fairy tale. She references the divinatory power of the Weird Sisters who resemble prophetic goddesses, such as the Fates in Greek and Norns in Scandinavian mythology. Their inescapable presence ("And nod and nod at foot and head"; "Nodding by night around my bed"; "They stand their vigil in gowns of stone" (CP 75-76)) suggests that

⁹ In Scene 2, Act 1, Macbeth also calls her "pale Hecate", which has been interpreted as her manifestation of Diana, merging the two goddesses (171n41).

the weird dummies influence the speaker's destiny. The poem echoes The First Witch's prophecy to Macbeth, "Sleep shall neither night nor day:" (1.3.18), which the weird dummies manifest by staying "Day now, night now, at head, side, feet" (CP 76). Plath alludes to the maternal curse in "Daddy", where the maternal line is blamed for the speaker's "weird luck" (CP 223), which I study in detail in Chapter 5. Clark quotes Aurelia Plath, who said in an interview that Plath's emotionally charged reading of the line, "Mother, mother" at the BBC radio reading of "The Disquieting Muses" particularly hurt her (*Red Comet* 519). Although Plath kept her tone detached from the poetic speaker, her mother felt the blame. In the poem, the speaker not only holds the mother accountable for bringing the curse on her but blames her for not getting rid of the weird women: "I wonder / Whether you saw them, whether you said / Words to rid me of those three ladies" (CP 75).

In the second half of the poem, the speaker describes her inability to fit into traditionally feminine roles, which can be read as a maternal curse: "I learned, I learned, I learned elsewhere, / From muses unhired by you, dear mother" (CP 75). Plath's naming of the three female figures muses implies their ambiguous character. While she detaches them from the mother, they replace her as "traveling companions", implying that their presence is inescapable; thus, they also influence the speaker's fate. I argue that "The Disquieting Muses" expresses the influence of *Macbeth's* witches in Plath's portrayal of weird dummies who appear along with the mother. In this interpretation, the mother figure in the poem recalls Lady Macbeth's character who presents an ambivalent attitude towards motherhood. She expresses her care for her child ("How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me" (1.7.55)); at the same time, she fantasises about killing the baby ("I would, while it was smiling in

my face, / Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums / And dashed the brains out" (1.7.56-59)). The ambivalent motherhood of Lady Macbeth likely served as a literary example through which Plath could consider her ambiguous feelings towards her own mother. "The Disquieting Muses" demonstrates Plath's deployment of supernatural female figures from different literary and mythological sources to represent her ambiguous feeling about the mother by merging witches, the Weird Sisters, and the imagery of fairy tales. She builds on the prophetic power of the Weird Sisters and their spiritual form, making the dummies haunting and inescapable. "The Disquieting Muses" also prefigures the curse or ill fate associated with the maternal line, which often haunts Plath's poetic speakers.

"All the Dead Dears" and "The Lady and the Earthenware Head" show a more subtle influence of *Macbeth's* witches than "The Disquieting Muses". The two poems portray spectral female figures whose powers lie in their inescapable and ominous presence. While the former poem depicts maternal hags, who haunt the speaker, "The Lady and the Earthenware Head" describes a sinister hag-head whose paralysing vision evokes Medusa and the prophetic "vision" of the witches. Plath wrote the two poems before her Cambridge tragedy paper in spring 1957. Therefore, it is likely that her poems were prompted by her revision of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. My close reading demonstrates that the poems draw on Shakespeare's play, particularly on the witches and their powers.

"All the Dead Dears" starts with a small note after the title, informing the reader that the poem was inspired by a "*coffin of the fourth century A. D. containing the skeleton of a woman, mouse and shrew*" exhibited at the Archaeological Museum in Cambridge (CP 70). The poem comprises six six-line stanzas with a shorter

second line (except in the fourth stanza) and a varied rhyme scheme. As the title anticipates, the poem is filled with long vowels (“dears”; “these three”; “hear”; “reach”; “me”; “feet”), which have eerie and lingering effects reinforcing the spectrality. Plath employs the poetic device of consonance with the repetition of *k*, *g*, and *t* sounds (“granite grin / This antique”; “crumb by crumb”; “tack of the clock”), creating a threatening acoustic of the poem. In the first stanza, the speaker describes the remains of the bodies as watchful witnesses of the living: “This antique museum-cased lady / Lies, companioned by the gimcrack / Relics of a mouse and a shrew” (CP 70). She calls the skeleton of a woman a “lady”: a similar identification to the weird dummies in “The Disquieting Muses”, which suggests a pattern in Plath’s naming the spectral female figures. Here, the speaker calls the relics “These three,” which she reimagines as her trio of maternal ancestors, suggesting a similarity between the two poems. My reading centres on the powerful association of the number three with the speaker’s maternal predecessors, whom she perceives as haunting hags. They bring bad luck to the speaker; similar to *Macbeth’s* Weird Sisters, they have sinister and prophetic powers.

From the third stanza, the descriptive narrative turns to the speaker’s inner life; she personifies the skeleton to her maternal ancestor. She projects her inner fears to the relic, yet the poetic voice remains distant. For the speaker, the ancient female body and the two other relics personify her hag-like maternal ancestors:

How they grip us through thin and thick,
These barnacle dead!
This lady here’s no kin
Of mine, yet kin she is: she’ll suck
Blood and whistle my marrow clean
To prove it. As I think now of her head,

From the mercury-backed glass
Mother, grandmother, greatgrandmother
Reach hag hands to haul me in, (CP 70-71).

The speaker only uses personal pronouns regarding the skeleton-woman: “no kin / Of mine”; “she’ll suck / Blood and whistle my marrow clean”; “hands to haul me in”. Despite trying to prove the lack of connection between them, the employment of “mine” and “my” reinforce it, suggesting an unbreakable bond. The skeleton lady embodies the maternal ancestors who appear haunting and sinister. The verbs “grip”, “suck”, and “reach” suggest that they have a dominant presence and therefore, rule the speaker’s life. The maternal hags, like the dummies in “The Disquieting Muses”, and *Macbeth’s* Weird Sisters, have an ominous power over one’s fate. The internal rhymes in the stanzas reinforce the inescapable bond between the speaker and the maternal hags: “barnacle dead” / “her head” / “Reach hag”. The alliteration of the *h* sound in the poem (“hag hands to haul me in”) further implies the haunting presence of the hag figures. Like the witches from *Macbeth*, they manifest in metaphysical form and embody maternal malice. Plath’s poem also recalls the appearance of Banquo’s ghost who haunts Macbeth. He addresses the ghost: “Thy bones are marrowless, thy blood is cold; / Thou hast no speculation in those eyes” (3.4.94-95). Both *Macbeth* and Plath’s speaker in “All the Dead Dears” associate marrow and blood with the dead who come back and haunt the living.

In the poem, the maternal ancestors appear as a female trio: “Mother, grandmother, greatgrandmother”. Their evocation suggests they can be interpreted as an antithesis of the Holy Trinity, like the Weird Sisters and other sinister female trios. An earlier version of the poem was part of her *Two Lovers and a Beachcomber* collection, kept in the Al Alvarez Papers in the British Library, which only references

two maternal figures. Plath likely revisited the poem and alluded to the literary and mythological female trios that served as poetic inspiration for “The Disquieting Muses”. The alteration highlights Plath’s awareness of the symbolic power of the three, which argues that she further considered the Weird Sisters and other supernatural female trios as an influence of the maternal hags. The speaker calls the maternal ancestors “These barnacle dead!” (CP 70). The line has the only exclamation mark in the poem, which stresses the significance of the barnacle metaphor. Barnacles are little shell-like creatures with sharp edges that attach themselves to everything and can be parasites (Florida Museum). In “Medusa”, Plath’s poem from 1962 that narrates her ambiguous feelings about her mother, the barnacle metaphor reappears, signifying the maternal bond: “Old barnacled umbilicus, Atlantic cable” (CP 225). The metaphor is particularly compelling since barnacles have both female and male sexual organs; they are sexually ambiguous.

Likewise, they resemble the witches from *Macbeth* whose gender has been questioned by Banquo. Critics, such as Purkiss, highlighted that the witches represent borderlands between male and female, earthly and supernatural, and evil and good (*The Witch in History* 211). In the poem, the maternal ancestors drift in the borders of the physical and the spectral realm. Here, the mirror signifies the blurred lines between the spectral and physical realms. In the fifth stanza, the speaker highlights their ghost-like presence: “All the long gone darlings: they / Get back, though, soon” (CP 71). The shift from “hags” to “darlings” highlights the speaker’s ambiguous relationship with her maternal kin. It likewise alludes to Macduff’s cry “All my pretty ones?” (4.3.218), addressing the murder of his family. “All My Pretty Ones” is the title poem about her parents’ death for Anne Sexton’s poetry book published

in 1962. Plath's poem portrays the ambiguous maternal kin whose haunting presence resembles the sinister trio in "The Disquieting Muses". Jon Rosenblatt argues that the two poems share similarities in blaming the family (73). Yet, he does not elaborate on their portrayal of the uncanny female figures whom the speaker makes responsible for her ill fate. I argue that Plath sought inspiration from *Macbeth's* witches and their mythological origin. She portrays the feeling of being cursed, which she links to the maternal ancestors who appear in hag-like shapes.

The poem ends with the speaker's acceptance that the dead relatives are still present: "Each skulled-and-crossboned Gulliver / Riddled with ghosts, to lie / Deadlocked with them, taking root as cradles rock" (CP 71). The harsh *k* sound creates a cracking effect, suggesting the presence of the spectral figures enlarged to Gulliver's size, which accentuates their inescapability. Plath's imagery is reminiscent of a poem from her juvenilia "Temper of Time", written in 1955: "There's a hex on the cradle / And death in the pot" (CP 336). The lines draw on the witches' cauldron scene from *Macbeth* and their infanticide ("Finger of birth-strangled babe" (4.1.30)). In both "Temper of Time" and "All the Dead Dears" Plath alludes to hag figures who can transgress boundaries of life and death; they have power over the living, similar to the interpretation of the witches from *Macbeth*. This reading recalls the Weird Sisters' prophetic power. In "All the Dead Dears", Plath does not portray the maternal ancestors explicitly as evil; however, the speaker's ambiguous description shows an uneasiness in their kinship. In "All the Dead Dears" and "The Disquieting Muses", Plath's imagery demonstrates a similar interpretation of *Macbeth's* witches. They appear as shapeless metaphysical female figures who are associated with the maternal figures. Their spiritual form and association with

prophetic powers make them more than just witches, emphasising their mythological origin.

The third poem I look at, “The Lady and the Earthenware Head”, associates the hag figure with sinister supernatural powers who haunts the speaker. I argue that Plath uses Shakespearean allusions in portraying the “antique hag-head” (CP 69) as inescapable, sinister, with an overpowering presence similar to the witches. As discussed, Plath likewise parallels eerie female figures with the witches from *Macbeth* in her depiction of the dummies in “The Disquieting Muses” and the skeleton woman in “All the Dead Dears”. In the draft of “The Lady and the Earthenware Head”, she directly addressed the head’s association with witchcraft, which I look at later in detail. Plath noted that her poem draws on “the compelling mystic aura of a sacred object, a terrible and holy token of identity sucking into itself magnet wise the farflung words which link & fuse to make up my own queer & grotesque world” (J 332). Her description associates the evil and inescapable powers with the head whose presence haunts her poetic imagination. The verb “sucking” echoes the portrayal of the skeleton from “All the Dead Dears” who will “suck / Blood and whistle my marrow clean” (CP 70). Like “All the Dead Dears”, “The Lady and the Earthenware Head” was inspired by an archaeological relic that Plath reimagined to an object possessing supernatural powers. This poem treats the earthenware head as a sinister hag figure, suggesting that Plath considered it as a representation of the haunting maternal line similar to the dummies and the skeleton lady. Her poem likewise evokes mythological figures like Medusa and her petrifying power in the representation of the head’s evil look. By drawing attention to the head’s sinister vision, Plath implies its prophetic ability, which evokes the Weird Sisters’

“fatal vision” (2.1.35), which I discuss later in detail. Yet, Plath likely sought inspiration from other parts of the play. In the witches’ brewing scene in *Macbeth*, the first apparition is an armed Head who “knows thy thought; / Hear his speech, but say thou nought” (4.1.76-77), meaning that the head has an eerie present and prophetic powers, similar to Plath’s earthenware head. At the end of the play, Macduff calls Macbeth’s head “Th’usurper’s cursed head” (5.9.22), which evokes Medusa’s slain head (Garber 135). My reading shows that Plath was influenced by several literary and mythological representations of witches in the portrayal of the sinister hag-head.

Similar to “All the Dead Dears”, “The Lady and the Earthenware Head” is characterised by varied line-length and expressive punctuation. Full stops and commas mark the tempo and separate the middle stanzas, portraying the powers of the head. The five seven-line stanzas have an irregular rhyme scheme. In the poem, the speaker takes up the role of an omniscient narrator who follows the inescapable vision of the head signifies danger. The “head” both literally and figuratively haunts the poem. It is mentioned five times, developing from “model head”, “outrageous head”, “hostage head”, “mimic head”, and finally to an “antique hag-head” (CP 69-70). The descriptions suggest a gradual development from a mundane object to a head with evil supernatural powers. By naming’s it a “hag-head” at the end of the poem, Plath creates an association between the head and witch figures, particularly maternal hags whom we saw referenced in “All the Dead Dears”. Plath employs *Macbeth*’s Weird Sisters and similar supernatural female figures (Medusa, Norns, Fates) to express the head’s controlling and ominous presence. The poem relies on sound patterns to show the head's inescapability. For example, in the first lines, the

alliteration signifies the speaker's entrapment: "Fired in sanguine clay, the model head / Fit nowhere: brickdust-complected, eye under a dense lid" (CP 69). The lines bring attention to the eye of the head, whose vision is eerie, which anticipates its inescapable presence that brings bad luck.

The speaker describes the owner's fantasy of getting rid of the head that "Rough boys, / ... Might well seize this prize, / Maltreat the hostage head in shocking wise" (CP 69). She calls the piece an "effigy", "coarse copy", "mimic" head, resembling an object employed in sympathetic magic. Similar to "The Disquieting Muses" and "All the Dead Dears", the head comes alive in the speaker's imagination, which argues that it possesses sinister powers associated with female supernatural figures. Further, in "All the Dead Dears", Plath's speaker brings attention to the skeleton's head: "As I think now of her head, From the mercury-backed glass" (CP 70). The head triggers the speaker's association of the ancient relic with the maternal hags, which shows the connection to "The Lady and the Earthenware Head". The head represents malicious maternal hags influenced by Medusa, prophetic goddesses, the Weird Sisters, and hag figures.

In a draft of the poem Plath transcribed to her mother in February 1957, the third stanza is more expressive of the head's association with witchcraft:

But she --- whether from habit grown or over-fond
Of the dented caricature, or fearing some truth
In old wives' tales of bond
Knitting to each original its coarse copy
(Woe if enemies, in wrath,
Take to sticking pins through wax!) --- felt loath
To junk it. Scared, unhappy, (L2 67).

In the stanza, the clay head appears as part of a folkloric witchcraft tradition. The “old wives’ tales” links the object to maternal figures, who create the “coarse copy” to perform *maleficium*. The sharp consonance of “coarse copy” reinforces the power of the head. The allusion to sympathetic magic – sticking the needles through the wax figure – further accentuates the supernatural quality of the head. Here, we can see multiple references to witchcraft, such as the wax image, “dented caricature”, alluding to its haggish look, and “old wives’ tales”, suggesting folkloric maternal figures. Plath’s imagery of the wax figure foreshadows the “wax image” in “Witch Burning” and the deployment of the photograph in “Daddy” for sympathetic magic. The draft demonstrates that the inescapable presence of the earthenware head embodies haunting and malicious powers and is explicitly associated with witches. The poem’s development demonstrates that Plath toned down the references to historical beliefs about witchcraft, such as the wax image to which witches were believed to stick needles to cause harm. She also deleted the folkloric “old wives’ tales” regarding the head, which implies an erasure of the association between maternal figures and the haggish head. Instead, she focused on the object as an individual entity that haunts the speaker and brings misfortune.

In the poem, Plath further describes the head’s ominous character: “birds descant in blackest feather” and “drear and dulcet weather” (CP 69). The lines echo “The Disquieting Muses”, in which the dummies bring darkness and bad luck to the speaker. While Plath does not specify what animal it is, she likely alludes to a superstitious bird, which foreshadows the theme of “Goatsucker”. In “Elm”, the speaker also compares her inner darkness to an owl-like creature with its “soft, feathery turnings, its malignity” (CP 193). In *Macbeth*, the owl signifies an omen: “It

was the owl that shrieked, the fatal bellman” (2.2.3). In Chapter 5, I return to Plath’s knowledge of superstitious birds and their association with witches and witchcraft. Plath’s imagery proposes that she sought inspiration from the Shakespeare’s play in linking the head to evil supernatural powers, particularly malicious intent and ill fate. The last part of the poem portrays the head having an “uncouth shape”, which is “too tough for knife to finish” (CP 70). The rough shape of the head anticipates the shapeless and headless dummies in “The Disquieting Muses”. The speaker describes it as “evil-starred” (CP 70), which alludes to the ill fate. However, it is also a word-play on the evil stare of the head, further highlighting the link between the head’s vision and ability to control the speaker’s fate (which in *Macbeth* appears as “fatal vision”). The head’s physical appearance mimics its domineering presence. It is impenetrable by the speaker, and its dense shape and “grisly visage” haunts its surrounding.

The final stanza intensifies the supernatural imagery and names the head an “antique hag-head”, which explicitly has Medusa-like qualities:

Despite her wrung hands, her tears, her praying: Vanish!

.....

An antique hag-head, too tough for knife to finish,

Refusing to diminish

By one jot its basilisk-look of love. (CP 70)

The internal rhymes of “basilisk”, “finish”, “vanish”, and “diminish” reinforce the head’s inescapable vision. The poem’s only exclamation mark is the shriek “Vanish!”. It reads as a performative line, alluding to the powers of spoken words, such as wanting to exorcise the evil spirits from the head. The sentence resembles the ending of “Medusa”: “Off, off, eely tentacle!” (CP 226). In both poems, Plath recalls

the incapacitating vision of the Gorgon (“basilisk-look of love”), which paralyses the speaker. The speaker’s command (“Vanish!”) echoes Macbeth’s lines from the play: “With such prophetic greeting? Speak, I charge you. / *Witches vanish* / ... Into the air, and what seemed corporal” (1.3.76; 79). Here, Macbeth demands to know the Weird Sisters’ prophecy, but they vanish into the air, which argues for their spiritual being. Plath’s poem evokes a similar effect from the head. While it is made of dense material (earthenware), the speaker wants the head to diminish, which reminds us of *Macbeth’s* witches. In the play, Banquo also suggests that the Weird Sisters possibly originate from the earth: “The earth hath bubbles, as the water has, / And these are of them. Whither are they vanished?” (1.3.77-78). The poem understands the head as an embodiment of spiritual evil that seeks inspiration from *Macbeth’s* witches, maternal hags, and mythological figures, whose paralysing vision, ability to foresee and influence the speaker’s destiny, and inescapable presence haunts the poetic persona.

To sum up, the three poems provide evidence of Plath’s association of the Shakespearean witches with spiritual evil and haunting presence that she often links to maternal lineage. “The Disquieting Muses”, “All the Dead Dears”, and “The Lady and the Earthenware Head” show the influence of *Macbeth’s* Weird Sisters and other supernatural female figures who manifest as the shapeless dummies, hag-like maternal ancestors, and an ominous hag-head. While “The Disquieting Muses” shows the direct influence of the Shakespearean witches to portray ambiguous attitudes towards the mother, in “All the Dead Dears”, Plath references the three supernatural female figures by identifying the maternal ancestors with the haunting power of hag figures. In “The Lady and the Earthenware Head”, which Plath wrote

first among the three poems, the relic materialises into a powerful hag-head whose sinister and paralysing vision and ominous presence build on elements from Shakespearean, mythological, and literary female supernatural figures. In all three poems, I identified several Shakespearean allusions, which suggest Plath referenced *Macbeth* in her portrayal of sinister female supernatural figures. My reading argues that, for Plath, the Weird Sisters stand for certain aspects of maternal witches; that is, their inescapable spiritual presence and influence on the speaker's fate, which she often perceives as a maternal curse. Therefore, she regarded the Weird Sisters as more than witches, who are associated with mythological goddesses and other trios of female supernatural figures. Moving on, I continue the study of Shakespearean influences in Plath's writings, focusing on the function of the male magician and other supernatural paternal figures whom I consider as Plath's poetic response to her relationship with her father.

Paternal Knowledge and Power

In the past, some critics have touched on Plath's Prospero-like portrayal of the father figure in her poetry. For example, Britzolakis notes that "*The Tempest* has become an allegorical text not merely for Plath but also her critics" (*Sylvia Plath* 50-51). Elaine Showalter highlights that at the beginning of the twentieth century, there was an emphasis on the Americanisation of *The Tempest* in which the magic island represented the United States such that the critic Edward Everett Hale argued that Miranda was a "Massachusetts girl", the state where Sylvia Plath grew up (29). Massachusetts was the first place of successful settlement with the arrival of the

Mayflower in the seventeenth century, which prompts the postcolonial reading of the play interpreting Prospero as the domineering coloniser and Caliban as the colonised slave. In Chapter 6, I further elaborate on the influence of *The Tempest* in the bee poems regarding the dark diabolic portrayal of the bees.

Plath's rich engagement with the play spans her life, from her childhood to *Ariel*, which indicates that *The Tempest* had a more personal meaning for her than *Macbeth*. In 1956, when Plath studied at Cambridge, she participated in a drama club where she played Miranda in a reading of *The Tempest* (L1 997). In her poems, she positions her speaker as the daughter figure of the Prospero-like father. My reading argues that Plath associated certain features of her father figure with *The Tempest's* magician, whose powers are scholarly and controlling. The father is inaccessible, which contrasts with the maternal inescapability embodied in monstrous and weird supernatural female figures. I identify two themes from *The Tempest* that shaped Plath's portrayal of her paternal relationship, likening her father to Prospero's character. First, I demonstrate that, for Plath, Prospero embodied the educated and powerful father figure who uses his knowledge – magic – as control. Her portrayal of Otto Plath, the biology professor-beekeeper, is similar to the figure of the early modern magician. Here, my analysis focuses on the influence of *The Tempest* in Plath's association of paternal knowledge as male magical power. However, we can consider the influences of non-Shakespearean magicians, such as Doktor Faustus, in the dark and diabolic portrayal of the father, for example, in "Daddy" and "Man in Black" and mythological sea deities in the father's depiction in "Full Fathom Five". To understand better how the magician appears in Plath's writing

as the father figure, I first review the interpretation of Prospero and his powers in *The Tempest*.

In the play, Prospero tells the audience that he was a scholar of the “liberal arts” before his exile (1.273); he primarily uses magic to control nature and others. His strong connection to his books suggests that he learnt some of his magic from books that are “crucial to his rule over the island” (Mowat 1). In Act 5 Scene 1, Prospero renounces his magic and says he will drown his book, which suggests the act of a seventeenth-century magus, who could abandon his craft due to the changing hostile environment and association of magic with diabolism (Peters 176). Prospero’s power is often compared to “white magic”, which is protective “in the sense of preventing some misfortune from occurring or warding off some evil spirit or witch” (Levack, *The Witch-Hunt* 6). Frank Kermode’s influential introduction for the Arden edition published in 1954 named Prospero a theurgist; he argues that his magic compares to “the disciplined exercise of virtuous knowledge” (xlvii). By the mid-twentieth century, Prospero’s magic was accepted as white or Neo-Platonic (Gibson, *Rediscovering Renaissance Witchcraft* 33). I propose that Plath likely understood the magician’s power as white magic. She portrays the Prosperoan father as an intellectual figure who uses his knowledge to control, similar to magical power. It is a power equally desired and detested by the daughter.

Like Otto Plath, Prospero has knowledge of the natural environment. While Prospero’s speech about the wildlife of the island has been considered merely metaphorical (Fitz 46), the magician seems to know about bees whom he refers to in his speech: “As thick as honeycomb, each pinch more stinging / Than bees that made ’em” (1.2.328-330). Ariel likewise evokes the bees, and he associates them

with his newly gained freedom: “Where the bee sucks, there suck I; / ... Merrily, merrily shall I live now” (5.1.88; 5.1.93). Parallel with this, Plath’s bee sequence, written 3-9 October 1962, ends with the freedom of the bees in “Wintering”: “The bees are flying. They taste the spring” (CP 219). Whereas Chapter 6 looks at the bee sequence in detail, this section demonstrates that, for Plath, Prospero’s magic embodied her father’s beekeeping, signifying both scholarly knowledge and paternal control. Moreover, Plath associated Prospero and Otto Plath with her childhood memories, in which the father emerges as an idealised and dominant but often ambiguous person who the speaker perceives as having supernatural power.

Otto Plath was a biology professor at the Boston University. His book, *Bumblebees and their Ways* (1934) was considered ground-breaking; some of his colleagues even called him the German name *Bienen-König*, meaning “bee king” (Clark, *Red Comet* 18). The term demonstrates Otto Plath’s respected place within the field. His dominant scholarly figure likely influenced Sylvia Plath’s perception of her father. In his book, Otto Plath elaborates on his scientific journey, which started when he was a child (1). His book discusses several of his experiences, which are themes in Plath’s bee poems, such as observing the habitat of the queen bee, the process of requeening in the bumblebee colony, being stung by the bees, and transferring them into wooden boxes (O. Plath 1; 13; 72; 97). Otto Plath’s self-presentation as a scientist, an observer of the bees, and the beekeeper can be understood as overpowering nature. Clark argues that although Plath respected her father’s profession as a professor/teacher, later in her life, this became increasingly associated with patriarchal authoritarianism (*Red Comet* 19). Though Otto Plath’s interest in the bumblebees was genuine, he often describes his experimentations on

the bumblebees. For example, he studied bees under a jar and placed intruders in the nest: “[d]uring these past few years I have sometimes had more than fifty colonies under observation, most of which were kept on boards on shady side of a partly covered, abandoned cellar” (O. Plath 112). The citation exemplifies the hierarchical relationship between the beekeeper and the bees. I propose that in some of her writings, Plath paralleled her father’s beekeeping and Prospero’s magic, based on their shared association with scholarly knowledge, dominant paternal power, and ability to control.

“Among the Bumblebees” was written in the early 1950s. It centres on Alice Denway’s (Plath’s alter ego) relationship with her father, who is an adored, yet dominant figure. Plath uses a third-person narrator to distance herself from her childhood memories. The short story introduces the idolised fatherly relationship; Alice worships her father “because he was so powerful, and everybody did what he commanded” (JPBL 306). The father’s dominant presence and highly regarded knowledge recall Prospero and his use of magic. Even Ariel calls Prospero “my commander” (4.1.167). Throughout Plath’s short story, the father is portrayed as “a giant of a man”, and she likens him to a king evoking the “bee king” title of Otto Plath (JPBL 307-308). The little girl also perceives the father as fearless; he conquers a thunderstorm: “[p]ower was good because it was power ... And above the resonant resounding baritone of her father’s voice, the thunder rumbled harmless as a tame lion” (JPBL 310). Here, Plath alludes to Prospero, the creator and commander of the tempest. The father figure is not only powerful because of his perceived ability to control and conquer the weather, but his knowledge of bees: “[t]hen with a laugh, her father would spread his fingers wide, and the bee would fly out, free, up into the

air and away” (JPBL 311). Though the citation describes the scene from the innocence of the child’s perspective, it is a cautionary description of power, control, and freedom. There is also a parallel between the father’s control of the bee and Prospero’s control of Ariel. The connection is particularly appealing since Ariel compares himself to bees. In the short story, the girl’s worship of her father ends with her honest description of his death. Now, he appears as an authority figure. The father’s death and his subsequent loss of power evoke Prospero’s renouncing of his magic book – his knowledge. Although the bees only appear in a short section of the narrative, they anticipate the father’s death. The title also evokes Otto Plath’s scientific book; therefore, it sources inspiration from the father, which recurs in Plath’s other writings about the bees. “Among the Bumblebees” demonstrates Plath’s ambiguous perception of the father figure. She resolves this ambivalence by narrating the story from the child’s perspective. This way, the Prosperoan father remains an idolised figure of scholarly knowledge and power.

In the short story “Charlie Pollard and The Beekeepers”, the speaker evokes the father’s beekeeping against the bees, therefore, sourcing protection from paternal knowledge. Plath’s recurring association argues that she likened her father’s beekeeping to Prosperoan magic, which is a source of protection but paradoxically also a control. Her writings compare the father’s knowledge of beekeeping to the early modern learnt magician figure. In the story, Plath commemorated her experience of beekeeping in Devon in the summer of 1962. The narrator, like Plath, is unprepared for the encounter: “[t]hen I saw, on the grass, and in hands, everybody was holding a bee-hat, some with netting of nylon, most with box screening, some with khaki round hats, I felt barer & barer” (JPBL 57). She feels

vulnerable both physically and intellectually. Therefore, she relies on the father's knowledge of beekeeping as a protection against the stinging bees: "I became aware I was in a bone-stiff trance, intolerably tense, and shifted round to where I could see better. 'Spirit of my dead father, protect me!' I arrogantly prayed" (JPBL 58). The father's evocation through the praying, also an invocation, functions as protection. Despite Plath's disbelief in Christianity, she regarded the language of Christian prayers as powerful (L2 669). Plath's speaker attributes her prayer to a protective function, similar to Catholic prayers claimed against evil supernatural powers (Levack, *The Witch-Hunt* 118). The adjective "arrogantly" that describes her prayer echoes the phrasing of "Among the Bumblebees", in which the girl depicts the father's hierarchical relationship with the bees as arrogant. The two short stories demonstrate that Plath understood beekeeping as paternal knowledge, which builds on the characteristics of Prospero's magic.

Besides the short stories, some of Plath's poems also portray the father figure as similar to a magician. The first poem of the bee sequence, "The Bee Meeting", retells the day with the beekeepers in the Devon village in which the poetic persona likens the father's knowledge of beekeeping to protective magic. "The Bee Meeting" describes the meeting of the beekeepers, a group from which the speaker is excluded. She repeats the narrative of feeling unprotected against the stinging of the bees: "I am nude as a chicken neck, does nobody love me? / Yes, here is the secretary of bees with her white shop smock, / ... They will not smell my fear, my fear, my fear" (CP 211). The speaker only finds strength by evoking the father, whom she calls a magician: "I am the magician's girl who does not flinch" (CP 212). In the poem and the short story about the beekeeping experience, Plath's speakers seek

help from the father, whose scholarly knowledge functions as a protective charm against the bees. The poem is characterised by the heavy presence of white colour, which is associated with protective materials, such as “white straw Italian hat” (CP 211). Plath’s speaker also suggests that the only protection against the bees is the evocation of the father-magician who could control the bees, like Prospero’s enslavement of Ariel and Caliban. In the poem, the speaker attributes paternal origin to the knowledge of beekeeping, which is a form of protective magic. She is incapable of beekeeping; therefore, she cannot continue her father’s legacy. The speaker’s uneasy relationship with the bees expresses ambiguity towards the father’s knowledge of beekeeping, which controls the bees and offers protection against them.

The daughter’s lack of knowledge of the father’s beekeeping is the subject of “The Beekeeper’s Daughter”, written in 1959. The poem is written in six-line stanzas, with the seventh separately following the sestet. In this poem, the beekeeper-father is the “maestro of the bees” (CP 118), which resembles Otto Plath’s “the bee king” title. The poem is spoken from the perspective of the daughter, who describes the relationship between the female bees and the male beekeeper: “You move among the many-breasted hives”; “The queen bee marries the winter of your year” (CP 118). Yet, for the speaker, the bees’ honey appears as dangerous: “A fruit that’s death to taste dark flesh, dark parings” (CP 118). In her juvenile work “Lament”, Plath also portrays the bees as the murderer of the father figure: “Lightning licked in a yellow lather / but missed the mark with snaking fangs: / The sting of bees took away my father” (CP 315). Both poems reference the sweetness of the honey as a deathly substance that evokes Otto Plath’s diabetes, the cause of this death. As in “The Bee

Meeting”, in “The Beekeeper’s Daughter”, the speaker expresses her longing for the father’s beekeeping. The use of titles varying from “maestro” to “magician” give a Prospero-like character to the father. He is a commander, king, a magician who can control the symphony of the bees, likening him to Prospero as the possessor of coercive power. I argue that both “The Beekeeper’s Daughter” and “The Bee Meeting” engage with the question of father-daughter inheritance, in which the beekeeping stands for the father’s legacy, his knowledge and art, similar to Prospero’s white magic. In the poems, the speaker’s detached relationship with the bees indicates the unsuccessful inheritance of the father’s knowledge, which suggests Miranda’s lack of access to Prospero’s magic.

In “The Beekeeper’s Daughter”, language is also sourced from the father. Otto Plath’s *Bumblebees and Their Ways* influenced the poem’s narrative, suggesting a paternal origin to Plath’s poetic language (CP 289n104). The line “Trumpet-throats open to the beaks of birds” (CP 118) alludes to Otto Plath’s observation of the trumpet sound of the bumblebee. It is “like the voice of a Wagnerian hammer, or the discharge electric sparks, finally like the slow roll of a drum” becomes higher-pitched, then gradually stops (O. Plath 82). Otto Plath highlights that “[t]he ultimate object of the bumblebee colony is not the production of workers, but of queen and males” (25). Likewise, “The Beekeeper’s Daughter” portrays the fertility ritual of the bees, which is described as a dynasty making: “In these little boudoirs streaked with orange and red / The anthers nod their heads, potent as kings / To father dynasties” (CP 118). In “The Beekeeper’s Daughter” and “The Bee Meeting”, the hierarchical father-daughter relationship portrays the father as physically and intellectually unreachable. She cannot acquire her father’s knowledge of beekeeping and magic. Plath employs

elements from Prospero's character to portray the father as a scholarly person whose authority comes from his knowledge, which the girl perceives as his supernatural power. In "Charlie Pollard and The Beekeepers", "The Bee Meeting", and "The Beekeeper's Daughter", beekeeping is associated with paternal knowledge, which functions as a tool of control, anticipating the authoritarian father figure in "Daddy".

For Plath, *The Tempest* also signified her "childhood landscape --- the sea" (L2 928). Writing in her journals in 1958, she named the play, particularly its seascape, "a central metaphor for my childhood, my poems and the artist's subconscious, to the father image - relating to my own father, the buried male muse & god-creator" (J 381). In her writings that evoke the sea imagery of *The Tempest*, the father emerges as a dominant and inaccessible figure. In the essay "Ocean 1212-W", Plath wrote for a radio programme for BBC on the influence of her childhood seascape, she links her childhood seascape to her father: "... this is how it stiffens, the vision of that seaside childhood. My father died, we moved inland" (JPBL 26). In the essay, Plath merges the nostalgia of childhood about the shores of the Atlantic with the inaccessible father figure. In her poetic imagination, the paternal "myth" is created by the absence of vision, which makes the geographical environment of her childhood seascape "hypercathected" (Twiddy 106). Elisabeth Bronfen notes that Plath "repeatedly invokes the lost father as a metonymy for this lost scene of childhood bliss, with both standing in for the state of happiness whose value resides precisely in its irrecuperability" (76). My reading of "Full Fathom Five" and "On the Decline of Oracles" demonstrates that *The Tempest* functions as a

literary medium through which the absent father is enlarged into the Prospero-like figure.

“Full Fathom Five” was written in 1958; Plath considered this poem at the time one of her best and most moving poems about her “father-sea-god muse” (J 399). Plath’s wording signals a larger-than-life father figure. Like Prospero, the “sea-god”, alluding to Poseidon or Neptune, also has magical powers in that controls the water. The title of Plath’s poem is sourced from Ariel’s song from *The Tempest*, in which the spirit sings to Ferdinand about his supposedly shipwrecked and drowned father. For Britzolakis, the poem mourns the archaic father-creator, suggesting that creativity is located in this grieving process and portrays the Freudian “prehistoric” father (*Sylvia Plath* 48-50). Peter J. Lowe also attributes the poem a “darker tone” in which the dead father is “not transformed, but rather buried (or sunk), only to resurface and unsettle the living” (29).

“Full Fathom Five” is written in tercets and uses an irregular Terza rima rhyme scheme. As the title suggests, the poem is heavily reliant on sound patterns to recreate the sound of the sea, which has a haunting effect. In the first stanza, the dead father, like the waves of the sea, resurfaces into the speaker’s consciousness: “Old man, you surface seldom / Then you come in with the tide’s coming / When seas wash cold, foam” (CP 92). The alliteration of the s sound evokes the softness of the crashing waves on the shore. The poem evokes the acoustics of the waves, which bonds the paternal and textual body (Britzolakis, *Sylvia Plath* 49). In “Full Fathom Five”, the father is portrayed as archaic and god-like. He has “white hair, white beard,” and he is “The old myth of origins”, yet “Unimaginable” (CP 92). The recurring white colour associated with the father suggests a pattern in Plath’s poetic

imagination, which I also observed in “The Bee Meeting”. The whiteness evokes Prospero’s dominant, nevertheless protective power, highlighting the ambiguities in Plath’s representation of the father as a patriarchal magician-deity.

In the poem, the father is also feared by the speaker: “Your dangers are many. I / Cannot look much but your form suffers / Some strange injury” (CP 92-93). In the speaker’s imagination, the father’s absence is like the changing of the tides. Here, Plath recalls the “sea-change” from Ariel’s song, which suggests that the language of mourning of the father is sourced from *The Tempest*. The speaker evokes the father’s death and his ghostly resurfacing in her imagination: “The muddy rumors // Of your burial move me / To half-believe: your reappearance” (CP 93). The association of his funeral with mud contrasts with the oceanic clearness and lightness of the ghostly father. The references to his lack of vision (“half-believed”; “Unimaginable”) argue that his absence is not only physical but visual. For the speaker, the father has intellectual powers, which make him powerful: “You defy questions; // You defy other godhood” (CP 93). The poem implies Prospero’s figure by alluding to his dominion: “I walk dry on your kingdom’s border / Exiled to no good” (CP 93). The speaker is exiled to the father’s isolated kingdom, which indicates Prospero’s banishment to an island. In the play, the island also gives home to Miranda; she grew up on an isolated island. In Plath’s poem, the father’s kingdom only exists in the speaker’s psyche: “I remember” (CP 93). The echoes in the internal rhyme of “remember”, “Father”, and “water” give a paternal origin to life, which is associated with the sea imagery: “Father, this thick air is murderous. / I would breathe water” (CP 93). The lines imply the interchangeability between the body of water and the father. In Plath’s poetry, human and nonhuman bodies often merge,

which I discuss further in Chapter 5. My reading of “Full Fathom Five” argues that the “sea-change” of the water resembles the father’s inaccessibility, who merely exists in the psychic seascape. The speaker relies on the imagery of the sea to recreate the “old myth of origin” located in her relationship with the father figure. Although he is not explicitly magical, Plath portrays him as a magician-deity figure with supernatural powers who can command the water and defy godhood. The allusion to *The Tempest* indicates the influence of Prospero and his powers embodying the dominant but desired father figure.

“On the Decline of Oracles”, written also in 1958, was inspired by Giorgio de Chirico’s painting, “The Enigma of the Oracles” (J 359). The poem locates the father figure in the sea and evokes *The Tempest* as background material for its poetic imagery. The poem comprises four octaves, the same stanza form Plath used in “The Disquieting Muses”, also inspired by Giorgio de Chirico’s art. Yet, “On the Decline of Oracles” has little connection to the painting; it is de Chirico’s notes about his painting that influenced Plath (Zivley 47-48). His painting is a visual response to Böcklin’s “Odysseus und Kalypso” (1883), which portrays a seascape (Greene 115). Böcklin’s other painting, “The Isle of the Dead” (1880), likewise appears in Plath’s poem, which gives visual access to the images of the sea and the father (Zivley 48). The visual influences suggest the merger of sea deities, the Prosperoan magician, and the oracle figure in Plath’s poetic imagination. These figures represent authority, scholarly knowledge, and paternal supernatural powers.

In the poem, the speaker remembers the father by looking at Böcklin’s painting:

Old Bocklin missed, who held a shell
To hear the sea he could not hear.
What the seashell spoke to his inner ear
He knew, but no peasants know. (CP 78)

Like in “Full Fathom Five”, the dead father is inaccessible to the speaker, which is represented by the echo of the “ambiguous sea” (CP 78). Sally Greene argues that in Plath’s poems, the sea signifies wholeness, which the death of the father frequently disrupts; the “speaker must thereafter rely, as Böcklin had, on a recreation that only memory and the senses can combine to produce” (113). Therefore, the three mentioned seaside paintings function as a medium through which the father figure is located in the visual and aural realms of the sea. In *The Tempest*, Prospero links their arrival to the island to the voice of the sea: “hear the last of our sea-sorrow / Here in this island we arrived” (1.2.170-171). Thus, in both the play and Plath’s poem, the aural and visual appearance of the sea signifies the origin of the father-daughter relationship, presenting the Prosperoan father as a protective figure.

In “On the Decline of Oracles”, the dead father is associated with the high-status mythological figure, the oracle, who has Prospero-like characteristics. Britzolakis argues that Plath’s oracular father figure resembles Prospero, “who has in his keeping a magical or prophetic power lost to an ignorant age” (*Sylvia Plath* 62). The poem suggests the magician’s drowning of his books, which implies that the father and his knowledge are unreachable: “My father died, and when he died / He willed his books and shell away. / The books burned up, sea took the shell” (CP 78). The lines suggest that the father’s death resulted in losing his books and oracular powers, which the speaker did not get. Parallel to the bee writings, the

question of father-daughter inheritance evokes the Miranda-Prospero relationship. The father's lost scholarly books allude to Prospero's grimoires, suggesting his scholarly magical powers. In the poem, the speaker also associates the father's possessions with the visual and aural presence of the sea: "But I, I keep the voices he / Set in my ear, and in my eye / The sight of those blue, unseen waves" (CP 78). She finds the only legacy of her father in the "voice" of the sea, which is represented as ghostly and inaccessible (Britzolakis, *Sylvia Plath* 62). The poem suggests the haunting presence of the father by the echoes in the language. The rhyme between "I" and "eye", and "sea", "hear", and "ear" give visual and aural effects to the changing waves. In the second stanza, the rhyming "waves" and "away" further reinforce the spectrality of the seascape. The (lack of) vision is a recurring subject in the poem: "The sight of those blue, unseen waves / For which the ghost of Bocklin grieves" (CP 78). The alliteration of "ghost" and "grieves" further implies that the sea is the location of mourning the lost paternal relationship. Just as the voice of the sea remains an echo, the waves are also "unseen" (CP 78). The poem portrays the father as paradoxically both present and absent. His possessions are abandoned – however desired by the speaker – which resembles Prospero's renouncement of his magic books in *The Tempest*.

In the third stanza, the poem changes perspective, and three male figures appear who haunt the speaker: "But three men entering the yard, / And those men coming up the stair. / Profitless, their gossiping images" (CP 78). The men resemble the three magi who are gossiping and frightening, which opposes their highly respected status in Western culture. The speaker describes them as "Profitless," who "Invade the cloistral eye like pages" (CP 78). They are not visible but "invade"

the speaker's eyes which "Saw evil break out of the north" (CP 78). Unlike the father, whose (magical) powers are associated with scholarly knowledge, the three men represent a danger to the speaker. There is a gradual development in the poem from the voice of the sea, associated with the father and his magical-oracular powers, to the three men who represent *maleficium*. Like "The Bee Meeting", in "On the Decline of Oracles", the father's evoked presence suggests protection from evil, which likens him to the figure of the white magician. The poem ends with the speaker's coming to terms with her destiny to meet with the oracles: "half an hour / I shall go down the shabby stair and meet, / Coming up, those three" (CP 78). The poem does not explicitly refer to *The Tempest*, yet Plath's portrayal of the dead father figure associated with the sea and books implies Prospero and his lost possessions. In "On the Decline of Oracles", Plath merges imagery of the sea, fatherhood, magic, and scholarly knowledge while critiquing male oracle figures.

Plath's poems influenced by *The Tempest* often contemplate her paternal relationship. In these poems, the father is evoked by the sea imagery. He is inaccessible but inescapable, which creates a tension that climaxes in "Daddy". In "On the Decline of Oracles" and "Full Fathom Five", the vision, sound, and breath of the water become the "body" of the father. In contrast to the bee writings, in which the Prospero-like father is alluded to by his intellectual abilities, Plath's water-poems demonstrate her association with the dominant father figure embodied in the magician who is a source of security, but also authority. *The Tempest's* magician figure functions as a poetic inspiration for the inaccessible father figure. Like Prospero does away with his books, Plath drowns the paternal relationship in the sea.

Conclusion

Shakespeare's plays functioned for Plath as sources of poetic inspiration, offering her ways to relate supernatural figures to her parental relationships. Plath's portrayal of the magician and witches suggests a binary representation of the gendered understanding of supernatural figures and powers, which was influenced by the literature of the early modern period. While previously no critics paid attention to *Macbeth's* influence in Plath's poetry, I demonstrated several similarities between the play's portrayal of the Weird Sisters and her representation of maternal witches who often carry an evil spiritual presence. Plath likewise brings the trio into parallel with other weird supernatural female figures and goddesses, such as the three Fates, Medusa, the shapeless dummies, and maternal hags. Her imagery of the witches from *Macbeth* often references their mythological origin, suggesting she considered them more than witches, which corresponds to their popular interpretation during the mid-twentieth century. In the three poems, Plath's allusions to the Weird Sisters build on their spiritual form, paralysing appearance, and prophetic power. It expresses a different representation of maternal supernatural figures than the fairy-tale witch. Instead of highlighting the ambiguities of the mother's love, *Macbeth's* witches signify the inescapable maternal presence, which is perceived as a curse.

In contrast to the haunting maternal figures, Plath's poetic representation of the father suggests her longing for him. The paternal relationship is embodied in the imagery of *The Tempest*, which implies the father's similarity to Prospero, who is associated with the protective power of white magic, scholarly knowledge, and

patriarchal control. These paradoxical ideas can coexist, which shows the ambiguities of the father's magic and the different interpretations of white magic. Although Plath employs less expressive supernatural imagery related to the father, he is compared to Prospero's figure. His scholarly knowledge of beekeeping, control and protection, and connection to the sea make him a larger-than-life figure who resembles the Prosperoan white magician. In the examined texts, the father's magic is highly ambiguous, which is expressed in the representation of beekeeping. It is a control and protection, suggesting Plath's ambiguous perception of the father-magician and his powers. This chapter also discussed the language of magic Plath draws on, for example, her allusions to the witches' song and Prospero's magic as scholarly knowledge. The subsequent two chapters continue this theme and centre on studying the magical power of language. In Chapter 4, I trace the presence of ritualistic performances in Plath's poetry.

Chapter 4: Ritual Magic

Introduction

This chapter studies Plath's poetic engagement with the concept of ritual magic, focusing on ritualistic performances and the magical powers attributed to language. The main research question of this chapter is to explore what kind of ideas Plath drew on to convey intended magical outcomes in her poems, such as exorcism or spiritual purification. One of the main challenges of this chapter is bringing together different conceptual frameworks, which I see not as a limitation but as an opportunity to offer a new reading of Plath's poems. I use both the concept of ritual magic of the medieval and early modern period and J. L. Austin's speech act theory to look at the ritualistic performances in Plath's poetry. A basic definition of ritual magic is a ceremony in which ritualistic acts and ritualistic language reinforce each other. The ritual has an intended outcome and interacts with the supernatural world. According to Plath's *Webster's* dictionary, a ritual is "[t]he form of conducting worship; religious ceremonial" ("ritual"). The entry already contains associations with the magical and supernatural realms, mainly within Christian religious practices. The dictionary definition allows me to interrogate how Plath might have understood rituals. A central argument of this chapter is that some of Plath's poems are characterised by rituals and attribute magical powers to the performed language. I consider ritual magic a central concept of my research, which offers a fresh interpretation of Plath's poems.

Studies of Western esoterism and magic have long tried to define ritual magic; therefore, I introduce some definitions to explain my use of the concept. Eliza Marian Butler, who worked in Newnham College, Cambridge and retired just four years before Plath started her studies there, claims in her book *Ritual Magic* (1949) that ritual magic is “aimed principally at control of the spirit world” (3). Her description interprets the concept as the control of the supernatural, which is reminiscent of Prospero’s use of magic (Butler 17). Historians of the medieval period, Catherine Rider and Sophie Page, argue that recent scholarship demonstrates that “manuals of ritual magic were tailored to the individual interests of their owners, whether this was talking to spirits or having success in love” (6). Ritual magic, based on the reading and interpretation of grimoires, such as *The Key of Solomon* attributed to King Solomon, is exclusive to the educated practitioners. In this interpretation, Prospero’s tempest-creation is a performance of ritual magic since he deploys ritualistic acts with incantatory speech. In Christopher Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*, the black magician conjures Mephistopheles with an incantation from his magic book. He utters the words and draws a circle where Mephistopheles appears in the shape of a friar, which completes the ritualistic speech act. The focus on the figure of the magus interprets ritual magic as a formal ceremony performed by the male practitioner. Plath was familiar with early modern literature, which implies her knowledge of ritual magic in these plays.

However, ritual magic can also be informal, spontaneous, and performed by diverse individuals. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, new spiritualist movements, such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, prompted the rebirth of ritual magic. Francis King proposes in *Modern Ritual Magic* (1989) that

the revival of ritual magic has been linked to “the early lives and beliefs of such apparently diverse characters as W. B. Yeats, Aleister Crowley, and Charles Williams” (9). Plath felt particularly drawn to Yeatsian occultist practices and rituals. Her journals and letters demonstrate the use of informal ritual magic, such as bibliomancy, which is the practice of fortune-telling by interpreting an arbitrarily selected passage from a book, often the Bible. In November 1962, Plath used W. B. Yeats’s book as a fortune telling-device, which prompted her to rent the poet’s flat in London: “I opened a book of his plays in front of Susan as a joke for a ‘Message’ & read ‘Get wine & food to give you strength & courage & I will get the house ready” (L2 905). Plath’s phrasing demonstrates the attribution of magical powers to the informal performance of the ritual. Further, when Plath moved into the flat, she asked a Catholic priest to bless Yeats’s house (L2 926; 928). These anecdotes are not unique to Plath’s life. During the early years of her marriage to Hughes, the couple experimented with different occultist practices, which they used as poetic inspiration. For Plath, performances of informal ritual magic were confined to the domestic spaces, and they were often associated with poetry or poetry writing. E. M. Butler highlights that ritual magic has creative powers; it is the aesthetic element of the ceremony that captivates people, such as the use of different objects, instruments, and performing poetry or prayer (4). The creative-aesthetic dimension of ritual magic is helpful to look at when interrogating the ritualistic elements of Plath’s poems in which mundane objects are turned into magic aids.

Plath also read anthropological books, such as Sir James George Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1890) and Robert Graves’s *The White Goddess* (1948), describing performances of ritual magic. The first volume of Frazer’s book elaborates

on ritualistic offerings and sacrifices to gods and goddesses, while his definition of sympathetic magic can be considered a type of ritual magic, which I will discuss later in more detail. Graves mentions several rituals in which incantations played a role, such as an Irish poetic rite in which fingertips and mnemonics were used; he calls the fingers the “oracular agents” of the poet (198). These ideas likely appealed to Hughes and Plath, who, in the late 1950s, sought inspiration from *The White Goddess*. Plath’s understanding of ritual magic came from diverse sources across the early modern plays and mundane domestic performances to which she could have attributed magical powers. We see examples in her life of ritualistic performances as spontaneous and personal practices, which she mimics in her poetry.

In ritual magic, the uttered language is often defined by incantations and repetitions, which create the ritualistic effect. Poetic techniques, such as repetition and alliteration, are linguistic and rhetorical devices that “release” the power generated by the magical charm (Weston 179). Repetition functions as a mnemonic device, which emphasises the significance of the performativity of poetry. W. H. Auden, Plath’s beloved poet of her adolescence, defined poetry in his Introduction to *The Poet’s Tongue* (1935) as a “memorable speech” (v). He also attributes an almost-supernatural character to the emotionally moving poetry: “the stimulus is the audible spoken word and cadence, to which in all its power of suggestion and incantation we must surrender, as we do when talking to an intimate friend” (Auden v). The thoughts of the American poet likely influenced Plath in her approach to poetry. Her late poems deploy the performativity of language. While poetic techniques are employed in incantations, poetry does not function as a ritual, nor

does reciting poetry equal ritual magic. However, in the poems I study, “Daddy” and “Burning the Letters”, performative utterances and repetitions create a spell-like effect. This is not to say Plath performed a kind of witchcraft or spellwork in her poetry, but to argue that some of her poems draw on characteristics of ritual magic. What I mean by this is that “Daddy” presents the intended outcome of exorcising the father’s demonic spirit. In “Burning the Letters”, the speaker performs a cleansing ritual and banishes the spiritual presence of the letters. My reading considers the magical powers attributed to language, which Plath enhances by using poetic techniques, such as repetitions.

The other central theoretical framework I rely on is J. L. Austin’s speech act theory published in *How to Do Things with Words* (1962). Austin defines certain utterances that he calls performative, which are not true or false statements; they do not describe or report events. By saying the sentence, we perform the action which otherwise would be described (Austin 5). In this sense, uttering the words replaces the act itself. Therefore, the speech *acts* as a performance. Historians such as Brenda Danet and Bryna Bogoch have been keen to use Austin’s theory to study the mechanisms of curses in Anglo-Saxon legal documents during the medieval period (133). The conditionality of speech acts means that a curse would only be thought to have supernatural powers, and therefore, cause *maleficium* if the society holds beliefs about the performative power of language, as they did during the medieval and early modern period about curses (Culpeper and Semino 7). Pamphlets describing witch trials highlighted witches’ unrestricted speech, particularly cursing, which was used to prove their malice (Leuschner 275). In literary studies, critics such as Maria Tatar deployed Austin’s speech act theory. She argues that in the Grimms’

fairy tales, the transformative power of magic comes from the performative language (Tatar, "Why Fairy Tales Matter" 60-61). These examples demonstrate that looking at performative utterances has been useful across historical and literary studies. Research on the magical powers attributed to language allows me to read Plath's poems from a fresh and unique perspective.

Plath first mentions the significance of reading her poems aloud in 1956 to her mother (L1 1133; 1167). She argued for the orality and performativity of her late poetry in a BBC interview in 1962: "they are written for the ear, not the eye: they are poems written out loud" (AR 195). In 1962, Plath asserted to Al Alvarez that the poems from *Ariel*, such as "Daddy", have to "be read out loud" (31). Audio archives of Plath's poetry readings inform us about her changing attitude towards the performativity of her poems. She altered the highly formal voice that she read *The Colossus* poems with, reading poems from *Ariel*, such as "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy", in a way that does not only sound like a performance, but conveys the energy, passion, and power of spoken words. Previously, some critics paid attention to Plath's reading voice. Kate Moses notes that Plath's voice adjusted "to her breath, her delivery, her nuanced emotions riding the surface of her poems as well as her carefully measured statements—her performance, in other words" (90). Tracy Brain argues that in her later readings, Plath sounds neither American nor purely English; her changing voice corresponds to her ambivalence towards both America and England (*The Other Sylvia Plath* 45; 54). Performativity is not only a mode of reading, but it defines the poems. Tim Kendall proposes that, in Plath's late poetry, the poetic language is "something ritualised, rhetorical and incantatory, conscious of its status

of performance” (149). My chapter argues that the performativity of some of Plath’s late poems contributes to the ritualistic elements and magical power of language.

The first poem my chapter considers is “Daddy”, where I suggest that the poem deploys performative language to overcome the paternal relationship. I look at the drafts (one holograph and two revised typescripts) of the poem kept at the Smith College Special Collection to assess the changes in Plath’s poem, particularly the speaker’s ambivalent attitude towards the paternal relationship expressed in uttered German words. In “Daddy”, the German expressions are deployed to disempower the father’s spirit; it has an explicit political dimension through the speaker’s allusions to the violence of Nazism. However, the German language also signifies her longing to reconcile the paternal relationship, creating tension. My analysis demonstrates that the poem displays both ritualistic utterances and acts, which together complete a ritual to exorcise the father’s spirit. My reading brings the poem into parallel with an early modern demonic exorcism. I look at how “Daddy” narrates a performance of exorcism, for which the speaker uses quasi-magical German words and magical performances, such as image-making sympathetic magic.

The other poem I look at is “Burning the Letters”. Here, I argue that it employs some characteristics of ritual magic to narrate the banishing of the spiritual presence of the letters. The speaker performs the act of burning and uses repetitive sentences, which enhance the ritualistic effects. My reading carefully considers the changes and erasures Plath made throughout the seven drafts of her writings and demonstrates that earlier versions of the poem centre on the magical attributes of language. While I mostly avoid discussing the anecdotal events that influenced “Burning the Letters”,

they also give some context to Plath's perception of the blurred lines between informal ritual magic and mundane domestic rites. The poems demonstrate Plath's broad knowledge of ritual magic within Western culture and literature. I also propose that "Burning the Letters" can be understood as a metanarrative of ritual magic. We can read it as a response to magical powers attributed to certain ritualistic practices, which interrogates what constitutes ritual magic. To explore in detail Plath's understanding of ritual magic, next, I look at the magical performances that take place in "Daddy".

Ritual of Exorcism in "Daddy"

Many scholars have noted Plath's employment of supernatural imagery and allusions in "Daddy". Guinevara A. Nance and Judith P. Jones use Frazer's concept of sympathetic magic and argue that the poem performs an exorcism of the father (125). Stanley Plumly proposes a link between Plath's employment of Nazi imagery and diabolism (16). My reading argues that Plath adds a contemporary political dimension to the diabolic imagery, thereby contributing to the tensions. The speaker disempowers the father by the uttered language. He moves from a "bag full of God" to "every German" and "Panzer-man," "Not God but a swastika", "devil", "man in black with a Meinkampf look", and finally, he is only a "bastard" (CP 224-225). The names signify the demystification of the father.

Another aspect of "Daddy" that researchers have focused on is the incantatory language of the poem. Critics have compared the nursery rhyme-like language of the poem to "furious hexes and charms" (Van Dyne, *Revising Life* 52),

chanting (Ferry 197), and “stuttering” (Clark, “P(l)athography” 362). The speaker’s employment of both the childlike and the incantatory speech proposes an ongoing tension in language, which contributes to the energetic and dynamic reading of “Daddy”. Moreover, both the childlike speech, “furious hexes” and “stuttering”, imply that the language is an imperfect speech. Yorke describes the poem as “ritualistic, incantatory, *witchy* in which a mythic exorcism” is performed (84). Her word “incantatory” likewise proposes the spell-like effect of the repetitions. Van Dyne’s study of “Daddy” argues that the “verbal gestures are attempts to wound the men who have victimized her, deforming and disfiguring the myth of masculinity with each abusive epithet”, which alludes to cursing (*Revising Life* 52). Recently, Clark notes that Plath’s earlier poem “Electra on Azalea Path”, which narrates the daughter’s visiting her father’s grave, also displays curse words (*Red Comet* 557; 775). I argue that in “Daddy”, the German language simultaneously has a political and magical dimension. The expressions associated with Nazism are uttered to dispel and disempower the father.

In Plath’s poem, the performed ritual magic is ambiguous: the speaker simultaneously wants to resurrect (necromancy) and banish (exorcism) the father’s spirit. Butler demonstrates that the blurred lines between exorcism and conjuration by relying on early modern sources. She summarises Reginald Scot’s recording of a ritual in *The Discovery of Witchcraft* (1584), who mocked the witchcraft beliefs, during which

... the sorcerer binds himself to pray for the soul of the condemned criminal all the days of his life; and the latter engages to return from the other world and do all the necromancer’s bidding on pain of everlasting damnation ... The

urgency of the language, the relentless pressure brought to bear on the victim whose last hours are spent listening over and over again, twenty-four times at least, whilst the other reads the bond, repeating inexorably: 'Remember thine oath and promise,' all contribute to produce a ghastly impression. (Butler 239-240)

This description resembles the ritual magic performed in "Daddy": the speaker admits summoning the father's spirit, who is a dark and diabolic figure, whilst repeating incantations. Butler also argues that in the early modern period, examples of ritualistic performance of exorcism shared characteristics. For example,

the fear of the form in which the spirits may manifest: the deep dread of the peril to the exorcist manifest; the deep dread of the peril to the exorcist manifest in such phrases as 'nor-yet that thou shalt have any power of my body or soil, earthly or ghostly' (Butler 241).

Plath's poem expresses the different spiritual 'forms' of the father (daddy, bastard, Nazi, and the devil) and the ways in which the speaker uses performative language to dispel him. Frank Klaasen's definition of necromancy also helps to interpret Plath's poem. According to him, necromancy "concerns itself principally with conjuring demons, though sometimes also angels ... It employs repurposed liturgical fragments and structures, a variety of consecrated objects and lengthy ritual invocations reflecting the standard rhetoric of prayer and exorcism" (Klaasen 201). In "Daddy", the speaker first resurrects the father's spirit to reconcile the paternal relationship. During the ritual, she employs the rhetoric of exorcism to break free from the binding bond by disempowering him with the politically charged language.

Historians of the witch-hunt also developed new approaches to interpreting demonic possession as a theatrical performance in which the different parties, the demoniac, the priest, the relatives, act according to a "script" (Levack, *The Devil*

Within 139). Plath's poem mimics this theatrical performance; the poetic persona moves between the possessed and the exorcist, which corresponds to the linguistic and spiritual transformation of the father from a sinister Nazi figure to a bastard. The tense power dynamics have gendered and political dimensions, contributing to the poem's tension. The title word "Daddy" is usually uttered by a loving child; however, in the poem, the speaker reverses the function of the intimate name. Further, the word always appears in the lines expressing the wish to break free from the relationship: "Daddy, I have had to kill you"; "So daddy, I'm finally through"; "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through" (CP 222-224). The speaker utters the ambiguous term, which expresses the intimacy and frees her from the father's possessive presence. The repetition creates a ritualistic effect, reminiscent of spellwork. The poem starts with the speaker's evocation of her previous unsuccessful summoning of the father's spirit: "I used to pray to recover you / Ach du" (CP 222). The lines suggest that the speaker was performing a prayer, which invokes his spirit, though she expresses dissatisfaction with the prayers. In the previous chapter, I proposed that in poems such as "The Bee Meeting", the speaker's call on the father figure signifies protection and that his spirit functions as a protective power against the bees. In "Daddy", Plath reverses the speaker's attitude towards the paternal bond. The father is not a source of intimacy and protection but possessive power, threat, and violence.

She confronts the father, whose association with the German language confines her in the state of a repetition that recalls ritualistic utterances:

In the German tongue, in the Polish town
.....

The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.

Ich, ich, ich, ich,

I could hardly speak. (CP 222-223)

Similar to the repetition of “daddy”, the echoes of “ich” are part of the ritualistic speech. The personal pronoun expresses ambivalence since it both helps the speaker gain autonomy and traps her in a repetitive state of selfhood. Plath employs the second person singular, “Du”, which is informal “you”. The German pronoun cannot be translated into English; she misplaces the father by uttering: “I thought every German was you” (CP 223). The speaker’s unsuccessful attempt to locate the father in the English language evokes Rudolf Steiner’s linguistic theory. The philosopher claimed that the German language corresponds to “the level of the spirit” since it is impenetrable by other languages, such as English, making it abstract and untranslatable (Wilson 87-88). The impenetrability of the German language is perceived in the poem; the speaker hears and utters it, yet she cannot reach it. According to Steiner, when you hear a foreign language, you “have to use your power of abstraction, the pure power of conceptualising” (49). The speaker cannot understand the words, which makes the process of transformation (and translation) impossible. The poem’s dynamic energy partly comes from the tension that the lack of comprehension produces. “Daddy” employs the German language like a spellwork, in which the magical powers of language are often sourced from the seemingly nonsensical foreign meaning, which I discuss later in detail.

In “Daddy”, the German has a political dimension. The expressions associated with the Nazi figure aim to disempower the father’s spirit, which is particularly formative in the poem’s draft. The undated holograph of “Daddy” is

written across three pages numbered from 1 to 3. The handwritten draft mostly looks like the final version of the poem. It is divided into stanzas, yet some verses, particularly on the second page, include additional words and crossed-out lines. I offer a close comparison of the holograph and the final poem to explore the significance of attributing magical powers to the German language.

In the final version of the poem, the speaker compares the father to an authoritarian Nazi figure:

I have always been scared of *you*,
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
And your neat mustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You — (CP 223).

The italicised “*you*” highlights that the speaker directly addresses the father. However, by the end of the stanza, he is referenced by the capitalised “You”. The changes in the pronoun mark the father’s enlargement signified by Nazi military imagery. In the holograph, the second page is filled with crossed-out lines, smudges, and alterations, implying her dynamic writing. Plath originally wrote: “The snows of the Tyrol, the [sweet ?] clear beer of Vienna / Are not [so pure to me] very [blond] pure or true” (MS “Daddy”, undated). The adjective “blond” in the second line further alludes to the Aryan Nazi figure. Plath employed heavily loaded expressions in the holograph, such as “with your Hitler moustache”; “Panzer-man, my Nazi, oh You!”; she further attributes to the “man in black” initially “a sexy look” then “Nazi look” (MS “Daddy”, undated). She contrasts the violent imagery with the intimate “my” and “Oh You”, which she toned down in the later versions of the poem.

On the second page of the holograph, Plath writes: "I have always been scared of you / [Love of] Luftwaffe, and a [*Durchmarch*] you gobbledygoo" (MS "Daddy", undated). She slightly misspells the German word *Durchmarsch*, which means march or walkthrough. By placing the German military expressions next to the childlike language, Plath further creates tension and draws attention to the powers of the German language. The handwritten em dashes in the poem contribute to the performative reading of "Daddy" and create a more intimate relationship between the speaker and the addressed father. Dashes in, for example, Emily Dickinson's poems can signal a "dialogic interchange" (Wylder 212). The two other dashes in "Daddy" appear after lines mentioning murder or death of the father ("You died before I had time —"; "If I've killed one man, I've killed two —" (CP 222; 224)). Therefore, the em dashes function as extra-textual violence towards the addressed father, particularly since Plath's handwritten dashes are sharp like a knife cut. They reinforce the role of punctuation as an expression of the ambivalent paternal relationship.

As highlighted in Chapter 2, for Plath, the German language was associated with her family heritages. German signifies one of the peaks of European culture: the language of Thomas Mann, Goethe, Kafka, the Grimms' fairy tales, and Freud. E. M. Butler also identifies German language and literature with one of the main traditions of ritual magic: "from puerility and squalor into poetry, fairy-tales and romance" (251). Plath's lifelong struggle to learn the language codes the German expressions as foreign and quasi-magical utterances, through which the ambivalent paternal bond is expressed. It is both violent ("Panzerman", "Luftwaffe"), intimate ("Du"), and seemingly nonsensical ("gobbledygoo"). The latter resembles magical

phrases and spells in which the meaning – and attributed magical power – comes from a foreign word (Vernel 141). Historical examples demonstrate the role of foreign languages in spellwork. For example, in ancient Greece, philosophers considered Greek the language of contemplation and foreign languages the expressions of rituals and magic: “[t]hey operated on the premise that Greek and foreign languages have their own special characteristics on either side” (Struck 402). A well-known example of the foreign origin of magic words is “abracadabra”, whose etymology is supposedly either Hebrew, Greek, or Aramaic (Waterman). During the medieval period, in English legal documents, the term “anathema maranatha” was a curse in which the second seemingly nonsensical word functions as a “quasi-magical incantatory expression” (Danet and Bogoch 152). The foreign origin of magic words offers a reading of the incantatory German language of “Daddy”. The German language can neither be fully acquired nor forgotten. The speaker remains haunted by language associated with the father.

Whereas the Germanness is associated with the father figure, Jewishness is linked to her maternal line: “With my gipsy ancestress and my weird luck / And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack / I may be a bit of a Jew” (CP 223). The speaker’s “weird luck” echoes the maternal curse from “The Disquieting Muses”. Likewise, it recalls the three hag-like maternal ancestors listed in “All the Dead Dears”. Previously, critics highlighted Plath’s deployment of Tarot cards in “Daddy”. Kurtzman argues that Plath arranged the *Ariel* poems in the order of the major arcana cards, and “Daddy” represents the fourth card, the Emperor (287-288). Yet, Plath’s reference to the Tarot suggests a more personal meaning. Not long after finishing “Daddy”, she wrote in her letters about using the Tarot as a fortune-telling

device – “I look forward to the directions of the Tarock pack” – and as a game: “bringing the Tarock cards [to Winifred Davies] as she is having friends” (L2 888; 905). Plath’s understanding of ritual magic as an informal performance is implied in her experimentations with bibliomancy, Tarot, and Ouija readings. Although critics acknowledged the significance of the Tarot cards in Plath’s life and as a source of poetic inspiration, they did not wholly examine its magical function in “Daddy”.

In the holograph, Plath names the maternal ancestors explicitly: “With my gipsy grandma and weird luck [and my Tarock pack] / [I may be a bit of a Jew.] / And my Tarock pack and my Tarock pack” (MS “Daddy”, undated). Plath’s book on Tarot which she bought in 1956, Basil Ivan Rákóczi’s *The Painted Caravan* (1954), notes that the “esoteric key” to the doors of Symbols is controlled by the “‘Master Gypsy’ who ‘is generally a woman in spite of her title’” (qtd. in Nield 13). Plath likely sought inspiration from modernist poets’ engagement with occultism; for example, T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922), in which the gipsy fortune telling woman Madame Sosostrius uses Tarot cards. In “Daddy”, Plath also contrasts power and powerlessness; the speaker relies on her maternal Jewish heritage to access social and magical power to overcome the presence of the father’s spirit. The tension between intimacy and violence is further reinforced since gypsies have been persecuted by the Nazi regime, which contrasts the speaker’s maternal and paternal heritages. The line referencing the Jewish identity appears before her “Tarock pack”, which ties together the ill-faith and Jewishness alluding to the Holocaust. In the final version of “Daddy”, Plath significantly alters the meaning by bringing forward the repeated “Tarock pack”, which links Tarot to Judaism. Monica Black argues that “[t]he idea that Jews had magical power surfaces in a variety of German cultural

artefacts, before and during the Nazi period” (219). Further, in the early modern period, the prosecutions of witches often coexisted with prosecutions of Jews. Jewish religious terminologies, such as the sabbat or synagogue, were likewise appropriated to describe the gathering of witches, demonstrating the perception of Judaism as “anti-Christianity, indeed as a form of Devil-worship” (Cohn 145). Plath’s poem reflects the prejudices that associated Semitic identities with magic; she adds a political and gendered dimension to this association by opposing the father’s Nazi identity with maternal Jewish heritages. The Tarot is part of the ritual magic performed in the poem through which the speaker wants to find liberation from the paternal relationship. The repetition of “Taroc pack, Taroc pack” also has an incantatory effect of invoking the cards, yet the actual performance of divination does not occur.

To complete the ritual magic, the speaker not only utters language but performs a ritualistic act:

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,
In the picture I have of you,
A cleft in your chin instead of your foot

.....
I made a model of you,
A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.
And I said I do, I do (CP 223-224).

In the previous chapters, I demonstrated that “Daddy” is not the first poem in which Plath suggests effigy making as a magical performance, but some earlier poems, such as “Witch Burning” and “The Lady and the Earthenware Head”, allude to this magical performance associated with witches. In “Daddy”, Plath returns to the

image-making magic. Critics, such as Nance and Jones, who interpreted “making a model” as a magical performance of sympathetic magic, provided evidence of Plath’s encounters with sympathetic magic (125-129). Yet, they overlooked Plath’s knowledge of this practice associated with witches. In “Daddy”, the family photograph is employed to reconcile the relationship. The father is both the devil and the victimised effigy, which reinforces the ambiguities of the paternal bond. The line “And a love of the rack and the screw” intensifies the tension by evoking torture. The rack was used as a torture device on witches. It was believed that the witch’s “integral, diabolic personality might be stripped away by the application of pain to uncover the truth” (Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil* 204). Plath likely had knowledge of this historical torture device on witches and heretics from Hughes’s lost book on witches. The speaker finishes the performance by saying, “I do, I do” (CP 224), which functions as a speech act. She *does* away with the father whilst uttering the words. The repetition further creates the ritualistic effect, alluding to the magical performance. The tension is resolved by confirming the “voices just can’t worm through” (CP 224). It implies the absence of the father’s voice, possibly a reference to his German language. The line likewise reads as if a request of release from father’s spiritual possession was successful.

In the holograph, Plath ended the poem with the line, “Daddy, daddy, lie easy now” (MS “Daddy”, undated). In the next version of the poem, a well-arranged undated typescript that includes some handwritten editing, Plath added a stanza by pen at the end of the second page. Here, the speaker summons the village community to do away with the father:

There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing [shoe, boot, shoes] and stamping on you
They always knew it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through. (TS "Daddy", undated)

In the typescript, the boot is evoked as an object, which was previously the father's "boot in the face," which is a metonym alluding to the violence of Nazism. In an interview, Suzanne Macedo, Plath's friend, suggested that the boot in "Daddy" refers to an actual object, remembering that there was a discarded pair of boots in Plath's North Tawton house ("parts three and four"). Similar to the photograph, the boot is deployed as a tool, representing both intimacy and violence. Yet, the villagers' violence against the father is ambiguous; it evokes the feeling of celebration and justice communities must have felt after the Nazi occupation had ended. Peel suggests that Plath's writing on the violence of the crowd was influenced by the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset on *The Revolt of the Masses* (1929); her highly annotated copy is held at the Lilly Library ("Ideological Apprenticeship" 61-62). The crowd's violence likewise resembles stoning used as capital punishment, which suggests that the father has, indeed, committed a crime.

"Daddy" also reads as an exclusion from the community. Plath's poem describes the villagers taking part in a ritual of excommunication, which compares to "The Bee Meeting". Whereas in the bee poem, the villagers perform an initiation ceremony and the father is a source of connection against them, in "Daddy", they want to banish the outsider, and the speaker is part of the mob. The excommunication also ends the relationship between the speaker and the father. The line "They always knew it was you" suggests the father's long-suspicious character, which further justifies his removal from the community. In an interview,

Harriet Rosenstein claims that Aurelia Plath told her that “the villagers never liked you” line in “Daddy” was not about Plath’s father, but about Ted Hughes, whom the small North Tawton community allegedly disliked (Lucie-Smith). In the final version of the poem, Plath toned down the violence of the ritual “They are dancing and stamping on you” (CP 224), which is an act of performance, a common element of ritual magic. In the past, Old Anglo-Saxon charms were often sung, performed, or other ritualistic acts in front of an audience (Weston 193). In the Old Germanic tradition, several charms were associated with beekeeping: when the owner of the bees died, it was a tradition that the family told the bees about the death with an oral poetic performance (Elsackers 447-448). The magical practices involving beekeeping are particularly appealing, which I looked at in Chapter 3. In “Daddy”, the villagers act against the demonic father figure and remove him from the community with the performed act.

“Daddy” deploys the ritual magic of exorcism to be released from the father’s possessive and demonic spirit. In the ritualistic language of the performance, intimacy is tangled with violence. The German expressions highlight Plath’s engagement with the language of magic words, to which she adds a political meaning that reinforces the tensions. The poem also alludes to the performance of ritualistic acts, which the speaker deploys as sources of magical power, such as the Tarot and image-making as sympathetic magic. These ideas demonstrate Plath’s knowledge of ritual magic and the use of magical aids for the ritual. The poem transforms mundane objects, such as a photograph and boot, into magical items, which enhance the performativity of the ritual magic. The father’s possessions are deployed to harm him and exorcise his spirit. “Daddy” reminds us of E. M. Butler’s

idea of the creative and aesthetic elements of ritual magic that often appeal to practitioners. The poem achieves its goal with the last utterance: "I'm through" (CP 224). The exorcising ritual offers a reading of "Daddy" that highlights Plath's knowledge of and interest in the language and practice of magic, which here is utilised to break free from the possessive paternal bond.

Ritual of Dispelling Spirits in "Burning the Letters"

Behind the narrative of "Burning the Letters", an autobiographical story unfolds. According to the anecdotal evidence, after discovering Hughes's infidelity, Plath burnt some of his letters and poems and the manuscript of her second novel in the garden of their Devon home. Biographers, critics, and people who knew Plath have been keen to reconstruct some of the circumstantial events that could lie behind "Burning the Letters", often exaggerating certain elements of the bonfire-making. The anecdote of Clarissa Roche, who was an acquaintance of Plath, is filled with biographical speculations and voyeurism. According to her, Plath selected the date of this ritual corresponding to the full moon, and in the middle of a circle in the garden, she uttered magic words resembling "abracadabra" and "mumble jumble", which Roche reckons Plath read out from a book ("interview recording, part three"). The anecdote expresses the ambiguities of ritual magic. Mundane and domestic practices, such as burning personal items, can be perceived as performances of spontaneous and informal magical rituals, depending on what one attributes to magical powers. Clark suggests that even Ted Hughes claimed that Plath "had been practising 'witchcraft'" during autumn 1962; however, her neighbour David Compton

stated that the bonfire-making was a spontaneous act of Plath cleaning her home (*Red Comet* 739). My reading of the poem further discusses the ambiguities of ritual magic, particularly Plath's shifting attention from the magical attributes of the burning to a more subtle ritualistic performance that allows the magic and the mundanity to be equally present.

Critics also had a varied response to "Burning the Letters". Lynda K. Bundtzen suggests that despite the scandalous witness statements, the poem has "none of this quality of a witch's ritual being performed"; and Plath's burning of Hughes's items is rather an act of a "vulgar harridan who has decided to invade the writing garret of poet-husband" ("Poetic Arson" 439; 442). Jonathan Ellis argues that "[b]iographical context aside, the poem represents the culmination of Plath's view of letter writing as a quasi-magical form in which the author and the recipient of the letter are somehow literally present" (24). In the poem, the speaker interacts with the spirits of the epistles who are partaking in the ritual, which I discuss in my close reading. Like "Daddy", in which the speaker employs the repeated second person singular, in "Burning the Letters", particularly in the drafts, the speaker summons the addressee. Kendall highlights that many of Plath's October poems are addressed to a specific person or persons (161). Brain also notes that these poems "have epistolary qualities, and owe much to her apprenticeship as a letter writer" ("Sylvia Plath and You" 89). My reading of "Burning the Letters" centres on the speaker's interaction with the letters, which act as the magical objects through which the speaker banishes the spiritual presence of the addressee. By looking at the drafts, I argue that the poem resembles ritual magic in which the speaker burns the letters with a protective spell against their harmful presence.

In the earlier versions of "Burning the Letters", Plath was more explicit about the magical attributes to the burning ritual, which later she changed to more disguised or metaphorical allusions. Some of the events that may have influenced the poem suggest that the burning of the items was a one-time occurrence. However, the earlier drafts of the poem imply the presence of ritualistic elements with the attribution of magical powers to the language. The poem may narrate a mundane domestic activity since burning household waste, or "separation and incineration", was common in post-war Britain until the 1960s and a favoured way to dispose rubbish (Stokes, Köster and Sambrook 84). Items, such as food waste, old papers, and sanitary towels, were often burned in the garden (Castelow). The contextual information demonstrates the ambiguities of the poem. I argue that Plath's development of "Burning the Letters" displays her experimentation by transforming the domestic practice of getting rid of household rubbish to informal ritual magic.

Throughout the writing of her poem, Plath went through significant editing. Van Dyne argues that the drafts show that "Burning the Letters" was "extraordinarily difficult for Plath to write" ("Rekindling the Past" 253). Indeed, the frequently undated seven drafts kept at the Smith College Special Collection are filled with crossed-out lines, words written over the top of another, and rearranged stanza order. The first draft is a heavily edited holograph; the pages are numbered 1 to 3. This version of the poem is the most expressive with magical allusions, which I study in detail. The second draft is a similarly untidy part-typescript and part-holograph numbered between 5 to 9. The first two undated versions of the poem do not have a clear structure. The poem is lively and dynamic; however, the repeated crossed-out lines and writing on the margin make the reading challenging. The third draft is the first

dated version of the poem, a revised typescript numbered 6. Plath's writing gets cleaner in the fourth draft, numbered 7, yet she still struggles with reconciling some parts of the poem. While the earlier versions were written in one block, only in the fifth draft, an undated typescript, Plath arranged the text into stanzas. The sixth version of "Burning the Letters" is numbered 8; it includes several black-ink revisions, particularly in the last stanza. The seventh draft is dated 12 October 1962, it features two drawings, an owl and a cat, on the right side of the paper. The drawings may be Plath's illustrations to Edward Lear's nursery rhyme "The Owl and the Pussy-Cat".¹⁰ Alternatively, Plath's October poems, such as "Lady Lazarus", reference a cat and flying creatures. This draft of the poem is the closest to the final, published poem. Nevertheless, Plath struggled with the outline of the last stanza, which I discuss later in detail. My reading of Plath's poem shows that until the third draft, "Burning the Letters" contained several passages that enhance the magical attributes of the ritualistic burning.

Before reading Plath's poem, I discuss some sources available to Plath on fire rituals, which likely influenced her poetic imagination. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* describes the preventive function of bonfires as a form of homoeopathic magic that has been used to guard against witchcraft and evil spirits:

... ceremonial fires have no necessary reference to the sun but are simply purificatory in intention, being designed to burn up and destroy all harmful influences, whether these are conceived in a personal form as witches, demons, and monsters, or in an impersonal form as a sort of pervading taint or corruption of the air. (329)

¹⁰ Plath referred to a children's book by Lear in 1960, which they read to her daughter (L2 552).

The citation understands fire as a magical agent against witchcraft. I argue that Plath's poem deploys the purifying and protective function attributed to fire rituals. Fire also often appears in the other poems Plath wrote in the same month, such as "Lady Lazarus", "Fever 103°", and "Ariel", in which her poetic personae inhabit, consume, and aid themselves with it. Among her earlier poems, "Witch Burning" suggests that Plath attributed a purifying power to the fiery burning in her poetry. A similar narrative occurs in "Burning the Letters", which I discuss throughout my close reading. Gill mentions the influence of Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, particularly on the fire's cleaning effect in Plath's poem ("Your story. My story" 78-79). My reading proposes that fire functions as a magical agent that the speaker employs to purify her surrounding from the spirits.

"Burning the Letters" comprises four stanzas in which the first introduces the initial stage of the performance, the creation of the bonfire:

I made fire; being tired
Of the white fists of old
Letters and their death rattle
When I came too close to the wastebasket.
What did they know that I didn't? (CP 204).

The speaker justifies the burning of the letters by blaming them for the knowledge they possess. In the first holograph, the poem starts with "My fire", which proposes a more intimate relationship between the speaker and the fire; it is something that she summons (MS "Burning the Letters", undated). The phrase expresses ambiguity. It can refer to her burning passion, suggesting either her love or revenge. In "Burning the Letters", the fire is both destructive and excites the speaker's imagination: "This fire may lick and fawn, but it is merciless" (CP 204). The speaker

likewise deploys the magical attributes of fire. Unlike in some of Plath's poems, here, the poetic persona directs fire not at the self, but at others. In the first draft, Plath starts the poem: "I made a fire and ? your handwriting" (MS "Burning the Letters", undated). The first three versions of the poem repeatedly feature the expression "your handwriting", suggesting the intimate relationship between the speaker and the addressee.

In the first draft, the speaker utters her reason for burning the letters: "And here is your handwriting, [paper after paper] the spry hooks, they lie. / I got tired of looking / And there was nobody for me to know and go to" (MS "Burning the Letters", undated). In the first holograph, the crossed-out repetition of "paper after paper" creates a ritualistic effect, suggesting a dynamic performance. In the next version, which is part typescript and part holograph, Plath changed the lines: "And here is your handwriting, the spry hooks. / I got tired of looking. / And There was nowhere [anybody to know,] to go and nothing to do" (MS and TS "Burning the Letters", undated). By the fourth version of the poem, Plath erased both the personal significance of the letters and her motive for burning them. She only alludes to her loneliness: "And [here] there [is your handwriting] was the writing, spry hooks" (TS "Burning the Letters", undated). Tracking the development of Plath's poem allows me to look at the details of her erasures. The shift from "your handwriting" to "the writing" removes the personal significance and distances the speaker from the epistles. Plath's early drafts present the burning of the letters as an intimate dialogue between the addressed person and the speaker, alluding to sympathetic magic, which also marks the epistolary discourse.

In the first holograph, the speaker burns other personal items. On the second page of the manuscript, Plath included a passage that reinforces the magical attributes of the burning ritual:

So I burnt the letters and the dust puffs and the old hair
At least it will be clean in the attic.

[At least it will smell ? a scrubbed wood]
At least I won't hang underneath it, dumb as a fish (MS "Burning the Letters", undated).

The lines explicitly portray the performance of burning, which is more personal and dynamic. The mixture of the domestic (hair, dust) with the professional (writings) suggests that the fire was not only made to burn the letters but has to cleanse the home from the negative spiritual presence, which recalls Frazer's analysis on the purifying and protective effect of fire rituals. In the holograph, the items are significant objects that embody the addressee. Therefore, they signify a closer relationship. By burning such personal belongings, the speaker gets rid of the spiritual presence of the lover. The three-times repeated "At least" acts as a ritualistic utterance reinforces the purifying characteristic of the burning ("clean in the attic"; "scrubbed wood"). In the later versions, Plath got rid of the powerful three-time repetition and erased the lines alluding to an intimate burning ritual. In the second draft, Plath changed the status of the burned items:

draft of letters
[So I burned the letter, and the dust puffs and the old hair.]
At least it will be clean, now, in the attic.
At least I won't hand underneath, dumb fish
With tin eyes, waiting for flint and signal (MS and TS "Burning the Letters", undated).

The handwritten marginal phrase “draft of letters” on the top of the typed lines implies that the burning is incomplete. Although Plath kept the cleaning effect of the burning, the erasure of repetitions alters the ritualistic effect of the lines.

In the later versions of the poem, Plath deleted the lines portraying the burning and changed the description of the attic to a “good place”, which remains in the final version of the poem. Van Dyne reads Plath’s deletion as substituting with “the repetitive whine of the trapped and friendless housewife, the oddly defiant smoke signal of the carbon birds” (*Revising Life* 37). In the final version of “Burning the Letters”, the second stanza narrates the speaker’s anguish:

The sly hooks that bend and cringe, and the smiles, the smiles.
And at least it will be a good place now, the attic.
At least I won't be strung just under the surface,
Dumb fish
With one tin eye,
Watching for glints,
Riding my Arctic
Between this wish and that wish. (CP 204)

The shorter lines create a more dynamic reading of the poem, and the internal rhymes contribute to the ritualistic effect. The dominant sound of “l” in the rhyming “sly” / “smiles” / “now” / “eye” reinforces that the stanza is concerned with the speaker’s inner life. The repeated “smiles” of the sly hooks are a metaphor for the letters identified with the lover. Nevertheless, the speaker is alone. There is a shift from the intimate “your handwriting” to the metaphorical “hooks” and “smiles”. The stanza lacks the purifying effect of the burning, which was dominant in the first three

drafts. The removal of the intimacy of the epistolary discourse also erases the spiritual character of the burning.



Figure 1. Holograph of "Burning the Letters", undated



Figure 2. Holograph and typescript of "Burning the Letters", undated



Figure 3. Typescript of "Burning the Letters", 1962 August 12



Figure 4. Typescript of "Burning the Letters", 1962 August 13

At the end of the second page of the first holograph, Plath implied a personal but ambiguous relationship between the speaker and letters:

I open the [pages, the] white wads that would save themselves.
[Spirit] word after [spirit] word [gives itself up] is lit!
They darken like Joan of Arc, the heart is a cinder. (MS and TS "Burning the Letters", undated)

The crossed-out "pages" is replaced with the alliteration of "white wads that would save themselves", which enhances the ritualistic effect of the repetition. It continues with the "[Spirit] word after [spirit] word", enhancing the magical characteristic of burning the letters. The passage signals the attribution of the magical powers of written words. The initial line reads as "Spirit after spirit gives itself up!" then it was altered to "Word after word is lit!" The first version reads the line as an utterance of dispelling the spirits whom the letters signify. The exclamation mark highlights the performativity of the line, which resembles an incantation. The alteration removes the spiritual presence and reads as a destruction of the epistolary writings. Ellis argues that the speaker wants to burn the letters as "textual remains" embodying an actual person; he compares this textural revival to the bodily resurrection in "Lady Lazarus" and "Fever 103°" (25). Plath's speaker treats the burning letters as people who could "save themselves". However, the likening of the letters to the martyr shows an ambiguous relationship. I highlighted in my first chapter that Joan of Arc's figure fascinated Plath (see "Witch Burning" and "Lady Lazarus"). In the holograph of "Burning the Letters" the simile brings the burning into parallel with medieval executions. The speaker perceives her act as murder; like Joan of Arc, the spirit of the letter is annihilated.

In the second draft, Plath got rid of this passage. However, in the third draft, which is a revised typescript numbered 6, she reinstated them. The altered lines are written in the second half of the poem:

Word after Word is lit.
They darken like Joan of Arc.
And the name of the girl flies out,
To alight by my left shoe. (TS "Burning the Letters", 12 August 1962)

Here, Plath removed the spiritual power attributed to the epistles. Instead, she developed the martyr imagery identifying the rival with Joan of Arc. In the next draft, an undated revised typescript numbered as 7, Plath kept the line "Word after Word is lit" (TS "Burning the Letters", undated). Van Dyne argues that the drafts reveal Plath's ambiguous attitude toward the rival girl who is represented as a martyr/witch: "Plath fails to resolve ... whether she murders or is herself ghoulishly tormented" (*Revising Life* 37). In my reading, Plath struggles to reconcile whether the letters are merely objects that she can get rid of or the spiritual embodiment of the individuals who possess her. While earlier drafts read the poem as a form of a spell to banish the spirits of the epistolary person(s), the final poem treats the letters as objects, not as spirits, which expresses the elimination of their magical power. The speaker's response to the epistolary writing is altered by the abandonment of the martyr/witch imagery.



Figure 5. Holograph of "Burning the Letters", undated



Figure 6. Typescript of "Burning the Letters", 1962 August 12

Throughout the drafts, Plath renamed the “black-edged” paper flake. In the third draft, its meaning shifts from a “death card”, “funeral card”, to “funeral announcement” (TS "Burning the Letters", 12 August 1962). The “funeral announcement” suggests that the epistolary burning is an act of grief, mourning that expresses sadness. The imagery evokes the black funeral cards which “were a phenomenon of the Victorian celebration of death” (Curl 19). By the sixth draft, Plath abandoned the death imagery of the card. The changes from “darken like Joan of Arc”, which is present in the first and third draft, to “black-edged death card” in the fifth draft, to the final version of “a name with black edges” shows the speaker’s ambiguous attitude towards the epistolary afterlife of the rival. First, she is metaphorically burnt like the witch, then mourned like a martyr. Finally, the burnt piece becomes merely a black-edged paper. The manuscripts demonstrate Plath’s struggle to articulate not only the role of the rival but the role of magic – if any – in the epistolary burning, which becomes a ritual in the drafts. My analysis establishes

that the changes Plath made in her drafts tone down the magical characteristics of the ritual and the spiritual presence and powers of the epistles.

One of the most significant erasures happened in the second draft, an undated holograph and typescript. In the middle of the second page, Plath's speaker appears as a murderous persona: "[And I can be a criminal. I am killing a photograph. / I have been diminished / Now I blacken, I grow tall]" (TS "Burning the Letters", 12 August 1962). The crossed-out lines in the brackets allude to a ritualistic murder similar to "Daddy". The speaker employs a photograph representing the person she aims to harm. Plath's draft further suggests the violent sacrificial element of the purification, which mimics the purifying fire rituals described in *The Golden Bough*:

Not uncommonly effigies are burned in these fires, or a pretence is made of burning a living person in them; and there are grounds for believing that anciently human beings were actually burned on these occasions. A general survey of the customs in question will bring out the traces of human sacrifice, and will serve at the same time to throw light on their meaning. (Frazer 106)

The citation suggests that the earlier version of "Burning the Letters" portrays a more explicit performance of ritual magic with allusions to sympathetic magic as spiritual purification. It reads as a significantly more violent performance than burning epistolary writings. In the poem, the purifying burning, repetitive language, and the spiritual presence of epistolary persons(s) imply the performance of ritual magic. The violence of the ritual is reinforced by Plath's ending of the second draft with these lines: "It is not malice that [sends up] raises yellow ? : It is a burnt smile / [And the salt seasons the black ashes]" (TS "Burning the Letters", 12 August 1962). The heavily edited lines at the bottom of the page are hard to interpret. From the parts I could read, the lines explicitly portray burning as a release from the evil presence of

the spirits. The “hooks” of the letters are now “a burnt smile”, which reinforces the attribution of spiritual power to the letters.

In the final version of “Burning the Letters”, the last stanza portrays the release from the tension. It is dominated by images of nature. The fourth line “Pale eyes, patent-leather gutturals!” rules the stanza not only with its commanding *p* sounds, but by featuring the only exclamation mark of the poem. It is the most dynamic part of the poem, which mimics the casting of a spell. In the first holograph, Plath ended the poem with this line. There is no decline from the intense emotions, but the poem ends in the moment of a force, which contributes to the magical power attributed to language to dispel the spirits. In the line, “gutturals” refer to harsh sounds produced in the back of the throat, which is particularly prominent in, for example, the Semitic languages (A. L. Miller 56-57). Gutturals are also one of the first sounds that infants produce, which recalls the childlike “gobbledygoo” in “Daddy”, implying that the “gutturals” in “Burning the Letters” form a quasi-magical language that utilise the power of spellwork. In the final version of the poem, Plath ends with a repetition, highlighting continuity: “What immortality is. That it is immortal” (CP 205). The line references the cathartic violence in the stanza, evoking the fox’s “red burst and a cry” that keeps “Dyeing the air” (CP 205). Bundtzen argues that immortality suggests the authenticity of feelings, such as the pain that the poem carries (“Poetic Arson” 443). In my reading, “immortality” indicates the cyclical character of repetitions, which accentuates the ritualistic effect of the poem. The echoes and excessive repetitions of sounds, words, and expressions contribute to the dynamic and lively reading of “Burning the Letters”.

My comparative reading of the drafts and the final version of “Burning the Letters” interprets the erased lines and expression as allusions to ritual magic, employing ritualistic language and acts. Throughout her writing process, Plath reduced the magical powers attributed to language and eliminated the spiritual presence of the letters. My analysis of the drafts demonstrates that “Burning the Letters” reinforces the pattern in Plath’s poetry whereby she reduced the magical elements which are featured in the initial versions of her poems. While it is unknown why Plath might have made those changes, she could have considered the explicit language less fitting for her well-informed poetry. It is also possible that she wanted to distance herself from some of the sources of her poem, such as ritual magic, Frazer, and Joan of Arc, and chose more allusive and metaphorical poetic devices. The final version also reduces the repetitions and changes the sound patterns of the poem. Plath’s manuscripts shift from the magical powers of the uttered language that produces the ritual to enhanced poetic techniques, such as repetitions and strict stanza form. “Burning the Letters” also interrogates the magic of informal and domestic rites – what does it mean to burn someone’s writing? – which can be read in the poem as a metanarrative about ritualistic responses to a ritualistic event.

Conclusion

My reading of “Daddy” and “Burning the Letters” argues that the poems are performances in which ritualistic acts accompany ritualistic utterances. Although the two poems have significant differences in their poetic language, rhyme, and structure, they both have magical intent. The rituals in the poem share the

characteristics of attributing magical powers to language, particularly the uttered speech. They employ personal items for performing sympathetic magic. Whereas in “Daddy”, the exorcism is more explicit, and the speaker deploys repetitions to create a ritualistic effect, “Burning the Letters” has a more subtle portrayal of the ritual. Further, both poems have earlier versions in which the magical and ritualistic elements appear more directly. During the process of writing “Daddy”, Plath altered the highly charged language to more allusive phrases and reduced the magical dimension of the politically charged German language. In “Burning the Letters”, she erased the magical powers the letters possess and changed the incantatory language to neater and tighter poetic lines. My reading of the poems demonstrates that the concept of ritual magic was influential in Plath’s poetry. It is a magical performance that she encountered from sources across the Western literature of witchcraft and anthropological works, such as *The Golden Bough*, and through her experimentation with the magical attribution of informal rites. By studying Plath’s poetic engagement with ritual magic, I can trace her understanding of magic and the broader cultural context in which magical powers are attributed to language and certain rituals.

In the next chapter, I continue to explore Plath’s poetic engagement with the praxis of magic. I look at supernatural transformations, which display the transformative power of magic, as Plath’s poetic interrogation of women’s access to autonomy and power through magic.

Chapter 5: Supernatural Transformations

Introduction

This chapter explores narratives of supernatural transformation in Plath's poetry. I argue that the poems portray women's struggle for autonomy and access to power. In this chapter, I continue to study the broader theme of Plath's thoughts and writings on gender and magic, particularly the way in which women access supernatural powers for their agency. I use the term supernatural transformation to refer to any physical transformation of the human body that has a supernatural element: for example, the change from human to vegetal form, hybridity, and shapeshifting. Previously, critics, such as Jon Rosenblatt, interpreted the transformation of the self in Plath's poetry as a cycle between death and rebirth (26). Greg Johnson and Leonard Sanazaro followed a similar route in "A Passage to 'Ariel': Sylvia Plath and the Evolution of Self" (1980) and "The Transfiguring Self: Sylvia Plath, a Reconsideration" (1983). Instead of focusing on the cycle of life and death, I consider transformation *within* life, but in different forms. In Plath's bee sequence and "Lady Lazarus", the change from human to animal body suggests the liberation of women who achieve autonomy in their new shape. In "Ariel", the speaker is in a constantly changing motion: "And now I / Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas" (CP 239). In other poems, such as "Virgin in a Tree", the transformed poetic persona is instead entrapped in a gendered bodily existence, which expresses women's powerlessness and lack of bodily autonomy.

My previous chapters demonstrate that Plath's engagement with the supernatural regularly falls within the questions of gender and power. This chapter focuses on female bodily transformation, which expands the study of Plath's poetic responses to the gendered perception of magical powers. The central research focus of this chapter is to investigate Plath's employment of narratives of supernatural transformation in her poetry, through which she frequently critiques gender norms and societal boundaries between the human and nonhuman subjects. I am interested in how altering the female body challenges or reaffirms women's access to bodily autonomy and power. What is considered normative, and where are the boundaries – if any – between the human and nonhuman subjects? Further, how do Plath's poems that portray supernatural transformation inform us about the gendered bodily existence of women?

This chapter relies on the concept of metamorphosis, which references Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Plath likely read *Metamorphoses* when she studied Latin in Gamaliel Bradford High School, Wellesley, in which Ovid's poetry has remained part of the syllabus until today (Ranger, "Ovid, Plath, Baskin, Hughes" 14). In the mythological tales, metamorphosis is "the magical alteration of physical form from one species to another" (Barkan 19). Leonard Barkan's definition implies that metamorphosis fundamentally has a supernatural component. Ovid's book portrays metamorphosis as a new state of being; it shifts between change and permanency (Sharrock 38). However, this transformation is often a violent process, signifying not only a corporeal but psychological transformation, particularly after sexual assault. Holly Ranger argues that Plath was interested in the "gendered Ovidian imagery and themes to explore the female body in metamorphosis" ("Sylvia Plath and Ovid's

Daphne" 219). Plath's employment of these narratives suggests her focus on the powerlessness of women who undergo metamorphosis. In poems such as "Virgin in a Tree", women's bodies are transformed into vegetal forms, which implies their lack of agency in the violent metamorphosis. I propose that Ovid's *Metamorphoses* functioned as a source of poetic inspiration for Plath, through which she responded to women's lack of bodily autonomy within the male-dominated society.

Another central concept of this chapter is shapeshifting, which describes a specific transformation from human to animal form, usually associated with magical women across folklore and mythology. In Plath's poetry, shapeshifting appears as a narrative strategy associated with women's right to autonomy. I propose that some of Plath's poems, particularly in *Ariel*, narrate women's access to bodily autonomy through changing their form or discarding the female human body. Poems, for example, "Goatsucker", "Stings", and "Lady Lazarus", allude to the concept of shapeshifting from human to animal form, particularly the flying creatures who associate women's transformed selves with freedom. I demonstrate that Plath's knowledge of folkloric beliefs of witches and mythological creatures influenced the portrayal of her poetic speakers' changing into birdlike shapes as a rejection of the restricting norms about womanhood. Plath creates positive narratives of women's access to power and bodily autonomy and her poetry shows interest in the ambiguities of the transformation. In "Ariel", the exchange of bodies is more fluid; it can be considered a merger. My reading of the poem focuses on the non-hierarchical relationship between the rider and the horse, which counteracts the patriarchal forces of the rigid gender and human boundaries.

I differentiate between metamorphosis, shapeshifting, and hybridity, portraying diverse narratives of women's access to autonomy. However, these concepts associated with transformation also have similarities. They depict a physical change, which exemplifies that women's bodies can be modified and transformed. They raise questions about gendered bodily autonomy, what is acceptable for women, and retell the narratives previously reserved for the male-dominated literary tradition. To demonstrate Plath's poetic representations of women's violent transformation into plants, I look at the female bodily transformation in "Virgin in a Tree" and "Edge", influenced by the Ovidian understanding of metamorphosis.

Involuntary Transformations

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is full of women's bodily transformation, and they almost exclusively happen after sexual violence. In the first book of *Metamorphoses*, Daphne and Syrinx flee from the predatory male sexual desire, which results in their transformation into a tree and a reed. In both myths, the women transform; however, their metamorphosis does not save them. Daphne and Syrinx lose the ability to speak, which "represents their subjugation" (Bloch 7). The metamorphosis signifies women's loss of humanity and vulnerability; their immobility makes them persistent subjects of violence. Bloch also suggests that Ovid's transformations indicate the "permanence of the psychological trauma" that the women suffer (18). In the myth of "Apollo and Daphne", Apollo uses the Daphne-transformed laurel as an accessory, which further objectifies the female body:

As if they still were limbs, and kissed the wood,
And the wood shrank from his kisses, and the god
Exclaimed: "Since you can never be my bride,
My tree at least you shall be! Let the laurel
Adorn, henceforth, my hair, my lyre, my quiver: (1.556-560).

The metamorphosis into vegetal form does not help her escape from the sexual pursuit. Apollo still treats "Daphne-tree as female", not as an arboreal being (Sharrock 39). For example, he appropriates the foliage of the laurel tree as a metaphor for Daphne's hair (Hardie 260). Even after her metamorphosis, Daphne is trapped in a gendered arboreal existence that continues the sexual violence. The myth exemplifies the interchangeability of the female body and the vegetal life, which is a recurring theme in Plath's poetry.

In poems, such as "Virgin in a Tree", the female body is violated, exploited, or objectified, which brings attention to the women's lack of bodily autonomy. Ranger suggests that, for Plath, women's transformation signified the relationship of male-poet and female-muse that she satirised in her poetry ("Ovid, Plath, Baskin, Hughes" 15). Plath critiques the male perception of women's bodies by alluding to the powerlessness of female corporeal metamorphosis. She implies that art can dehumanise women, which is demonstrated by their transformation into plants. Ranger argues that, in Plath's poetry, mental illness presented

as a kind of metamorphosis, most often represented by images of women overwhelmed by plant life, an echo of the many traumatized women of Ovid's epic poem transformed into flowers and trees. There is an unsettling blur between human and vegetation ("Sylvia Plath and Ovid's Daphne" 219).

Building on Ranger's criticism, my reading of "Virgin in a Tree" and "Edge" explores the distorted and powerless female corporeal existence.

Plath wrote "Virgin in a Tree" in 1958. The poem retells Daphne's myth to reflect contemporary gender relations and norms. Similarly, Anne Sexton's poem "Where I Live In This Honorable House Of The Laurel Tree", published in *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960), employs the classical myth to respond to the issues of gender and power. Sexton's poem is spoken from Daphne's perspective, whose body has already transformed into a laurel tree. Sexton's Daphne-speaker is immobile, which is reinforced by the repeated lines at the beginning and the end: "my wooden legs and O / my green green hands" (17). The repetition of the colour green highlights the poetic persona's entrapment in the arboreal form. The assonance of the *o* sounds creates an elegiac effect, which reinforces the speaker's hopelessness. The limbs "legs" and "hands" allude to a human body, to which she compares her transformed tree shape. There is a perceived alienation of the female body caused by the transformation. Gill argues that in both Sexton's and Plath's version of the myth, the "escape becomes a new form of imprisonment", which displaces the female subject into the natural world (*The Cambridge Introduction* 55-56). My reading of Plath's poem focuses on the idea that women's existence is tied to their gendered bodies, which implies their vulnerability in society.

Plath's "Virgin in a Tree" was inspired by Paul Klee's similarly titled artwork "Virgin in the tree", portraying the female body as "organically one" with the dead tree (Zivley 40). The poem describes the virgin's transformation into a tree as an involuntary act, suggesting entrapment, imprisonment, and powerlessness. "Virgin in a Tree" is a dialogical poem in which the speaker takes up the role of the narrator. The poem is written in five-line stanzas with irregular lengths, which are finished with short and harsh words, such as "nun-black", "Look", and "break", stressing the

stiffness of the transformed female body. The speaker introduces the theme in the first lines: “How this tart fable instructs / And mocks! Here’s the parody of that moral mousetrap / Set in the proverbs stitched on sampler” (CP 81). The satirical voice anticipates that the poem is a parody of the myth, which the speaker calls a “tart fable”. The alliteration of “moral mousetrap” gives the impression of a nursery rhyme. However, she shortly informs the reader about the brutal nature of the subject: “Approving chased girls who get them to a tree / And put on bark’s nun-black” (CP 81). The lines describe the one-sided sexual pursuit from which the bark provides shelter to the girl. Yet, the gendered imagery of the bark rather reinforces entrapment into a vegetal state. The phrase also implies that female sexual desire is regulated. Therefore, the virgin’s transformation into an arboreal form expresses women’s lack of autonomy over their bodies.

In the second stanza, the allusion to Daphne becomes more direct. There are additional allusions to women fleeing from the sexual pursuit:

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 (CP 81).

The stanza starts with an enjambement. The word “Habit” implies the nun’s habit, particularly the black tunic. The imagery associates the virgin’s transformed arboreal form with female chastity. It is this habit that “deflects / All amorous arrows”. The lines evoke the scene from the myth in which Cupid shoots an arrow at Apollo, making him long for Daphne; then fires another one at the girl, so she flees from the love. The arrow is a recurring metaphor in Plath’s writings, which contemplates

women's power/powerlessness. While in "Ariel", Plath shifts the object that violates women to becoming the arrow herself, shooting any way she desires, in "Virgin in a Tree", the girl's body is protected and covered. Nonetheless, she is immobile, which opposes the phallic symbol, which is active: a shield, not the sheathed. Daphne's myth portraying "sexual pursuits; woman-as-art" is a recurring theme in Plath's poetry, which explores "the frustrations of a woman writer under cultural pressure to be muse, rather than poet" ("Sylvia Plath and Ovid's Daphne" 224). While Ranger is interested in Plath's employment of the myth primarily to write back against the divide of the female muse and the male poet, I suggest that Plath's linking of feminine aesthetic and the vegetal form expresses deeper and more disturbing ideas about the human body, autonomy, and sexuality. Plath's poem also alludes to Ovid's myth of "Syrinx and Pan", in which Pan is the male pursuer of the nymph who, upon being caught, is transformed into a reed and becomes Pan's musical instrument. Likewise, the female body in "Virgin in a Tree" is an instrument for men (reed pipe or a tool in a sheath), which implies that women have no voice, choice, even, a human form. Plath employs the concept of metamorphosis to portray the transformation of women as a violent act, symbolising their powerlessness against the male deities who embody the male-dominated society.

In "Virgin in a Tree", Plath further evokes Pan by portraying his "goat-thighed or god-haloed" figure, while in "Faun" – originally titled "Metamorphosis" – the lover is characterised similar to Pan: "Goat-horns. Marked how god rose / And galloped woodward in that guise" (CP 35). The parallels between "Pursuit", "Faun", and "Virgin in a Tree" demonstrate that Plath's understanding of Ovid's metamorphosis centres on women's lack of power, particularly during a one-sided sexual chase, which

implies that the women's transformation is tied to their lack of sexual autonomy. In the poems, Plath's portrayal of male sexual desire is ambiguous. In "Virgin in a Tree", the sexual pursuit is a violent act: "Pine-needle armor protects / Pitys from Pan's assault!" (CP 81). The alliterative *p* sounds stress the disturbing nature of the sexual assault, which initiates the transformation of the female body. In an earlier poem, "Pursuit", she describes the sexual chase as "The hunt is on, and sprung the trap" (CP 22). Ranger argues that the poems demonstrate Plath's lack of vocabulary for expressing female sexual desire as she "remains trapped in the 1950s discourse on femininity" ("Sylvia Plath and Ovid's Daphne" 237). In my reading, Plath's poems influenced by Ovidian mythology express her awareness of women's lack of bodily autonomy. They critique the limited choices women have in their sexual expression.

From the fourth stanza, the poem shifts the focus from Daphne's myth to interrogating the broader discourse of gender and sexuality:

Their leafy crowns, their fame soars,
Eclipsing Eva, Cleo and Helen of Troy:
For which of those would speak

For a fashion that constricts (CP 81).

By naming the three well-known female figures from Western culture, Plath indicates that women always struggled with different kinds of "constrict[ion]". The reference to speech alludes to Daphne's myth in which she lost her ability to speak after transforming into a tree. The lines also recall Philomela's rape and her cut-off tongue by Tereus and subsequent transformation into a nightingale. The poem suggests that speaking is necessary to voice women's struggles; therefore, "Virgin in a Tree" reads as a metanarrative. Just like Philomela, whose "voice is restored through art"

(Hartman 254), the poem becomes an artistic counterforce to (re)tell women's stories.

Plath portrays the metamorphosis into a gendered vegetal shape as the girl losing her human characteristics: "White bodies in a wooden girdle, root to top / Unfaced, unformed, the nipple-flowers / Shrouded to suckle darkness? Only they" (CP 81). The colour white reinforces the bond between human and nonhuman subjects. The lines recall the faceless dummies in "The Disquieting Muses", which indicates a recurring theme in Plath's poetry about the amorphous facelessness of women. The lack of identity, such as a face, a body, and mouth, reinforces the girl's lack of voice. The phrase "Unfaced, unformed" emphasises the loss of human features of the female body. The association of flowers with the woman's breast foreshadows the imagery of "Edge", which I study later. In Paul Klee's artwork that inspired "Virgin in a Tree", the woman's "full, pointed, pendulant breasts" are the only human part in her (Zivley 40). Plath's poem associates the soft "flowery" femininity with the deceased body ("suckle darkness"), which suggests that the girl loses her autonomy and agency by being only the object of male desire.

The last part of the poem is a satirical evaluation of Daphne's myth, which implies Plath's ambiguous attitude towards women's preservation of virginity: "They descant on the serene and seraphic beauty / Of virgins for virginity's sake" (CP 82). Zivley argues that Plath "rejects the choice of Daphne, and Syrinx, agreeing with Klee that the virgin's chastity has earned her nothing" (41). The speaker calls women's safeguarding of chastity a "pact", which has "Been struck to keep all glory in the grip / Of ugly spinsters and barren sirs" (CP 82). The poem uses short words and hard sounding consonants to highlight the crudeness of the virgin's

transformation: “This virgin on her rack: / She, ripe and unplucked, ‘s / Lain splayed too long in the tortuous boughs: overripe” (CP 82). In the second line, the stand-alone possessive pronoun suggests the spectral presence of the noun, possibly the virgin’s transformed body. The symbolic and textual erasure of the female body reads as a social commentary on women’s lack of autonomy. Here, the transformation is not only an involuntary metamorphosis, but a loss of the autonomous self. The words “ripe” and “overripe” code virginity with the language usually reserved for edible plants. Ranger notes that the poem deploys “a subtle shift in vocabulary. Once the woman has renounced her sexuality, she is dehumanized and described more like a tree than a woman” (“Sylvia Plath and Ovid’s Daphne” 235). The poem portrays the altered body as more violated, hurt, and arboreal: “Stiff as twigs, her body, woodenly / Askew, she’ll ache and wake” (CP 82). The internal rhymes link the virgin’s transformed body with this new form of existence. Carmen Concilio argues that in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, “the mythical characters transformed into plants, both men and women, start experiencing the immobility and rootedness of their feet ... this means that becoming-vegetal is a clear metaphor for a sort of permanence of life in death” (23). Like the girl in “Virgin in a Tree”, Daphne experiences the permanency of the metamorphosis. This new form is neither wholly vegetal due to its gendered shape nor human, suggesting a kind of hybridity. Unlike in “Ariel”, in this poem, Plath does not establish an emphatic link between the woman and the nonhuman life. She only focuses on the violence of the male-enforced transformation. Plath’s poem implies the ambiguity of the metamorphosis, which neither saves nor ends the girl’s life. She continues to be confined in a gendered shape.

The end of the poem returns to the loss of humanity of the girl by the “un-” phrase: “Untongued, all beauty’s bright juice sours. / Tree-twist will ape this gross anatomy” (CP 82). The speaker calls the transformed female body “gross”, which recalls the grotesque presentation of the female body in Klee’s artwork. The medical term “anatomy” foreshadows Plath’s hospital-inspired poetry, such as “Tulips” and “Surgeon at 2 a. m”. in which the female body is an object of the male doctors. Plath’s ambiguous presentation of the sexual pursuit concludes that neither chastity nor a one-sided sexual hunt is appropriate, which critiques societal norms about women’s limited choices. The violent transformation of the female body into the grotesque tree proposes the loss of humanity of the girl. This metamorphosis is without flexibility or fluidity, which signals a complete alteration of not only her physical shape but her psyche. Plath’s imagery describing the arboreal form, such as “nun-black” and “nipple-flowers”, portrays the tree as sexualised or virginal. It is not the virgin who initiates and controls the metamorphosis, but the man who chases her, which signals her powerlessness and vulnerability.

“Edge” is another of Plath’s poems in which the female body is violently transformed into a nonhuman form. The poem bears the influence of classical stories and mythologies, such as de Chirico’s painting “Ariadne, deserted, asleep”, portraying Theseus’s abandonment of Ariadne (Clark, “P(I)athography” 367). Medea likewise emerges indirectly in the poem, which has been considered a revision of her myth (Bassnett 20-21). I argue that in “Edge”, Plath borrows the Ovidian understanding of metamorphosis to narrate the transformation of the female body into a vegetal form. My reading focuses on the metamorphosis and I look at the active and passive phrases in “Edge” to demonstrate an association between the

woman's "perfected" body and vegetal form of existence, which resembles the female bodily transformation in "Virgin in a Tree". The poem links metamorphosis to the loss of sexual reproduction, suggesting women's lack of agency over their bodies.

The poem comprises ten mostly unrhymed couplets with short words and hard-sounding consonants that create a bleak and static atmosphere. There is only one holograph of "Edge" dated 5 February 1963, kept at the Smith College Special Collection. The manuscript reveals that the initial title of the poem was "Nuns in Snow", which implies that it would have been a different poem, focusing on the dutiful virgins. Plath's wording echoes chastity and nun's habit from "Virgin in a Tree". In the manuscript, the stanza breaks are not self-evident. The poem could be read as one block of text, contrasting to the brokenness of the published version of "Edge". The draft only includes some revisions. Plath's handwriting is clean and neat, implying that she carefully drafted the poem. She only wrote two lines of the poem on the top of the page, which she crossed out after retitling it to "The Edge": "Here they come / Down there" (MS "Edge", 5 February 1963). The lines portray the speaker's perspective looking down at the scene, which parallels the poem's ending in which the moon is the observer of the transformed female body. Clark suggests the draft portrays "coldness, celibacy, martyrdom, and purity" (*Red Comet* 872). We can also see similar imagery in "Virgin in a Tree" and the initial "Nuns in Snow". The poems employ the figure of the virginal nun, implying that Plath would have continued "Edge" with a narrative on women's sexual purity. The published version of "Edge" centres on the ambiguities of motherhood and the transformation of the

female body. Plath's redrafting shifts the perspective from the nuns to just one woman, which reinforces the isolation and bleakness of the poem.

"Edge" starts with a harsh portrayal of the female body in a remote atmosphere:

The woman is perfected.
Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment
The illusion of a Greek necessity (CP 272).

In the poem, the enjambments separate the adjectives from nouns ("dead // Body"; "bare // Feet"), suggesting the brokenness of the female body. Plath's line breaks are harsh and dense, which reinforces the lifelessness of the female figure. In the handwritten draft, Plath also added, then crossed out two adjectives:

[terrible]
The [dead] woman is perfected. (MS "Edge", 5 February 1963)

The unstable description of the woman's body implies that she is not motionless. The indecision of Plath's writing literally and figuratively transforms the body. The abandonment of "dead" means the poem considers the woman alive. The additional adjective "terrible" is reminiscent of the queen bee's survival in "Stings": "Now she is flying / More terrible than she ever was" (CP 215). Despite the allusions to a dynamic rebirth, Plath settled with "The woman is perfected" line, which alludes to a passive, statuesque, and art-like femininity. She is not perfect, but made into perfection without an agency (Clark, "P(l)athography" 366). We do not see the woman's transformation, only its violent aftermath.

The woman “wears a smile of accomplishment,” which reveals the ambiguity of the metamorphosis. Ellis suggests that in Plath’s poetry, smiles are “a sign of attack rather than welcome” (25). The smile proposes that the woman is not wholly lifeless; however, the noun “accomplishment” acknowledges that she is a moment of closure. Despite the poem’s emphasis on passivity and immobility, “Edge” is filled with active verbs (“flows”, “coiled”, “folded”, “bleed”), which imply a fluid movement. Helen Vendler also suggests the presence of life in the poem:

If her bare feet are relieved to “have come so far” on their now-ended journey, in life they were footsore and weary with anxiety. If the children resemble Cleopatra’s consoling asps, they have assisted in the only possible escape (as Shakespeare’s queen saw it) from future shame and humiliation before the public. If the breasts are now empty of milk, they used to be full, as if lactation (representing the hourly physical demands on a mother) could stop only in death. (146)

While she focuses on the woman’s physical exhaustion, Vendler recognises that Plath’s poem originates from an active life and it narrates the struggles of the woman; not the end of her existence. My reading focuses on concept of metamorphosis in the poem, suggesting that “Edge” is a poem about female bodily transformation, not death.

Plath’s speaker references classical sources, which compare the woman in the poem to ancient sculpture: “The illusion of a Greek necessity // Flows in the scrolls of her toga” (CP 272). Tunstall proposes that the “Greek necessity” recalls “the history of aesthetics and visual art, the mathematics of perspective ... classical statuary and ideals of proportion and architectural simplicity” (“Vision and Visual Art” 249). There is a sense of fluidity in the words highlighting the smooth movement (“flows”; “scrolls”). In my reading, the poem resists the objectification of the woman

and Plath rather draws attention to the details of her body. Her toga is associated with a flowing movement and her feet with walking. The poem reveals that the female subject has been in the process of motion – which I interpret as her metamorphosis –; however, it has ended: “We have come so far, it is over” (CP 272). Instead of the woman’s death, “Edge” portrays the end of the transformation, which results in a new form of existence. Unlike many *Ariel* poems that focus on rebirth, “Edge” presents a metamorphosis from an old into a new shape. Like “Virgin in a Tree”, the neither-fully-alive-nor-dead existence entraps the woman.

From the fifth stanza, there is a change in the perspective; the woman’s body is at the centre. We see that she has not been alone, but the narrator references her children, who are described as “white serpent,” and her breasts as “Pitcher of milk, now empty” (CP 272). Critics, such as Clark highlight Plath’s allusions to Shakespeare’s *Anthony and Cleopatra*, in which Cleopatra kills herself by putting a venomous snake onto her breast to bite her (“P(l)athography” 367). “Edge” also evokes the scene from the play in which Cleopatra likens herself to a marble statue: “My resolution’s placed, and I have nothing / Of a woman in me: now from head to foot / I am marble-constant; now fleeting moon” (5.2.238-240). The lines are similar to Plath’s portrayal of the female body in “Edge”. There is a parallel between the enjambement (“nothing / Of a woman”) and the line breaks in Plath’s poem (“Her dead / Body”). The metaphorical metamorphosis to marble and the focus on the female body parts suggest the influence of Shakespeare’s tragedy in “Edge”. In other Plath poems, Cleopatra signifies female beauty. In “Virgin in a Tree”, Cleopatra appears as “Cleo” who along with Eve and Helen of Troy, is contrasted with the “green virgins” (Ranger, “Sylvia Plath and Ovid’s Daphne” 232). In the poem “Face

Lift", the speaker, who undergoes a physical transformation of her body, compares herself to Cleopatra: "They've changed all that. Traveling / Nude as Cleopatra in my well-boiled hospital shift" (CP 156). The allusions to Cleopatra's figure imply Plath's ambiguous attitude towards the male idea of female beauty. According to Clark, Plath critiques the "male poetic tradition in her own life", such as the works of Robert Graves, who named Cleopatra an embodiment of the White Goddess ("P(I)athography" 367). In "Edge", the woman is transformed from an admired maternal figure to a disfigured nonhuman form. Her shape escapes the objectification.

The poem not only critiques the "perfected" female idea but proposes that women, without agency and autonomy, are trapped into a floral form and only have aesthetic value: "She has folded / Them back into her body as petals / Of a rose close when the garden" (CP 272-273). In the lines, the flower imagery signifies the powerless female body. Constance Scheerer links "Edge" with "Tulips" and argues that both poems portray a "series of marbleized images" in which Plath creates her "garden" (477). Connors also notes that Plath borrowed images from the rose garden in Yaddo, where Plath and Hughes were resident in 1959, which is "known from its magnificent rose gardens, as well as a collection of imported statues" ("Visual Art" 82). Merging the memory of the rose garden with classical mythology and male poetic tradition, Plath creates a vision of the female subject as visually pleasing but somewhat distorted and wounded ("Stiffens"; "bleed"). There is a contrast between the imagery of the stillness of the marble statues and the vegetal flowers. Even when they are dying, the flowers are in the process of transformation. Yet, the female body is neither a beautiful flower nor a still statue, which resists the male gaze. "Ariel" also

presents a similar ambiguity to the poetic subject, which rejects the strict gendered boundaries and the objectification of the female body.

Like “Virgin in a Tree”, in “Edge”, the floral imagery highlights the amorphous existence. In Ovid’s tales, “[h]uman and bestial, animate and inanimate, male and female can flow into one another” (Segal 11-12). “Edge” creates fluid boundaries between the human and vegetal, mother and murderer, static and flowing, which suggests the instability of the female subject. The flower imagery shifts from blooming to the closing of the petals; finally, it “Stiffens and odors bleed / From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower” (CP 273). The word “Stiffen” evokes the “Stiff as a twig” from “Virgin in a Tree”. The phrase reinforces the connection between the two poems. There is a contrast in “Edge” between the fluidity of bleeding and the static stiffening, which proposes that the metamorphosis alternates between different forms. The expression “odors bleed” evokes the woman’s sexual reproduction, such as menstruation or miscarriage. Whereas flowers are usually associated with virginity and sexuality, in Plath’s poetry, such as “Barren Woman”, “Tulips”, and “Edge”, they are symbols of miscarriage, loss, and illness. The powerful visual and olfactory imagery contrasts with the beginning of the poem portraying the whiteness and bleakness of the statuesque woman in her toga. The woman’s lack of voice can be compared to Ovid’s tales, such as Daphne’s myth, in which the vegetal form causes the loss of speech.

The end of the poem changes perspective; the focus is now on the moon, who is an uninvited spectator of the scene:

The moon has nothing to be sad about,
Staring from her hood of bone.

She is used to this sort of thing.
Her blacks crackle and drag. (CP 273)

The stanzas personify the moon who is referred to by the female pronoun. In other Plath's poems, such as "Barren Woman" and "The Moon and the Yew Tree", the presence of the moon symbolises death and loss. In "Edge", the moon is neither cruel nor sympathetic towards the woman. There are no emotions depicted, which support the detachedness of the female subject. The line "She is used to this sort of thing" implies that the moon regularly witnessed such a transformation of women, which results in a vegetal female existence. The opposition between the moon's blackness and the whiteness of the woman's toga highlights the imagery of the double. Tunstall demonstrates that in her *Webster's* dictionary, Plath underlined the definition of "drag" associated with "the indefatigable pull of the moon": in Plath's poems, "the moon is transformed by 'drag' into a vampy femme fatale, giving the scene an atmosphere of stagey noir" ("Vision and Visual Art" 254). The verbs "crackle and drag" describe a slow and painful movement. The hard-sounding consonants enhance the harshness, which implies that the transformation is rough and violent. Yet, it is not death, but another form of existence, which echoes the Ovidian understanding of metamorphosis. The woman is still alive and she has not given up. We do not know what happens when the sun rises again.

My analysis highlights that despite the bleak and static atmosphere, there are several allusions to movements and transformations. Although there are no explicit references to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Plath's rich allusion to classical mythology suggests that "Edge" examines women's violent metamorphosis, through which she interrogates women's access to power and autonomy. My reading of "Edge" and

“Virgin in a Tree” continues some of the themes discussed in the previous chapters, such as the influence of classical literature and mythology in Plath’s poetic representation of gender and magic. In these poems, the gendered imagery of the vegetal form accentuates the continuity of women’s entrapment. Unlike witches, they do not have access to magical power. In “Edge”, there is a hope for a continuous transformation, proposing that the deceased vegetal state might not be the woman’s final form. For example, verbs like “wears”, “flows”, “come” imply an active state: the woman is still alive, and she can overcome the aesthetic constraint of perfection and the fatigue of her sexually marked body. The presence of the moon also indicates the cycle between night and day: perhaps, when the sun comes up, the woman in “Edge” transforms again. Plath builds on the Ovidian transformation narratives, particularly on women’s (lack of) access to power and autonomy, which she brings into parallel with the gendered female body as a sight of transformation – from child to womanhood – in society. In “Edge”, the woman rejects the aesthetic and reproductive function of her female-sex marked body. Instead, she chooses to exist in a new form, which the poem does not show us, making the transformation an intimate process hidden from the male gaze. Plath ends the poem in the process of this transformation, not death, which shows for a more hopeful reading than previous critics suggested. In the two poems I looked at, Plath draws on the vocabulary of classical mythology to critique the misogyny in society that has denied women – and other marginalised groups – autonomy, voice, and power. The Ovidian metamorphosis functions as a metaphor through which Plath responds in her poetry to gendered-based violence and women’s limited choices regarding their sexuality. Next, I focus on another mythological and folkloric narrative of supernatural

transformation, shapeshifting, that offers women's right to autonomy. There is also a space for more fluidity in the exchange between animal and human forms.

Voluntary Transformations

Shapeshifting is a type of voluntary supernatural transformation during which the self's body is changed to animal form. It "breaches fundamental boundaries, such as those between humans and animals and between the divine and mundane realms" (Young 8). This supernatural transformation is often associated with women; they transgress gender boundaries and norms. Narratives of shapeshifting go back to classical mythology. In ancient Rome, *striges* were believed to be women transforming into owl-like creatures who lived on human flesh and blood, for which Ovid's *Fasti* is one of the central sources (Cohn 162). Classical texts differ on whether *striges* were flying women, transformed by some by supernatural power, or are purely birds; they are also described as resembling Harpies, the half-bird half-woman mythological monster (Ogden 10-11). The *striges* are considered a central source of the folk belief that witches can fly by transforming into birdlike creatures when gathering to their sabbath. During the medieval period, Regino of Prüm's *Canon Episcopi*, a guide to ecclesiastical laws and morals, introduced the idea of the night flight of witches (Cohn 168): "some wicked women ... believe and profess themselves, in the hours of night, to ride upon certain beasts with Diana, the goddess of pagans, and an innumerable multitude of women" ("Popular Beliefs" 179).

Another parallel between the *strix* and the witch is the idea that they eat infants, which shows the development of popular beliefs in the Western imagination.

Cohn argues that “it was the educated elite who, in the name of Christian doctrine, rejected the night-witch; while the common people continued to believe in her” (166). Paweł Rutkowski also suggests that in the early modern witch-hunt, witches’ “animal metamorphosis acquired a more definite, sinister character”, implying that they gained transformation power after their pact with the Devil (22). While witches’ flying was an accepted belief even among the early modern demonologists, narratives of shapeshifting only appeared in witch trial confessions (Levack, *The Witch-Hunt* 50). The ability to change shape is portrayed in early modern plays, such as *The Tempest*, in which Ariel is a shapeshifter. Yet, it is the blue-eyed hag, Sycorax, whose magical powers are transformational, inspired by Circe (Warner 100-101). Ariel’s freedom implies a change of shape, which I discuss later in more detail. To sum up, historically, shapeshifting has been associated with magical women and witches through which they gain bodily autonomy and power.

Sylvia Plath was influenced by her varied encounters with shapeshifting across mythology, the history of witch-hunt, and folklore. In her poems, the female poetic persona transforms into an animal form, which Plath links to the rebirth of the autonomous self. In “Lady Lazarus”, the speaker compares herself to a cat who was “Nine times to die” before she transforms into a phoenix (CP 244). In the bee poems, which I study in the next chapter, Plath merges the queen bee with her poetic alter ego. In “Witch Burning”, the speaker likens herself to a moth in the process of her burning transcendence. We can see the pattern in Plath’s poetry that she creates a bond between women’s autonomous transformation and birdlike creatures. I propose that Plath’s poetic narratives on shapeshifting build on the beliefs about witches’ power to transform into an animal form. My reading of “Goatsucker” and

“Ariel” focuses on the relationship between animal and human subjects and the autonomy the transformation offers to the poetic personae.

Plath originally wrote “Goatsucker” for Esther Baskin’s *Creatures of Darkness* (1962), a book on nocturnal animals, in which Esther’s husband Leonard Baskin illustrated the creatures. Plath owned a copy of *Creatures of Darkness*, which is kept at the Smith College Special Collection. It includes the inscription “Sylvia Plath, 23 Fitzroy Road, London NW1” (Steinberg, “Library of Sylvia Plath”). My research looks into Esther Baskin’s book, held at the University of Exeter’s Special Collections, which I consider influential in Plath’s poem. Despite Plath’s poem not being featured in Baskin’s book, *Creatures of Darkness* describes the goatsucker or nightjar:

The nightjar, with great gaping mouth, flies through the dusky forest and heath a hunt for insects and moths. His mouth is capacious trap to catch small flutterers in the twilight air. Like an owl’s, his head and eyes are large, as he flies noiseless through the umbrage ... The nightjar is also known as the goatsucker: this is because in Italy and Greece he is thought to suck the milk from goats. Aristotle has it that this milk-sucking bird causes the goat to go dry and blind. (“The Nightjar”)

The book provides significant knowledge of superstitions and folkloric elements of creatures. We can observe Baskin’s use of the male pronoun regarding the goatsucker, which Plath likewise employs in “Goatsucker”. Plath encountered several folkloric beliefs about the bird when she went to the Boston Public Library to research the subject in early 1959. In her subsequent letter, she informed Esther Baskin of finishing the “Goatsucker” poem:

the Bird’s also called the Puckerbird, or Puckeridge after a disease it’s supposed to give cows & weanling calves in England, so it’s a double threat,

in superstition, to cows as well as goats. And it's called the Devil-bird in Ceylon (L2 293).

Plath's citation highlights the predatory character of the superstitious bird, which likens the goatsucker to the figure of the *strix*. In her letter, she quotes from Robert Graves's poem, "Outlaws", which draws on the folkloric and mythological origin of the nocturnal birds: "Old gods, tamed to silence, there / In the wet woods they lurk" (qtd. in L2 294). It is possible that Plath's "Goatsucker" was influenced by Graves' poem due to its similar description of superstitious birds as misunderstood creatures. In her journals, Plath took notes on nocturnal birds, which include the following remarks: "Superstition- peasants: in all languages"; "Puck- disease in cattle | mischievous demon" (J 594-595). The notes describe the oral retelling of folkloric beliefs Plath also draws on in her poem: "So fables say" (CP 111). "Goatsucker" was likely influenced by other mythical birds, such as the *strix* possessing demonic and flesh-eating characteristics associated with shapeshifting women, which I demonstrate in my close reading.

"Goatsucker" is written in sonnet form; the octave focuses more on the superstitions about the goatsucker, while the second six-line stanza takes a closer perspective on the identity of the nocturnal creature. The poem starts with the lines "Old goatherds swear how all night long they hear / The warning whirr and burring of the bird" (CP 111). Here, Plath recalls beliefs by referencing the "old goatherds" who witness the night-time hunt of the goatsucker. The alliteration and emphasis of the *w* sound continue in the following lines, which portray the diabolic features of the creature: "Who wakes with darkness and till dawn works hard / Vampiring dry of milk each great goat udder" (CP 111). The lines reverse the order of the natural speech

("works hard till dawn") to stress the rhythm. This way, she likewise links the near rhyme of "hear" and "hard". The emphasis on the vampiristic goatsucker evokes the *strix*, having similar predatory behaviour. The supernatural feature of the goatsucker is suggested in naming it a "Devil-bird" (CP 111). The poem links the bird's superstitious reputation to witches: "So fables say the Goatsucker moves, masked from men's sight / In an ebony air, on wings of witch cloth" (CP 111). Comparing wings to "witch's cloth" reinforces the bond between flying creatures and witches and alludes to shapeshifting.

In the folkloric imagination, the goatsucker has been associated with witches. The bird was thought to have "the sound of witches hiding in the bushes" (Sharps). A similar belief appeared during the Salem witch trials in which Tituba recalled a bird during her confession. Elaine G. Breslaw names Tituba's possible reference to a bird significant to Indigenous communities "the supernatural ancestor" of the goatsucker (547). Plath's portrayal of the "ruby fire" eyes of the goatsucker and its "ill-famed" murderous character can be understood as an anticipation of the phoenix-like poetic persona in "Lady Lazarus" with her red hair: "Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair" (CP 247). We can see Plath's developing pattern that associates flying creatures with witch-like characteristics. Likewise, she creates a parallel between "Goatsucker" and the slightly later poem, "Witch Burning", by comparing the poetic subject to a moth. In "Goatsucker", Plath describes the bird as a "luna moth" (CP 111), which she first capitalised in the typed draft of her poem in a letter to her mother: "It shadows only -- cave-mouth bristle beset --- / Cockchafers and the wan, green Luna moth" (L2 295). At the end of "Witch Burning", written in November 1959, the speaker states that "I'll fly through the candle's mouth like a singeless moth" (CP 135). Parallel with

this, Esther Baskin's book suggests that "Luna moths are grotesquely large as birds"; she adds: "[q]uivering and agasp in search for light and fire, they end their short lives in it and burn in an auto-da-fé" ("Luna moth"). The unusual metaphor of the burning of heretic and martyrdom used to describe the tragic death of the luna moth demonstrates the rich literary, folkloric, and textual sources Plath encountered. In Chapter 1, my reading of "Fever 103" highlighted that the poem originally had a stanza that included the term "auto-da-fé" to portray the poetic persona's burning as she ascends to heaven. Plath's wording proposes her familiarity with medieval and early modern inquisitorial prosecutions. Although her inscription in Baskin's book suggests that she got the copy of *Creatures of Darkness* between December 1962 and January 1963, it is possible that Plath read the book before moving to London and that it inspired "Fever 103", written on 20 October 1962. Plath's knowledge of the history of the witch-hunt and folkloric beliefs argues for her linking women's autonomy to birdlike flying creatures in the poem.

"Goatsucker" also recalls Anne Sexton's "Her Kind" (1959), which "speaks for women whose passions have not been given prominent literary treatment" (Golden 16). "Her Kind" draws on beliefs about flying witches:

I have gone out, a possessed witch,
haunting the black air, braver at night;
dreaming evil, I have done my hitch
over the plain houses, light by light: (15).

There are several parallels between Plath's and Sexton's poems, such as flying being associated with women's freedom, reference to black/ebony air, and the seemingly dangerous and misunderstood female personae. The line "Brightness

ascends my thighs" (CP 136) from "Witch Burning" is also alluded to in Sexton's poem "where your flames still bite my thigh" (16). Although "Witch Burning" was written in Yaddo, Robert Lowell's writing workshop at Boston University prompted Plath's and Sexton's "two-way exchange of ideas, influences, and writing styles" (Crowther, *Three-Martini* 137). The poems critique the negative associations of women's access to autonomy, particularly the perception of the sexually liberated woman as dangerous. Sexton and Plath draw on popular imagery of flying women, such as witches and the *strix*. They likewise evoke Lilith, who is attended by screech owls in the King James Version of the Bible: "The wild beasts of the desert shall also meet with the wild beasts of the island, and the satyr shall cry to his fellow; the screech owl also shall rest there, and find for herself a place of rest" (Isaiah 34:14). The allusions to flying associated with autonomy, disguise, vampirism, and the negative perception of the superstitious creature suggest that although Plath's poem is about the goatsucker, it relies on various other sources on shapeshifting women. "Goatsucker" foreshadows the transformation into different animals in Plath's late poetry as a metaphor for female autonomy.

While shapeshifting signals a complete change from human to animal form, Plath's poetry likewise portrays the possibilities of a fluid human-animal transformation. In "Ariel", I demonstrate that horse riding portrays the symbiotic transformation between the human and animal bodies. My reading centres on the merger that implies a non-hierarchical relationship that exceeds the gender and human boundaries and creates a fluid shape for the speaker's autonomous self. Previously, some critics have highlighted the process of transformation in Plath's "Ariel". Leonard Sanazaro understands the poem as the "transfiguration of the old

self” into a renewed self (74). Van Dyne focuses on the speaker’s transformation into Lady Godiva, which she calls explicitly sexual and erotic (*Revising Life* 122). Clark argues that “[t]he speaker shape-shifts, becomes pure motion” (*Red Comet* 795). Previous critical works are helpful in considering “Ariel” as a poem about transformation. However, they do not explicitly focus on the supernatural elements of this process. I propose that in the poem, the speaker’s and the horse’s merger alludes to hybridity, which signifies the refusal of fixed boundaries between human and nonhuman.

My analysis of the poem considers Plath’s process of writing the poem to track her development of the transformation. The manuscripts of “Ariel”, kept at the Smith College Special Collection, are written on pink Smith College memo paper. They include an undated holograph, which according to Smith is numbered 1, but Plath’s handwriting looks like a “2”. The next numbered pages are 3 and 4; consequently, there is possibly a missing holograph of “Ariel”. In the likely initial draft, the stanzas are dense and long on this one-page holograph, yet Plath’s handwriting is clear and neat; it only includes a slight revision. The second holograph comprises two pages numbered 3 and 4. These drafts are written on the same pink memo paper and have significantly more corrections. Number 3 is dated 27 October 1962 and is a revised version of the draft numbered 2. However, the holograph numbered 4 looks like a different version, an unfinished draft. In my analysis, I refer to the numbered 3 and 4 holographs as separate drafts because they tell a different narrative of “Ariel”. I discuss later in more detail the page numbered 4, which almost reads like another poem that Plath quickly abandoned. There are also additional typescripts: four dated 27 October 1962 and one undated draft. Dyne argues that the main difference

between Plath's handwritten drafts and the final poem is the pace: "[b]y disrupting and fragmenting these in her revision, Plath creates the illusion of pure energy in motion" (*Revising Life* 126). In the holographs, Plath uses longer lines, which create a slower reading experience. The manuscripts include several exclamation marks, which Plath later abandoned or changed to em dashes:

God's lioness!
How one we grow!
Pivot of heels and knees! The furrow
(MS "Ariel", 27 October 1962)

God's lioness,
How one we grow,
Pivot of heels and knees! —
The furrow (CP 239)

The alteration in the punctuation accelerates the reading pace. I pay attention to the changes in the manuscripts to demonstrate the development of her writing process that shifts from horse riding, merging the human and the animal subject, to associating the transformation with fluidity and a non-hierarchical human-nonhuman relationship.

Previously, critics, for example, William V. Davis highlighted the three sources of "Ariel", which include the direct reference to Plath's horse riding, the spirit from *The Tempest*, signifying creativity and freedom, and the Hebrew translation of Ariel meaning "lion of God" that Plath feminised in her poem (61). By relying on the titular similarity between the horse and the spirit, Plath reinforces the merger of different bodily and spiritual forms that allude to the speaker's thrive for autonomy. "Ariel" was foreshadowed by Plath's experience of horse riding during her Cambridge years, which she commemorated in "Whiteness I Remember", which was inspired by the horse called Sam:

Simplified me: a rider, riding
Hung out over hazard, over hooves
Loud on earth's bedrock. Almost thrown, not
Thrown: fear, wisdom, at one: all colors
Spinning to still in his one whiteness. (CP 103)

The lines portray the horse riding more explicitly than in "Ariel" and separate the two personae, the horse and the rider. Yet, the enjambement "all colors / Spinning" prefigures the fluid transformation of bodies in "Ariel". In her letter from 1956, Plath writes about horse riding as an ecstatic and transformative experience: "[n]ever has every fiber of mind & body been so simply & passionately concentrated" (L1 1044). In Renée R. Curry's reading, the poem associates whiteness with racial sameness; the speaker "perceives the power of nature as white" (14; 138). Despite the influence of "Whiteness I Remember", Clark argues that the title of "Ariel" provided more creative possibilities for Plath, alluding to Shakespeare's Ariel and the Pegasus figure from Greek mythology (*Red Comet* 792). Building on the previous critical works, my reading argues that the merging of the human and animal bodies suggests the equal relationship that the transformation produces. There is a sense of flexibility and fluidity, which allows multiplicity. It is a counter-narrative to women's gendered entrapment, in, for example, "Virgin in a Tree".

The finished version of "Ariel" is written in short lines of tercets and is filled with enjambments and em dashes, which contribute to the fast tempo. The transformation is also marked by the movement of colours from dark to redness. White refers to Godiva's figure, which recalls "Whiteness I Remember", dark/black is associated with death and stillness, and red, which is more dominant in the drafts, is linked with fiery burning and rebirth. Although "Ariel" centres on the transformation, it starts with stillness: "Stasis in darkness" (CP 239). The adverbs and echoes

demonstrate that Plath's poem is in a continuous movement: "Then the substanceless blue / Pour of tor and distances" (CP 239). The sibilance and rhyme ("darkness" / "substanceless" / "distances") are repeated throughout the first part of the poem. Plath did not always start "Ariel" with these defining lines. In the holograph numbered as 4, for example, the poem began with a different stanza, focusing on death, which Plath then crossed out: "[Hands, hearts, dead men / Dead men / Hands, hearts, peel off —]" (MS "Ariel", 27 October 1962). Though the lines allude to human presence, the lifeless body parts accelerate the stillness. The silent *h* and *d* reinforce the still and dead scene. There is tension between the imagery and the fast-paced reading of the stanza. The poem's start in the holograph implies that violence has been committed; we do not know who the dead men are or what might have happened to them.

From the second stanza, the pace of the poem accelerates, which is highlighted by the short words and allusions to horse riding: "God's lioness / How one we grow, / Pivot of heels and knees! — The furrow" (CP 239). In the tercet, the speaker and the horse blend into each other ("How one we grow"), which is the first appearance of the process of transformation. Perloff argues that "Ariel" demonstrates the "identification with the animal kingdom ... [a]s the motion accelerates, the speaker cannot distinguish the brown furrow ahead from the brown neck of the horse" ("'Angst' and Animism" 66). The recurring enjambement enhances the quick pace and the motion of transformation. Further, the internal rhyme stresses the merging of the bodies ("heels" / "knees"), which echoes through the poem. The third stanza continues the metamorphosis: "Splits and passes, sister to / The brown arc" (CP 239). Here, the reference to the sisterhood stresses female kinship, which

is prefigured in the naming of the horse “God’s lioness,” which alludes to its supernatural character. Plath’s gendering of the animal as female suggests the influence of *The Tempest*. In the play, Prospero often compares the spirit to female mythological creatures: “Go make thyself like a nymph o’ th’ sea”; “Bravely the figure of this harpy hast thou” (1.2.301; 3.3.83). I interpret Ariel’s character as a hybrid creature whose change of shape and subsequent liberation implies bodily autonomy. In Plath’s “Ariel”, the bond between the human and the animal subject is explicitly gendered, which reappears in the bee sequence. The poem deploys the horse as a metaphor for the speaker’s autonomy. The relationship describes their compassion and equality, which the fluid transformation accentuates.

The manuscripts reveal that Plath initially imagined a very different relationship between the rider and the horse. The first holograph numbered 2 left out Lady Godiva’s figure and focused only on the horse riding. Later, Plath gave a greater narrative role to female autonomy. In the holograph numbered 3, she inserted a stanza between the lines “Flakes from my heels” and “And now I” by drawing a right-sided arrow – which also functions as a visual aid to the phrase, “I / Am the arrow”. Lady Godiva appears in the right-side margin:

White
Godiva, I unpeel —
Dead hands, dead
Stringencies! (MS "Ariel", 27 October 1962).

While the marginalia reads as four lines, Plath likely meant it as a tercet and there was not enough space on the right side of the paper. The adjective “white” is an additional feature of Lady Godiva, suggesting that Plath wanted to stress the bond

between the horse and the female rider through the recurring white colour. In “Virgin in a Tree”, the symbiosis between arboreal life and the girl is highlighted with the whiteness.

In the next holograph, numbered 4, the poem takes a different turn and centres on the theme of female autonomy. In this draft, the writing does not take up the whole page. Most of the lines are crossed out with large black waves, suggesting that Plath quickly abandoned them. The development of the holographs shows that Plath considered centring her poem either on the horse riding, which focuses on a metamorphosis narrative, or the female poetic persona and her liberation through the riding. Here, Plath included several new stanzas portraying the female speaker more explicitly, who also undergoes a fiery rebirth during the horse riding. These tercets are mostly intact in the manuscript, and the wavy pen movement, symbolising Plath’s abandonment of the passage, only slightly touched the lines.

In the deleted passage, the portrayal of the poetic persona borrows imagery from Plath’s previous poems that narrate a fiery transformation:

[Rising, galloping,
In a season of dying,
The season of burning.

In a season of burning, I
am White Godiva
On fire, my hair,

My one resort
Brown furrows, rippling] (MS "Ariel", 27 October 1962).

The lines “In a season of dying, / The season of burning” evoke “In the month of red leaves I climb to a bed of fire” (CP 135) from the first stanza of “Witch Burning”.

Plath's association of fire with red hair alludes to the speaker of "Lady Lazarus" whereas the movements of rising and burning recall "Fever 103". In "Ariel", Plath rhymes "hair" with "air" ("Hauls me through air — / Thighs, hair" (CP 239)), which is reminiscent of the ending of "Lady Lazarus": "I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air" (CP 247). The description of Lady Godiva in "Ariel" concludes with her association with whiteness, which implies power and the motion of transformation: "White / Godiva, I unpeel / Dead hands, dead stringencies" (CP 239). The references to Godiva's naked ride suggest "female rebellion against male perfidy", which evokes poems such as "Lady Lazarus" (Clark, *Red Comet* 793). The verb "unpeel" compares to the line "unwrap me hand and foot" from "Lady Lazarus", alluding to the transformation of the female subject. Plath's initial exclusion of Lady Godiva from the poem, prior to the figure's central role in the draft numbered as 4, and her later merger of human and nonhuman bodies suggest that she was hesitant about the boundaries between the self and other. "Ariel" demonstrates that Plath's representation of autonomous and powerful women who possess supernatural qualities, particularly in her October 1962 poems, is linked to the animal world. While the motion of transformation gives bodily and sexual autonomy to Lady Godiva, Plath implies that women are trapped in their gendered human bodies. She deploys horse/phoenix/bee/goatsucker to grant (supernatural) power to her female poetic speakers.

In the last part of the poem, the speaker's identity becomes more dominant. Her self-identification with the arrow that flies in the air demonstrates her independence. The rhyming rising vowels of "now", "flies", "I", and "cry" reinforce the upward movement at the end of the poem. In the holograph numbered 3, Plath

accentuates the separation of the human and the animal subjects by including an extra tercet, which becomes the second last stanza:

Melts in the wall
O bright // beast, I
Am the arrow, the dew that flies
Suicidal, at one with the drive
Into the red
Eye, cauldron of morning. (MS "Ariel", 27 October 1962)

Plath uses a { sign between “Am the arrow, the dew that flies” and the first two lines of the last tercet of the poem, implying that she wanted to merge the lines into a stanza. In the manuscript, the textual closeness of the horse (“beast”) and the rider (“I”) expresses an ambiguity, foreshadowing the subsequent merger of bodies in the poem. It is likely that Plath only decided later to stress the hybridity of the poetic subjects.

She kept the separation of the horse and the poetic persona in the second revised typescript dated 27 October 1962, typed on a carbon paper. This typescript only includes one revision in the stanzas, describing a closer relationship between the rider and her horse:

Melts in the wall
[O bright]
And [Beast,] I
I am the arrow // [t]The dew that flies (TS "Ariel", 27 October 1962).

Here, the capitalised “Beast” implies the uniqueness of the horse. It creates a non-hierarchical relationship between the Godiva-like rider and the animal. The crossed-

out enjambment of “[bright] // And [Beast]” recalls “God’s lioness,” attributing to the animal a supernatural character. Van Dyne suggests that the line breaks in the stanza read as “a fluid exchange of identities” (*Revising Life* 121). Another instability in the manuscripts is the fluctuation of the arrow as a reference point for the speaker. In the holograph numbered 2, Plath is more explicit about the association of rising and flying: “I rise / With the arrow, the dew that flies” (MS “Ariel”, undated). As the later versions of the poem demonstrate, Plath’s speaker moves from rising and flying with the arrow to being the instrument herself. The shifting reference indicates that Plath was uncertain with the focus of her poem: whether it should narrate ascending, signalling a rebirth, or centre on horse riding as a metaphor for the fluid transformation. In my reading, the recurring references to air, flying, and rising movements suggest that horse riding is a motion that merges the female rider and her horse into a hybrid form. The fluid transformation textually and metaphorically breaks the boundaries between human and nonhuman subjects and suggests a non-hierarchical existence.

“Ariel” draws on mythological sources to portray horse riding as flying. Throughout my chapter, I discussed Plath’s association between flying creatures, such as *strix* and goatsucker, and women’s autonomy, which Plath also alluded to in “Goatsucker”, “Witch Burning”, “Lady Lazarus”, and the bee sequence. Previously, Ted Hughes implied the influence of the myth “Story of Phaethon” from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in “Ariel”, linking it to “Sheep in Fog” in a lecture in 1988 (Ranger, “Ovid, Plath, Baskin, Hughes” 9). The Ovidian myth understands horse riding as flying, which implies the rising movement in Plath’s poem. In the story, Phaethon asks his father, Helios, the Sun god, to give him the chariot of light to drive it to

heaven. However, he cannot control the winged horses, and the chariot starts to melt as he falls to the ground. The myth ends with the metamorphosis of his sisters into trees because of their grief. Barkan also argues that “Phaethon’s ride threatens the very existence of the categories”, which suggests the hybridity between the horse and the rider (34). In Hughes’s translation of the myth, he uses images of fiery burning to describe the horse riding into the Sun: “Now Phaethon saw the whole world / Mapped with fire. He looked through flames / Flame in and flame out, like a fire-eater” (*Tales from Ovid* 38). The expression of “fire-eater” indicates the influence of Plath’s poetry, such as “Lady Lazarus”. Plath’s manuscripts of “Ariel” heavily reference burning, alluding to the Ovidian myth. The poem refers to the flying of the winged horse and evokes mythological creatures like centaurs. Unlike Phaethon, Plath’s speaker is in control of the horse. In “Ariel”, Plath focuses on female autonomy through bonding the speaker with her horse. She shifts the culturally negative connotations associated with flying women, such as the night flight of witches, to an affirmative narrative on female autonomy, highlighting the liberatory motion of flying.

The ending of “Ariel” enhances the association of flying with freedom:

The dew that flies
Suicidal, at one with the drive
Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning. (CP 240)

The expression of “one with the drive” suggests the merging of bodies with the movement, which evokes the beginning of the poem (“How one we grow”). The citation argues that the motion of transformation has reached the “cauldron of

morning”, which ends the process of metamorphosis. Plath plays with the sonic similarity between “Eye” and the self’s “I”, implying the merger of the poetic persona and the Sun. The word “cauldron” suggests the merging of bodies. It is a container for mixing different ingredients, echoing the witches’ cauldron from *Macbeth*, which melts and blends under the Sun’s heat. There is perceived fluidity between the human and the nonhuman subjects. We do not know whose “Eye” is referenced, the rider’s or the horse’s. The full stop at the end of the poem reinforces the stillness with which the poem starts. In the final version of “Ariel”, this line is the only one that portrays the colour red, which recalls the changes from dawn till morning. In the draft numbered 4, the fiery red is associated with Lady Godiva’s burning red hair; therefore, the colour is coded as the colour of the transformed self.

In “Ariel”, Plath’s focus moves from rebirth to the merging of bodies as a form of metamorphosis, emphasising the colour changes. I read her portrayal of the fluid boundaries between the human and nonhuman as a counter-narrative to the patriarchal forces of violent transformation of women, which can entrap them in a “rooted” existence. “Ariel” creates compassion, equality, and fluidity between the subjects, which implies the ambiguities of the human-nonhuman hybrid shape inspired by Ariel’s figure and Ovidian myths. For Plath, the animal world provides the possibility of moving away from the restrictions of the gendered bodily existence. Her portrayal of horse riding is figurative, not literal, which links flying to freedom. “Ariel” not only narrates the transformation of the rider and the horse into a new form of existence, but proposes that the motion is a transformation. The poem breaks the boundaries between the human-animal subjects, challenging not only who is

considered human but the gendered corporeal existence to which women are assigned.

Conclusion

Plath employs different kinds of supernatural transformations to respond to normative ideas about gender, power, and agency. The violent metamorphosis of the girl in "Virgin in a Tree", the perfected floral body of the woman in "Edge", and the exploration of animal and human subjects in "Ariel" and "Goatsucker" are narratives through which Plath describes female corporeal transformation. It is either a creation of a new autonomous persona or a gendered entrapment in a vegetal form. In several of her poems, the female-centred retellings of Ovidian myths critique the negative associations attached to women's stories traditionally told by male writers. Ranger points out that Plath offers a space to explore subjects usually missing from the dominant narrative ("Plath and Classics" 34). The involuntary and voluntary transformations create different poetic retellings of female experiences. The former shows that women's existence is always gendered and tied to the female body, which restricts women. In the latter, the voluntary transformation suggests access to autonomy and power, and it is a non-hierarchical transformation from human to animal or a hybrid form. In either case, Plath questions whether women can accomplish bodily, spiritual, and sexual autonomy and power in their gendered bodies. She experiments with the ambiguities of the human-nonhuman shapes, challenging the fixed boundaries of humans, particularly of women.

The poems I studied demonstrate the influence of supernatural transformations across Western mythology and folklore in Plath's poetry, which centre on women's struggle for autonomy. The next and final chapter continues the discussion of Plath's employment of animals in her portrayal of women's access to magical power. My reading of the bee sequence draws attention to Plath's interest in flying creatures as a representation of female autonomy. I also return to Plath's bee metaphor as the other within the political framework of the Cold War embodied in the witch figure, which circles back to my analysis in Chapter 1.

Chapter 6: Witchcraft and the Other in the Bee Poems

Introduction

This chapter looks at the supernatural elements in Sylvia Plath's bee sequence. I argue that Plath's portrayal of the bees employs elements from witch imagery and her poems interrogate the rhetoric that associates the dark other with witchcraft and black magic. In the bee poems, the speaker moves from fearing the bees to controlling them, then she develops a kinship with the creatures through their shared experience of female survival. The bees' defiance of the oppressive control alludes to the uprising of marginalised groups. My chapter demonstrates that Plath's sequence was also influenced by political events, such as immigration and the fall of the British Empire through which she interrogates the boundaries between the self and the other. I look back at several of the themes of the previous chapters, such as the racist rhetoric of post-war politics, particularly regarding witchcraft, the concepts of white and black magic, the bee metaphor in Plath's writings, and her association of flying creatures with female autonomy. Like "Poem for a Birthday", the bee sequence also signals a shift in Plath's poetry. She developed a poetic persona in the image of the queen bee, which prefigures the portrayal of female heroines fighting for autonomy in her October 1962 poems, for example, "Lady Lazarus" and "Ariel". The four bee poems I read in this chapter are "The Bee Meeting", "The Arrival of the Bee Box", "Stings", and "Wintering", in which I focus on the bees' association with the other, which is brought into parallel with the racial politics of witchcraft and (magical) power.

Similar to my reading of “Ariel”, “Goatsucker”, and “Witch Burning” that I discussed in the previous chapters, Plath’s characterisation of the bees builds on narratives of female autonomy associated with witch-like flying creatures. Her bee metaphor deploys the witch figure that stands for marginalised and prosecuted groups, as she does in “Lady Lazarus”. Like in the United States, where Tituba from the Salem witch trials – discussed in Chapter 1 – exemplifies how racial and gender stereotypes are associated with witches, in post-war Britain, the discourse of witchcraft was likewise embedded in racist rhetoric and was linked to otherness. Literary witch figures were often characterised by dark features; the “colour-coded threat, related to the racial rhetoric” was associated with the foreign and Communism (Gibson, *Rediscovering Renaissance Witchcraft* 88). In particular, Dennis Wheatley’s horror and occultist novels articulated nationalism and conservative values, in which “British heroes confront villains and devilish figures whose characteristics resemble those of the ‘enemy’ we all know” (Wiske 100). In Wheatley’s novel *The Satanist* (1960), “devil-worshipping witches fund communists, commit murder, drug and rape women and blackmail public men in an attempt to destroy the British economy and, eventually, cause World War Three” (Gibson, *Rediscovering Renaissance Witchcraft* 79-80). Whitley’s books conflate magical practices of black people, such as Voudoun, with satanic and diabolic practices, demonstrating the racist deployment of supernatural concepts. Whitley echoes a white Christian superiority similar to the rhetoric of McCarthyism. In his novels, religion “or religiously inspired symbolic objects carry dependable powers”, meaning that evil is often defeated by Christianity embodied in the Church of England (Wiske 102; 104).

Some of Plath's short stories, for example, "Mothers", also refer to the supremacy of the Church of England, which builds on contemporary tensions about national identity and immigration to the United Kingdom. In her bee sequence, Plath deploys political discourses in her association of the bees with darkness and danger, and suggestions that they defy the power of the beekeepers. My reading demonstrates that her poems allude to the McCarthy witch-hunt, the Civil Rights Movement and draw on the collapse of the British Empire, anti-Irish sentiment in Britain, and Cold-War anxieties about the dark other. In the sequence, Plath interrogates the racial rhetoric of witchcraft that vilifies blackness, which her poems subvert. To fully understand the political and cultural context of Plath's bee poems, first, I look at the discourses circulating in the 1950s-1960s in England about immigration, and fear of the other, and how they relate to modern witchcraft.

In the early twentieth century, the Egyptologist Margaret Alice Murray popularised the idea of witch-cults. Her most well-known book *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921) builds on the idea that witches participated in a fertility cult during the Middle Ages and early modern period. They celebrated the Horned God, who became the Christian representation of the Devil. Murray established her hypothesis based on manipulated and edited confessions from different times and locations of Western Europe, ideas with a lack of substantial evidence, and relied on her anthropological knowledge of tribal fertility rituals. However, she was not the first to hypothesise about the existence of witch-cults, but was inspired by previous popular writings, such as Jules Michelet's *La Sorcière* (1862) and Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890) (Cohn 150-152). In her book, she regularly applied her knowledge of tribal cultures to the fertility cult of witches. Murray's book disregards

the social and political context of the early modern period, including folk beliefs, and she claims that witches are non-magical figures who were part of an underground society. In her book, she regards every confession, every prosecution as evidence for the existence of witch-cults (Burr 780-781). Jacqueline Simpson highlights that Murray's description of the "highly disciplined organisation secretly permeating society" fitted the 1920s, which abounded in conspiracy theories concerning the political groups, such as the Bolsheviks to Zionists (92). Even the early suffragettes were viewed as conspirator groups who formed an underground secret society, in an allusion to witches conspirator groups who formed an underground secret society that alludes to witches (Bearman 379).

Despite some earlier critics, Murray's hypothesis continued to be widespread for decades, and her 1929 entry on "Witchcraft" in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* remained unchanged; it was even reprinted in 1969 (Simpson 89). The entry included subheadings, such as "Medieval witches", "The Witch-cult", and "Transformation into Animals", and focused primarily on Murray's theory, not on the history of the witch-hunt ("Witchcraft"). During her high school years, Sylvia Plath used the 14th edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1929) for her paper on Hawthorne's novel on witchcraft laws, which featured Murray's description of the alleged cult of witches. Plath could have encountered Murray's definition of "Witchcraft", which remained in circulation for decades. Plath's *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* also defines the witches' sabbath: "[i]n medieval demonology, a midnight assembly in which demons, sorcerers, and witches were thought to celebrate their orgies" ("witches' sabbath"). The entry demonstrates the influence of Murray's hypothesis, particularly the allusion to fertility rituals as "orgies". Plath

possibly read this definition printed on the same page as her underlined noun “witch”. The more established critiques of the witch-cult theory became widespread during the 1960s-1970s. British historians of the witch-hunt criticised her work, including Keith Thomas in *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971), Alan Macfarlane in *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (1970), and Norman Cohn’s *Europe’s Inner Demons* (1975).

The denunciation of Murray’s theories did not mean that her enormous influence has ended. Gerald Gardner, the founder of Wicca and the most influential figure of twentieth-century Neo-Paganism, borrowed several ideas from Murray’s witch-cult theory. Further, she wrote the introduction to his book *Witchcraft Today* (1954). In Gardner’s account, modern pagans were organised into covens, where they performed fertility rites; these ceremonies compromised dances and singing around a circle shape (*Witchcraft Today* 20; 26). His allusions often frame religion in the post-war political climate. According to him, one can be a witch and a Christian, and it is “easier than being a Christian and a Communist” (Gardner, *Witchcraft Today* 121). He also claims that witches cast spells on Hitler to protect their land, and he likens the torture of witches to the interrogations of Nazis and Communists (Gardner, *Witchcraft Today* 104; 112). Gardner’s political parallels echo Plath’s allusions to witch prosecutions, for example, in “Lady Lazarus”, that function as a metaphor for the mid-twentieth century political conflicts. With this in mind, I investigate the depictions of witchcraft in post-war England, particularly the influence of Murray and Gardner, and how these suggest a comparison between Plath’s representation of the beehive in her sequence and a witches’ coven.

Although there is no hard evidence of Plath's knowledge of Murray's witch-cult theory, I argue that she was familiar with the idea of the fertility cult of witches. As highlighted, Plath used the 14th edition of the *Britannica*, first printed in 1929, which contained Murray's article on witchcraft and her hypothesis of witch-cults. Nancy D. Hargrove also argues that Plath's poem "Vanity Fair", written in 1956, shows her familiarity with theories of witchcraft, such as Murray's fertility-cult hypothesis, as her poem references a witch's coven (88-89). Besides Murray's ideas, Plath likely had some knowledge of the growing Neo-Pagan movements in Britain. From the mid-1950s, Gardner started publicly promoting Wicca in newspapers, radio, and interviews. Plath read articles from *The Observer*, whose poetry editor was Al Alvarez, her friend and literary critic. The articles included a piece by Gerald Gardner from 1956 in which he defended present-day witches as "ordinary people", though he also goes so far as to suggest that the Salem witch trials were not a "smoke without fire" ("Modern Witches").

Some papers approached Wicca with hostility, suggesting the perception of witches and witchcraft as a threat to British society (*The Triumph of the Moon* 256-257). In 1956, a report from Exeter states that witches in Devon are still practising both black and white magic ("Devon Witches"). Another statement from the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Liverpool warned against the rise of immigrant pagans in Britain. In the article, Archbishop Dr William Godfrey warned the new arrivals of Irish immigrants "of the many pagan tendencies in Britain", continuing that "the moral outlook [is] totally different in many ways" in England than in Ireland ("Pagan Tendencies"). The Archbishop's statement also alludes to the anti-Catholic sectarianism of the 1950s Liverpool (Roberts 25; 31). However, his expression

“pagan immigrants” could refer to racism against black people from Commonwealth countries. While the hostility against blacks and Irish originated from different sources, they were treated similarly in England, as demonstrated by the often-used “No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs” signs (Fielding 132). In post-war Britain, discussions of modern witchcraft were influenced by the prejudices at the time, such as racism. We can see a parallel between the hostility against the racially other and witchcraft. My reading of Plath’s bee poems argues that she draws these parallels in her portrayal of the bees as the dark other.

To my knowledge, no work has explored Ted Hughes’s familiarity with Murray’s witch-cult theory. However, his poem “Witches”, published first in 1958, shows awareness of the discourses on witchcraft in post-war Britain:

Once was every woman the witch
To ride a weed the ragwort road:
Devil to so whatever she would:
Each rosebud, every old bitch.
.....
Dancing in Ireland nightly, gone
To Norway (the ploughboy bridled),
Nightlong under the blackamoor spraddled,
Back beside their spouse by dawn (THCP 80).

The poem describes several popular beliefs about witchcraft that Murray also reproduced in her book, for example, the night rides of witches and sexual encounters with the Devil, which previously had been regarded as dreaming, hallucination, or hysteria of women (*The Witch-Cult* 10; 177). In the poem, the line “To ride a weed the ragwort road” evokes Murray’s hypothesis that brooms were a form of sticks “for going to a Sabbath or for use in the processional dance. The sticks were stalks of the broom-plant, of ragwort, hemp, bean, or any hollow stalk” (*The*

God of the Witches 88-89). Hughes's poem associated Ireland with witches, particularly their night-flying and dancing. Gardner devotes a chapter to Irish Witchcraft describing a presumed "ordinary fertility dance" of Alice Kyteler, the first accused witch of Ireland, who was tried for denying the Church and holding a midnight witches' sabbath (*Witchcraft Today* 99). Apart from Ireland, the other geographically specific chapter in Gardner's book is "Out of the Land of Egypt?", which is broadly concerned with indigenous and African magical traditions. Gardner's paralleling of Ireland and Egypt as locations associated with magic, particularly his naming of "primitive" people, suggests a colonial view. His wording emphasises the similar treatment of Irish immigrants and black people in post-war England.¹¹ Hughes singles out Ireland regarding its history of witchcraft, though his interest in Ireland likely lies in its association with Celtic myths and Catholic Ireland's worship of the Virgin Mary. My research proposes that Plath knew of the varied discourses of witchcraft in the post-war period, from modern witches to the utilisation of witchcraft in political rhetoric. I read the bee sequence as her poetic interrogation of the other in the post-war era by identifying the bees with dark supernatural beings, alluding to the racial rhetoric of witchcraft, who can overcome oppressive powers and become autonomous.

Blackness and Flying Women in the Bee Sequence

Plath wrote the bee sequence between 3-9 October 1962. The manuscripts, kept at the Smith College Special Collections, show that she originally titled these

¹¹ Though English hostility against the Irish originated from anti-Catholicism and not colour-racism (Fielding 10).

poems “Bees”. The bee poems have attracted various interpretations. Critics such as Susan Van Dyne and Tracy Brain argue for the intellectual, sexual, reproductive, and physical autonomy achieved in the poems that manifest in the image of the queen bee (*Revising Life* 103-104; *The Other Sylvia Plath* 69-74). Others, like Karen Jackson Ford and Alicia Ostriker, focus on Plath’s rich metaphor-making in the poems, examining the themes of female autonomy (137; 99-100). Recent critics point out Plath’s sourcing of the beehive metaphor from Western ideas about human society (Rogers and Sleigh 299). This interpretation likens the beehive to an organisation with a hierarchical structure, which alludes to a religious group or secret society. Building on previous criticism, my reading of the bee poems uniquely demonstrates that Plath employs supernatural imagery to interrogate questions of power, otherness, and community, which engage with contemporary issues of race and gender. Plath’s bee metaphor draws on ideas from “Goatsucker” and “Witch Burning”, which portray misunderstood and outcast figures alluding to witches. It also foreshadows “Lady Lazarus” and “Ariel”, in which the animal world offers the poetic personae freedom and autonomy.

The first poem I look at is “The Bee Meeting”, written on 3 October 1962; it comprises eleven, five-line stanzas. The poem describes the speaker’s initiation into the beekeepers’ meeting. Scholars such as Perloff and Van Dyne argue that “The Bee Meeting” reads as a ritualistic initiation (“The Two Ariels” 15; *Revising Life* 105). More recently, Clark remarks the poem narrates a “Gothic assemblage” reminiscent of a village sacrificial ritual in, for example, Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery” (*Red Comet* 767). Ford likewise claims that Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown” influenced Plath’s poem (142). In the short story, which takes

place during the Salem witch trials, Young Goodman Brown participates in a nightmarish witches' sabbath during which he encounters members of his community who participate in the secret gathering. Likewise, "The Bee Meeting" is set among a small village community and the speaker experiences alienation from the villagers in the meeting. She perceives it as a nightmarish ritual. Ford further argues Plath's "playful, embedded references" in the poem to Hawthorne's work by the description of "scarlet flowers" and "hawthorn" (142). The imagery also appears in her journals in which she wrote the short story, "Charlie Pollard and the Beekeepers" (O'Brien 320).

"The Bee Meeting" starts with the speaker's inability to identify the villagers, who, under their protective clothes, become unfamiliar and strange:

Who are these people at the bridge to meet me? They are the
villagers —
The rector, the midwife, the sexton, the agent for bees.
In my sleeveless summery dress I have no protection,
And they are all gloved and covered, why did nobody tell me?
They are smiling and taking out veils tacked to ancient hats. (CP 211)

The speaker positions herself as the new member of the beekeepers, who is initiated into the group. The recurring question marks in the poem highlight her uncertainty and unbelonging to the community. Plath describes the beekeepers' meeting as a ritual in which the members are masked and wear specific clothes and colours. In "Charlie Pollard and the Beekeepers", Plath is more explicit about associating the clothing with the strangeness of the meeting, which compares to a ritual: "The donning of the hats had been an odd ceremony. Their ugliness & anonymity very compelling, as if we were all party to a rite" (JPBL 58). The "anonymity" of the

masked faces suggests a secret gathering, which Plath's poetic speaker perceives as a dreamlike and strange experience, evoking Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown".

The speaker is portrayed as a passive participant of the meeting: "I am led through a beanfield"; "They are leading me to the shorn grove, the circle of hives" (CP 211). The portrayal of the bees as a "circle of hives" reinforces the ritualistic element of the meeting. It likewise alludes to the ritual magic often performed in a specific shape, such as a circle. Plath's description of the ritual is reminiscent of her short story "Initiation", in which a young girl called Millicent is initiated into a sorority; she decides not to join the group because of their exclusivity. Clark argues that the short story, written in 1952, is contextualised in the McCarthy era, during which anyone outside of the status quo was suspicious and considered the enemy of the state (*Red Comet* 120-121). Unlike Millicent in "Initiation", the speaker of "The Bee Meeting" is passive and accepts the conformism of the group. The speaker literally and metaphorically becomes one of the beekeepers: "Now they are giving me a fashionable white straw Italian hat / And a black veil that molds to my face, they are making me one of them" (CP 211). Throughout the sequence, whiteness is associated with protection from the bees; the colour appears six times in the poem. In the speaker's initiation, she accepts the uneasy conformism of the villagers instead of being the other. The theme echoes Plath's feeling of unbelonging in the secluded village community, which she wrote about in the short story "Mothers". The ritualistic initiation in "The Bee Meeting" responds to the social and political anxieties about otherness.

In the poem, there is a contrast between whiteness, which signifies protection and unity and blackness, which is associated with danger and strangeness: “black veil”; “black head”; “bean flowers with black eyes” (CP 211). The speaker singles out the rector, whose association with blackness suggests his ambiguous figure: “Which is the rector now, is it that man in black?” (CP 211). Here, Plath borrows the imagery from her previous poem “Man in Black”, written about the authoritarian father figure; the description also reappears in “Daddy”. In my reading, the rector’s identification with the ambiguous man in black suggests Plath’s uneasy relationship with the Church of England. Plath likely builds on the hostile rector in North Tawton, whose possible influence on her poetry I discussed in Chapter 1. Among the village members, the rector is the only clerical figure (although the sexton also works in the church), and he is positioned at the top of the hierarchy of the village community. In Britzolakis’s reading, the rector’s figure blends with the “surgeon-priest” who wants to perform the sacrificial operation on the speaker, making him the antagonist (*Sylvia Plath* 96). The hostile description of the rector evokes Plath’s late poetry in which priests, doctors, and the patriarchal authority are portrayed as sinister figures.

In the short story “Charlie Pollard and the Beekeepers”, Plath further elaborates on the rector’s association with darkness that defines his relationship to the bees:

“See all the bees round the Rector’s dark trousers!” whispered the woman. “They don’t seem to like white”. I was grateful for my white smock. ... “Maybe they want to join his church”, one man, emboldened by the anonymity of the hats, suggested. (JPBL 58)

The description foreshadows the dark bees in the sequence. The woman's suggestion warns against the bees' secret society or an underground religious group. Plath implies that this underground organisation is within the Church of England, which presents the religion as ambiguous and unholy. The writing also anticipates Ted Hughes's poetry book *Gaudete* (1977), in which Lumb, an Anglican clergyman, establishes an unorthodox religious coven: "only women can belong to it / They are all in it and he makes love to them all, all the time" (*Gaudete* 114). The reference to lovemaking evokes a fertility cult, in which Lumb is the male figure who, at the end of the poetry book, is killed and replaced by a female deity. Hughes's description of the women in the coven is similar to Plath's bees, whom he calls "black as flies" and "birdlike" (*Gaudete* 132). "The Bee Meeting" suggests an opposition between the beekeepers and the bees, which builds on racialised images of power. Throughout the sequence, these boundaries become more fluid as the speaker moves away from the human community, where she is othered to the collective kinship of the bees.

The speaker's relationship with the beehive is described as ambiguous. She fears the bees, yet she relates to them more than to the beekeepers: "Now I am milkweed silk, the bees will not notice. / They will not smell my fear, my fear, my fear" (CP 211). The three-time repetition not only highlights the terror that the speaker experiences but creates an association between her and the queen bee: "She is old, old, old, she must live another year, and she knows it" (CP 212). Plath also links her speaker with the queen through survival: "I could not run without having to run forever / The white hive is snug as a virgin, / Sealing off her brood cells, her honey, and quietly humming" (CP 212). The beehive does not seem to be concerned with

her; instead, they are productive workers. The recurring vegetal imagery implies the speaker's alienation from the other humans. She feels "rooted" and likens herself to a "cow-parsley" (CP 212). Yet, we can perceive ambiguity and uneasiness. The speaker does not fully identify with the nonhuman world but is "bound in her own humanness", which Ford links to Daphne's myth and her transformation into a laurel tree (Ford 138-139). The speaker is uncertain about her identity, and this ambiguity allows her to move between the human and nonhuman worlds. Plath brings the speaker's initiation to the group into parallel with the hunting of the queen bee as a ritualistic ceremony: "The villagers open the chambers, they are hunting the queen. / Is she hiding, is she eating honey? She is very clever" (CP 212). The question directed towards the matriarch of the bee colony expresses ambiguity: "The old queen does not show herself, is she so ungrateful?" (CP 212). While the speaker feels empathy towards her, there is also a slight frustration in her voice calling the queen "ungrateful", which is reminiscent of the earlier description of the bees as "arrogant". In the poem, the speaker contemplates whether she considers the villagers or the beehive a more dangerous community.

The speaker rejects the villagers' violence. Their hunt of the queen echoes the ritualistic "stamping and dancing" in "Daddy". In both poems, Plath describes the village community as secluded and violent who penalise the outsider. In "The Bee Meeting", the villagers' violence is highlighted by the alliterative line "Dream of a duel they will win inevitably" (CP 212), which has a drumming military effect. She feels more emphatic towards the queen bee who escapes from the beekeepers: "A curtain of wax dividing them from the bride flight, / The upflight of the murderess into a heaven that loves her. / The villagers are moving the virgins, there will be no killing"

(CP 212). The lines allude to sacrificial rituals. The speaker's voice is ambiguous; she calls the queen the murderess. Both the queen and speaker survive the beekeepers' meeting. The poem ends with the outcome of the ritualistic meeting: "I am exhausted, I am exhausted — / Pillar of white in a blackout of knives" (CP 212). Plath uses repetitions to suggest the developing connection between the speaker and the queen; the three-times repeated "exhausted" recalls the "She is old, old, old" characterisation of the queen. Her exhaustion implies a confusion in her identity, as if she was hunted by the villagers, not the queen bee. The returning imagery of whiteness is contrasted with the knives, the symbol of the unsuccessful killing. The speaker feels lost, even when the nightmarish meeting ends and the villagers return to their usual selves: "The villagers are untying their disguises, they are shaking hands. / Whose is that long white box in the grove, what have they accomplished, why am I cold" (CP 212). The lines anticipate the white box at the start of the next bee poem, creating a smooth transition in the speaker's relationship with the bees. The imagery of the "long white box" also implies a coffin, which in "Stings" is associated with the spectral presence of the dead father figure. In "The Bee Meeting", Plath brings into parallel the beekeepers' meeting with a religious ceremony in which the speaker's alienation from the village community questions the categories of human and nonhuman, powerful and powerless, and their association with whiteness and blackness. As noted in Chapter 3, Plath's positioning of the speaker as the "magician's girl" suggests the magical allusions of beekeeping. Thus, the interaction between the beekeepers and the bees has a supernatural component. The poem anticipates the bees as flying creatures who are explicitly gendered, thereby, I argue, alluding to witches.

The second poem of the sequence “The Arrival of the Bee Box” narrates the speaker’s ambiguous and hierarchical relationship with the bees. Throughout the poem, the speaker contemplates her bond with the beehive. In Bundtzen’s interpretation, the negotiation between freeing or enslaving the bees implies *The Tempest*, in which Prospero and Sycorax use magic to control Ariel (*The Other Ariel* 172). Following Bundtzen’s analysis, I look at the influence of the diabolic creatures Caliban and Sycorax on the speaker’s experimentation with and control of the black bees. I pay attention to the imagery of *The Tempest* in Plath’s bee metaphor, particularly the parallels between the racial rhetoric of witchcraft and British imperialism contextualised in the post-war era. My reading explores how the bees’ power is portrayed, which I link to the ambiguous perception of black people during colonialism as both inferior and possessors of diabolic powers.

“The Arrival of the Bee Box” is written in five-line stanzas; each reads like a sentence finishing with a full stop or exclamation mark. The closed structure visually mimics the shut box, in which the speaker keeps the bees. The poem ends with an isolated line that implies the uncertainty of the relationship. It starts with the speaker’s description of the box, which she calls a “coffin of a midget / Or a square baby” (CP 213). As I will discuss later in detail, the bees’ ambiguous character is highlighted in the sequence by their recurring identification with death. The narrative further focuses on the box in which the bees are kept: “The box is locked, it is dangerous. / I have to live with it overnight” (CP 213). Here, the box functions as a metonym. Instead of the bees, it is the object that signals danger. The lines also allude to the speaker’s contemplation of enslaving the bees:

It is dark, dark,
With the swarmy feeling of African hands
Minute and shrunk for export,
Black on black, angrily clambering. (CP 213)

Here, the dehumanising practice of slavery is evoked by the bees' identification with African slaves. The four-time repetition of the colour black reinforces the speaker's fear of the bees; their otherness is also a source of disgust (R. R. Curry 160). The poem suggests that blackness is a source of the power of the bees. As I further discuss later, the colour recalls concepts associated with dark supernatural powers, such as black magic, diabolism, and black mass, the secret gathering of witches. Levack argues that the dark depiction of the Devil "comes from the traditional association of black with sin" (*The Witch-Hunt* 33). The connotation of darkness as danger, particularly regarding magical powers, is embedded in the history of colonialism. Plath's poem articulates the connotations of darkness, just as "Sycorax can be both witch and Indian woman, both monstrous hag and former resident of Algiers, both native and immigrant to the island" (Purkiss, *The Witch in History* 258). Likewise, the bees are simultaneously fearful and enslaved, powerless and powerful, as their association with darkness accentuates. Plath had knowledge of the connection between the expansion of colonial power and the fear of diabolism and the dark other through literary texts like *The Tempest*, while the racial rhetoric of witchcraft was present in the post-war and early Cold War both in the US and Britain.

In "The Arrival of the Bee Box", the speaker's attitude towards the bees also suggests parallels to Britain's relationship with its former colonies. She considers liberating the bees, yet she still wants to exercise control over them. The speaker calls herself "not a Caesar", "owner", and appears a "sweet God," which suggests

her negotiation of power and identity. The poem's engagement with colonial power evokes the imagery of *The Tempest* in which the opposition between Prospero and his slave Caliban echoes the concerns about "British identity and history" (Wymer 4). Caliban represents the dark other whose identity is not fixed; he "has no coherent ethnographic model" (Gilles 197). His figure alludes to the influences of seventeenth-century colonialism, such as the founding of The East India Company in 1600, Britain's attempt to colonise Guiana in 1604, and the Spanish takeover of the Caribbean. The colonial discourse of the play also builds on the "English colonial adventures" in Elizabethan Ireland (Fuchs 46). Paul Brown argues that Caliban's language offers him a source of resistance against white power; he is not only othered through his perceived incomprehensible speech, but it is also his curse "provoking the master to curse in reply" (61).

In *The Tempest*, Caliban and his mother, Sycorax, are not only a reflection of colonialism, but they embody non-European magic, perceived as diabolic (Joseph 129). Following the analogy of the play, the speaker's disgust and annoyance about the bees ("I have simply ordered a box of maniacs" (CP 213)) recall Prospero's treatment of Caliban (Bundtzen, *The Other Ariel* 133-134). The bees are not just foreign, they possess the knowledge of Latin language: "It is the noise that appalls me most of all, / The unintelligible syllables. / ... I lay my ear to furious Latin" (CP 213). Latin is a learned language often associated with the more educated class, such as scholars, priests, and the early modern magus figure. During the early modern period, where Protestants theorised a connection between "Catholic superstition and magic", Latin-language prayers could be regarded as diabolic practices for which some were prosecuted (Levack, *The Witch-Hunt* 125). We can

also read the reference to Latin, identified with Catholic prayers, as an allusion to the anti-Catholic and anti-Irish sentiment present in post-war Britain (Walter 87).¹² In the poem, the bees' language expresses their ambiguity. It is both a source of their otherness, hence dangerous, and a form of power, signalling the refusal of colonisation. Identifying the bees' language with foreign sounds gestures towards some of the ideas I laid out in Chapter 4 about the language of magic, particularly the foreign origin of spells and magic words. The bees' Latin develops to the language of witchcraft; its foreign origin makes it fearful for the speaker.

In the second half of the poem, the speaker becomes more sympathetic towards the bees: "I wonder how hungry they are. / I wonder if they would forget me" (CP 213). The speaker only feels compassion towards the bees when she "soothed herself by proclaiming her ownership"; therefore, she takes up the "white role" (R. R. Curry 160). We can understand whiteness as the Prosperoan white magic, associating beekeeping with the control of the bees. The bees are hungry for their freedom and food, which the speaker contemplates granting them: "I am no source of honey / So why should they turn on me? / Tomorrow I will be sweet God, I will set them free" (CP 213). The speaker's claim that she is "no source of honey" reinforces her ambiguous attitude towards the dark creatures. She does not take responsibility for them, yet the pause of the caesura expresses hesitation. The last line "The box is only temporary" (CP 213) leaves the poem with an uncertain ending. By questioning the enslaving of the bees, the speaker also examines her power over

¹² In Ireland, Protestant settlers were more likely to make witchcraft accusations. Among Catholic witchcraft beliefs, the "witch figure was not threatening enough to warrant legal proceeding" even among Catholics, "professional and semi-professional magical practitioners" continued to exist until the mid-twentieth century (Sneddon 129; 146).

them. She develops a closer relationship with the hive. The poem highlights the tensions in their relationship. While wanting to own them, the speaker likewise desires to be part of the creatures (“I wonder if they would forget me” (CP 213)), which foreshadows her identification with the queen bee in the next poem. “The Arrival of the Bee Box” portrays blackness as a power of the bees, which the speaker perceives as ambiguous. Plath’s poem parallels the colonial imagery of *The Tempest* with the racial rhetoric of witchcraft, which associates the bees with the dark (magical) powers and the other.

“Stings”, the third poem of the sequence, shows a transition. My reading tracks the writing development of the poem and brings attention to the changes regarding the supernatural imagery associated with the bees, which Plath erased from the final version. In the initial August drafts, Plath had different ideas about the poem, which presents some textual similarities to “The Bee Meeting”, suggesting that she returned to the poem when starting her sequence in October. The August manuscripts portray a very different narrative centring on an unnamed figure referred to as “you” and their relationship to the bees who appear as defeated. Van Dyne argues that the early version of the poem “focuses entirely on Hughes and is the initial portrait of the scapegoat figure” who reappears in the final version of “Stings” (*Revising Life* 108). In this version, Plath is more explicit about biographical allusions, such as the breakdown of her marriage and isolation.

Plath’s writing process is hard to identify. The manuscripts, held at the Smith College Special Collections, are filled with crossed-out lines and revisions. They show the initial poem was written in three quintains, meaning that Plath structured it more rigorously than the October version of “Stings”. The August manuscripts,

written in carbon paper on the back of Hughes's poem written in 1960, "Lines to a Newborn Baby", include four drafts: an undated holograph numbered as 2, and three typescripts numbered from 3 to 5, of which 4 and 5 are dated 2 August 1962. The typescripts include some revisions with blank ink, but the overall narrative remains the same. The revised typescript numbered 4 is difficult to read due to the ink penetrating through the back of the paper. Plath struggled with the ending of her poem, she crossed out several lines and added words with black ink on the top of them. Plath starts the poem with a question: "What honey in you summons these animalcules? / What fear? ... / They [are in] discover your hair" (TS "Stings", 2 August 1962). In the lines, "summoning" prefigures the supernatural imagery of the sequence: for example, the invocation of the father in "The Bee Meeting" and his ghostly presence in the October version of "Stings". The manuscript presents several early ideas that Plath later incorporated in the bee poems, for example, the dangerous character of the bees, their attraction to hair, and the appearance of black and white coloured clothes. This version of "Stings" contains little supernatural imagery, and like in "The Swarm", the bees are portrayed as male soldiers, not a group of diabolic flying women.

The revised typescript numbered 5 focuses on the bees' "suicidal" stinging and ends with resignation and hopelessness:

After they stagger and weave, under no banner.
After, they crawl
Despatched, into trenches of grass.
[Or are they cleared, by un pitying housewives, from the white still]
[And like [unstable] ossifying statues —]
[And ossifying like junked statues —]
Gelded and wingless. Not heroes. Not heroes. (TS "Stings", 2 August 1962)

Here, Plath alludes to the bees as dying soldiers who are “cleared, by un pitying housewives”, suggesting that it is the task of women to “tidy up” after the injured bees. The adjectives “Gelded and wingless” imply castration, which genders the bees as men. Therefore, in the initial version of “Stings”, Plath links the productive work with the housewives, not the bees who appear as passive and weak. The poem presents the speaker’s ambiguous attitude towards the bees. She shifts from naming them “fools”, “suicidal”, and “not heroes”, who are “zinging” and “assailing” (TS “Stings”, 2 August 1962). The typescript depicts the bees as masculine, yet tired and defeated. Plath’s bee metaphor is evocative of the bee simile in the *Iliad*: “but like a swarm of fine-waisted wasps or bees / ... so these men will not, though there’s only the two of them, / fall back from the gates while they’re killing, or until they are killed” (12.166; 171-172). Plath’s allusion to the well-recognised simile suggests that she sourced her bee metaphor from the male scholarly and literary tradition similar to “The Beekeeper’s Daughter”. In Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, the Homeric bee-simile reappears associated with the “winged Heralds” of Fallen Angels: “Brushed with the hiss of rustling wings. / As bees / In spring-time, when the Sun with Taurus rides” (1.767-769). Plath’s sequence evokes the Miltonic bees associated with darkness and demons and alludes to spring as the period of survival.

The main change between the August drafts of “Stings” and the poem written on 6 October 1962 is the altered portrayal of the bees from a swarm of defeated male soldiers to productive female workers, which implies that Plath reconsidered the gender politics of her bee metaphor. The October version of “Stings” is lengthier and portrays a very different narrative. The poem contains twelve five-line stanzas

with varied lengths and rich punctuation such as question marks, em dashes, and quotation marks indicating dialogue. The first part focuses on the speaker and the bee-seller figure. The middle part shifts to the female bees. However, the watchful “third person” interrupts the narrative, then his figure is abandoned, which triggers the reawakening of the speaker/queen. This version of “Stings” also underwent several revisions. The manuscripts, held at the Smith College Special Collections, are written on the pink Smith memo paper, the back of the typescripts from *The Bell Jar*. They include one three-page long holograph dated 6 October 1962, with the papers numbered from 1 to 3. Plath wrote a “3” next to the title, which implies that it is the third poem of the sequence. The holograph is written with black ink and has some revisions, particularly on the last page, suggesting that Plath struggled with the poem’s ending. The holograph is quite untidy, and the stanza breaks are less clear. There are two revised typescripts of “Stings” dated 6 October 1962 and numbered 3 to the left of the title. Both typescripts are two pages long; the first typescript includes many crossed-out lines and revisions with blank ink and the second revised typescript is much neater, and it only has one revision with black ink in the last line of the poem.

In “Stings”, the speaker develops a closer bond to the bees who are characterised as female workers: “Of winged, unmiraculous women, / Honey-drudgers” (CP 214). She declares her care for the bees by ornamenting their box: “With excessive love I enameled it // Thinking ‘Sweetness, sweetness’” (CP 214). Patricia Grisafi argues that the speaker’s decoration of the box with her bare hands shows that she is “now confident with her ability to handle bees” (54). Yet, the speaker still positions herself as the owner: “Here is my honey-machine, / It will work

without thinking" (CP 214-215). She associates the bees with domestic drudgery: "These women who only scurry, / Whose news is the open cherry, the open clover?" (CP 214). "Stings" is the first poem in the bee sequence when the speaker explicitly calls the bees women. Unlike in "Wintering", in which the speaker develops a kinship to the bees, which I discuss later, in "Stings", the bees' gendering as women identifies them as busy domestic workers. Plath earlier attributed to the bees the adjective "unmiraculous", which is the opposite of a miracle, a positive supernatural phenomenon, suggesting the dark magical powers associated with the bees. It also evokes "Lady Lazarus", in which the speaker dismisses the "miracle" label, implying a link between the two poems, in which Plath rejects the male authority.

In "Stings", there is still a tension and ambivalence in the speaker's approach to the bees, particularly towards the queen: "What am I buying, wormy mahogany? / Is there any queen at all in it?" (CP 215). This poem contains less racialised imagery of the bees, yet the speaker still describes them as dangerous and fearful. She identifies her "strangeness" with "dangerous skin" (CP 214), which reads as an allusion to their blackness. Despite being the owner, she wonders, "Will they hate me, / These women who only scurry" (CP 214). The speaker blames the bees for their otherness, which shows both longing and hate and continues her ambiguous attitude towards the association of blackness with otherness and dark powers. The strangeness of the bees arises from their femaleness, which implies the bees are black flying female creatures, suggesting flying witches. The verb "scurry" signals their quick and swift motion of flying. It reads not only as an allusion to the bees' drudgery but implies their rushed flying to an assembly. "Stings" establishes a

connection between the female bees and the dark imagery, which foreshadows their “black mass” in “Wintering”, employing the diabolic connotations of blackness.

In the second half of the poem, a third person appears – alluding to the dead father figure – who is watching the scene. His lack of hat indicates that he was without protection: “white linen / He wore instead of a hat”; he was “sweet, // The sweat of his efforts a rain / Tugging the world to fruit” (CP 215). The man’s sweetness is associated with the bees’ honey, which is named the reason for his death:

The bees found him out,
Molding onto his lips like lies,
Complicating his features.

They thought death was worth it, ... (CP 215).

The allusion to the father’s death by the stinging of the bees echoes Plath’s juvenilia “Lament: A Villanelle”, which I mentioned in Chapter 3. The poem draws attention to the honey as a sweet but lethal substance: “Lightning licked in a yellow lather ... / the sting of bees took away my father” (CP 315). Similarly, in “The Beekeeper’s Daughter”, the speaker foreshadows the father’s sweet death: “A fruit that’s death to taste: dark flesh, dark parings” (CP 118). The relationship suggests the ambiguous gender power dynamics between the female bees and the male beekeeper. I read the dark bees’ attack on the father as an allusion to their diabolic magical power, which is more evident in the draft I discuss in the next paragraph. We can observe Plath’s pattern of associating the father’s death with the bees’ honey. I further discuss the bees’ association with death in my reading of “Wintering”.

On the second page of the holograph, Plath portrays the bees’ attack on the father as a sinister and diabolic ritual:

Now he peers through a warped silver rain drop;
Seven lumps on his head
And a [great] big boss on his forehead

Black as the devil & vengeful. (MS "Stings", 6 October 1962)

The "boss" has a dual meaning. It could allude to the knob made of metal or wood in ecclesiastical architecture, usually featuring religious iconography or even animals. St Peter's Church at North Tawton, to which Plath belonged, features "open wagon roofs with moulded ribs, carved bosses and wall-plates" made in the late-fifteenth century early-sixteenth century ("Church of St Peter"). This meaning of "boss" further highlights the bees' ambiguous association with religion, particularly their subversion of religious institutions. "Seven" also implies the seven deadly sins from the Bible; it is a superstitious number often associated with magic. The number seven suggests that the bees' attack on the father is executed with full force due to its magical properties. In the draft, the "seven lumps" on the father's head signify the stinging of the bees; in the middle sits the "boss", most likely the queen. It is important to mention that only the female bees can sting since it "is a modification of the *ovipositor*, the female egg-laying organ" (Capaldi and Butler 142). Therefore, the lines propose that the danger of the bees originates from their female gender. The attack on the male figure swaps the power relation of the hunting of the queen in "The Bee Meeting", which argues a shift in the speaker's attitude towards the bees. The bees are domineering and aggressive; they utilise their diabolic powers. Van Dyne reads Plath's portrayal of the male presence in the holograph as a refusal of patriarchal authority (*Revising Life* 109). The beehive not only rejects the men but kills them. The attack on the male figure also foreshadows Plath's murderous poetic

personae, such as Lady Lazarus, who represents the autonomous self. In the holograph of “Stings”, the speaker articulates neither support nor disapproval of the bees’ attack on the father. Yet, the diabolic simile (“Black as the devil”) shifts from the dehumanised slaves to devilish female figures, which alludes to witches. I argue that the hive resembles a witches’ cult.

Plath reproduced this passage in the following two typescripts of “Stings” (i.e. drafts three and four), which look identical, thus indicating that she was serious about including them in the poem. However, in the published version, she deleted this section. Here, on the left-hand side, we can see the revised typescript (third draft) dated 6 October 1962, and on the right-hand side, the final version of “Stings”:

The sweat of his efforts a rain Tugging the world to fruit. Now he peers through a warped silver raindrop, Seven lumps on his head And a big boss on his forehead,	The sweat of his efforts a rain Tugging the world to fruit. The bees found him out, (CP 215).
Black as the devil, and vengeful. The bees found him out. (TS "Stings", 6 October 1962)	

In the final version, we miss out on the father’s death explaining why the bees are perceived as dangerous. The version on the right contains less violence, which implies that Plath toned down the expressive language, particularly the allusions to the bees as diabolic and dangerous female creatures, deploying elements from the witch imagery.

In both the drafts and the published version of “Stings”, the poem turns from the attack of the male figure to the speaker’s rebirth, as she becomes one with the queen:

... but I

They thought death was worth it, but I
Have a self to recover, a queen.
Is she dead, is she sleeping?
Where has she been,
With her lion-red body, her wings of glass?

Now she is flying
More terrible than she ever was, red
Scar in the sky, red comet (CP 215).

Plath deploys poetic techniques and punctuation, such as enjambement, caesura, commas, and question marks to express the speaker’s uncertainty about identifying with the queen. The portrayal of the queen with her “lion-red body” signals a shift from her perceived darkness, central to the hierarchical relationship of ownership, autonomy, and rebirth. The null rhyme (“red” / “red”) highlights the new colour associated with the bees and implies the speaker’s changed attitude towards the bees. The fiery portrayal of the queen bee parallels the resurrected self in “Lady Lazarus”, the burning virgin in “Fever 103°”, and the speaker from “Ariel”, who merges with the animal in horse riding, which she perceives as flying. In her October poems, Plath continues the portrayal of magical women associated with flying creatures. “Stings” ends with the escape of the queen bee: “Over the engine that killed her — / The mausoleum, the wax house” (CP 215). Here, Plath returns to the mechanical imagery of the engine, which is evocative of the “engine” in “Daddy” that

chuffs the speaker “off like a Jew” (CP 223). In the second line, the mausoleum evokes the white box/coffin from the earlier poem of the sequence.

The manuscripts demonstrate that Plath struggled to end the poem. She rewrote the last two lines several times in each draft. Here, the bold letters indicate that Plath added the words in manuscript with black ink to the typescripts:

Over the engine that killed her // the white stiff wax,
The deserted nurseries, [the dead men] [at the dead].
the stringless dead men. (MS "Stings", 6 October 1962)

The wax mausoleum,
The [deserted] nurseries, [and] old dead men.
The deserting the desertion of (TS "Stings", 2 October 1962)

The desertion of nurseries, the desertion of dead men,
The mausoleum, [of] the wax [house] **home**. (TS "Stings", 6 October 1962)

In the holograph, the "stiff white wax" implies the presence of white power – an allusion to the beekeepers and to the bee box – from which the queen wants to escape. In the third revised typescript, “home” written over the “house” suggests much more ambiguous imagery of Plath’s recovery in the family home. The repeated appearance of the “desertion of nurseries” invites a biographical reading alluding to Plath’s isolation with her children in the village. The changing variations of “wax” indicate her uncertainty about its status regarding the queen. It is either a lethal home, echoing the box/coffin imagery, or is associated with the oppressive power of whiteness in “The Bee Meeting”. “Stings” demonstrates the speaker’s kinship to the female bees, which foreshadows the non-hierarchical” and gendered human and animal relationship in “Ariel” (“sister”; “lioness”), linking women’s freedom and

productive autonomy to the animal world. The poem shows similarity to several of Plath's October poems by deploying the witch imagery, suggesting female otherness and rebellion.

Plath wrote "Wintering", the last of the sequence, between 8-9 October 1962. She redrafted the poem several times, shifting the relationship between the beehive and the speaker from uncertainty to hope. The manuscripts, kept at the Smith College Special Collection, include a two-page long holograph dated 8 October 1962, written on pink Smith College memo paper. There are six revised typescripts of "Wintering", including two two-page long typescripts dated 8 October 1962 written on pink Smith College memo paper. These have heavy revisions. From the third typescript, the manuscripts become tidier. This typescript is a two-page long document dated 9 October 1962 and was written on white paper, and it includes the sequence title "Bees" before the numbered title "5. Wintering". The fourth revised typescript is undated; it also contains a header "Bees (10)" and numbers the poem 5, which indicates that at this point, Plath considered "The Swarm" as the fourth of the sequence. The fifth and sixth revised typescripts include very few revisions. The final version of "Wintering" structurally resembles "Stings", with both written in five-line stanzas with varied punctuation. "Wintering" focuses on female survival through kinship and collectivity. It also associates the honey production of the bees with their creative-productive work.

In the first holograph of "Wintering", Plath creates a closer bond between her speaker and the bees: "Only ignorant. / [It's] the time of hanging on, [for My bees for my bees,] My bees! / So slow I hardly know them" (MS "Wintering", 8 October 1962). While the possessive pronouns imply a more hierarchical relationship between the

speaker and the bees (“my bees”), she is also more dependent on them. She positions herself as the bees’ owner and their kin through the shared experience of female survival. In the poem, the beehive is portrayed as a female-only colony with a hierarchical structure: “Maids and the long royal lady. / They have got rid of the men” (CP 218). The reaffirmation of the bees as “all women” (CP 218) who are dark is further suggestive of the witch imagery. The power of the bees lies in their collective resilience, not just against the seemingly dominant human group associated with whiteness, but to survive the tough times, which implies that Plath draws strength from the kinship, even sisterhood, with the animal world.

In “Wintering”, darkness is ambiguous; it is associated both with the bees and their collective power and the unknown. Plath employs dark gothic imagery to describe the cellar (Ford 158-159): “This is the room I have never been in. / This is the room I could never breathe in. The black bunched in there like a bat” (CP 218). The repetition suggests that the darkness is a source of suffocation and danger. It is also a metaphor for the speaker’s “troubled state of mind” (Clark, *Red Comet* 769). The alliteration, such as “black bunched” and “bat,” continues the enclosed atmosphere and links the bees to darkness. The reference to dark flying creatures continues the bees’ likening to supernatural creatures, such as vampires and witches. In the poem, the images of darkness are ambiguous: “Black asininity. Decay. / Possession. / It is they who own me” (CP 218). The one-word sentence “Possession” acknowledges the changing power dynamic between the speaker and the bees. It is now the bees who are in control of her. In my reading, the bees’ possession of the speaker is metaphorical. Their occupation of the speaker’s mind evokes the concepts, such as demonic possession. The bees can be read as

demonic spirits who enter the human body and can move between worlds. I argue that in “Wintering”, Plath peaks the supernatural imagery associated with the bees. They are flying women alluding to witches, their origin in mythological creatures, like the *strix*, and ability to possess and move between words makes them supernatural beings.

The bees’ blackness also becomes their source of (magical) power. They are stronger and more resilient whom the speaker likens to a black mass: “Now they ball in a mass, / Black / Mind against all that white” (CP 218). The lines express the tensions between the bees and “all that white”. It suggests a reversal of the power dynamic previously expressed in, for example, “The Bee Meeting”, positioning the bees as the dominant group. The lines also alter the speaker’s previous attitude towards the bees; now, they defy her control (R. R. Curry 161). In the stanza, Plath changes the word order of the black mass to “mass, / Black”, stressing the colour, which stands alone as a line. The black mass recalls witches’ sabbath, which subverts the imagery of the beekeepers’ ritual in “The Bee Meeting”. The bees’ association with the dark other and gendering them as women who fly demonstrates Plath’s allusion to witches. The references to flying witches/women link the bee poems to the “Goatsucker”, “Lady Lazarus”, and “Ariel”, in which Plath relies on the association between flying and freedom to narrate women’s autonomy. The mass also reminds us of the Roman Catholic name for worship, which Plath’s poem subverts to “black mass” as Devil worship. The imagery recalls the ambiguous rector figure in “The Bee Meeting” and in her short story. It further links the bee sequence to anti-Catholic and anti-Irish sentiments in post-war Britain. Plath possibly draws on contemporary US politics, alluding to a mass protest of black people in the Civil

Rights Movement. This interpretation is particularly compelling, considering Plath's early identification of racial injustices with the early modern witch-hunt, which I discussed in my first chapter.

In the first draft of "Wintering", Plath continues the narrative with an explicit allusion to sexuality:

They have got rid of the men,
the men have only their sex + ^{they} eat too much honey.
[they will make men again]
[Anyway,] winter is [for the] for women. — (MS "Wintering", 8 October 1962)

In the lines, honey has an ambiguous role. Men consume it excessively, suggesting the hedonistic and domineering male sexual desire that Plath portrayed in, for example, "Virgin in a Tree", which I studied in Chapter 5. Unlike the male bees who consume it, the female bees produce honey. For them, sweet honey is not only for consumption, but it helps them to survive the winter. Consequently, honey allows them to live without the men. The crossed-out line "they will make men again" suggests that the female bees have the power to reproduce. Here, Plath recalls her father's scientific knowledge. Parthenogenesis allows small invertebrates, such as bees, to procreate without male reproduction: thus Plath's bee metaphor suggests the autonomous female self. For the speaker, the bees provide her with the security for her survival. They are "Filing like soldiers / To the syrup tin / To make up for the honey I've taken" (CP 218). Otto Plath notes in this book that when creating a nest, the queen bee consumes nectar from the wax pot (10). Therefore, it could be both the owner of the bees or the queen bee eating the honey, which proposes the

speaker's identification with the queen. Like in "Ariel", here, Plath merges the animal and nonhuman subjects, reinforcing their bond.

In "Wintering", the bees rely on manufactured sweetness: "It is Tate and Lyle they live on, instead of flowers. / They take it. The cold sets in" (CP 218). Plath's reference to the British brand Tate & Lyle has direct links to the slavery of sugar plantations. Although "both businesses were established after the abolition of slavery. The early nineteenth and early twentieth century British sugar industry was predominantly supplied by Caribbean plantations, founded under colonialism and supported by enslaved labour" (Huxtable et al. 97). The poem proposes that the bees take and live on the sugar syrup, which reads as their reclaiming the sweet product to defy the enslavers. Tate & Lyle's Golden Syrup features a picture of a dead lion surrounded by buzzing bees. The illustration references the biblical story when Samson kills a lion and the bees gather around the carcass; it also uses a quotation from the Bible: "out of the strong came forth sweetness" (Norman 52-54). The reference to Tate & Lyle in "Wintering" argues that the bees are not only resilient creatures, but they defy the captivity that the oppressive systems that the beekeepers and slavery kept them in.

The speaker claims that wintering is "the time of hanging on for the bees—the bees / So slow I hardly know them" (CP 218). The end of the poem echoes the title, the period of survival and peace that Plath links with female productive work: "Winter is for women / The woman, still at her knitting" (CP 218). The alliteration supports the relationship between women and winter and stresses "forbearance and equanimity" (Ford 161). Plath used the expression "wintering" in two of her poems, both written in 1959. "Point Shirley" was written about the memories of her dead

grandmother. The poem shows the association of old maternal figures with a traditionally feminine domestic work:

Nobody wintering now behind
The planked-up windows where she set
Her wheat loaves
And apple cakes to cool. (CP 110)

The grandmother's knitting and bread-making can be compared to the honey-making of the bees, which associates women with creative-productive work. Similarly, in "Electra on Azalea Path", Plath links wintering to the survival of bees: "It was good for twenty years, that wintering" (CP 116). "Wintering" ends an uncertain yet hopeful note: "Will the hive survive ... / What will they taste of, the Christmas roses? / The bees are flying. They taste the spring" (CP 219). The speaker associates the freedom of the bees with the rebirth of nature, which allows productivity, creation, and births life. It is a positive ending that moves away from their identification with danger, diabolism, and death. They bring life and are flying to free themselves from the restrictive labels.

In the holograph, Plath ended the poem quite differently: "What will they taste of, the Christmas roses? / Snow water? Corpses? [Spring?] A glass wing?" (MS "Wintering", 8 October 1962). The questions imply her uncertainty, which reappears in the following two typescripts: "Snow water? Corpses? [Spring?] A glass wing?"; "[Snow water? Corpses?] The bees are flying. They taste the spring" (TS "Wintering", 9 October 1962; TS "Wintering", 9 October 1962). In the drafts, the theme of rejuvenation barely makes an appearance, which suggests that the initial ending of the poem was less hopeful. The violent imagery of "Corpses" echoes the line from the previous stanza: "They can only carry their dead" (CP 218). Plath alluded to

Greek and Roman mythology in which the bees represented the borderland between the gods and humans; they have been linked with divine qualities and were believed to cross between the underworld and world of the living (Carlson 19). "Wintering" continues the imagery of the bees' association with death which appears in "Stings".

To sum up, in "Wintering", Plath's bee metaphor resists binary categories. While they first appear as dark and dangerous creatures, we see the speaker developing a kinship to the bees. Yet, she never acknowledges herself as one of them. The bees' association with darkness builds on the vocabulary of the supernatural, particularly the racial rhetoric of witchcraft, which is brought into parallel with colonial discourses. Plath's poems shift the speaker's relationship to the bees from ownership, fear, and enslavement to kinship based on their shared experience of female survival. The bees' depiction as dark flying women alludes to ideas about witches, which reappear in Plath's other poems, particularly those she wrote in October 1962. Plath's poetic personae are characterised similarly during this period. Their flying helps achieve autonomy, while their darkness provides power, alluding to witchcraft.

Conclusion

For Plath, the bees provide a complex metaphor in which she combines her paternal heritage of beekeeping with sources from mythology and classical literature. The bees stand for broader political issues, such as overcoming the oppressive powers of colonisation, the dehumanising practice of othering and racial injustices. Plath's poems move from the human community to a closer kinship with the

nonhuman world, foreshadowing her poems, such as “Ariel” and “Lady Lazarus”. In the poems, particularly in the drafts, Plath employed supernatural concepts in her portrayal of the “devilish” queen, allusions to witches, and the identification of the bees with the black mass. She borrows these concepts and associations from racist discourses of witchcraft, which were revived during the post-war and Cold-War era in the United States and Britain. The bee poems challenge the association of otherness with blackness and demonstrate that these identifications often come from the position of power. Plath’s sequence explores the tensions between powerful and powerless, the self and the other, and how the bees possess these qualities. The bee poems demonstrate Plath’s engagement with post-war discourses about witchcraft. She borrows ideas from Murray’s witch-cult hypothesis, the racial rhetoric of witchcraft, and conflated ideas about blackness and magic. The ambiguous portrayal of the bees in the sequence embodies the often-contradictory ideas Plath challenges and reworks in her poetry about witches and witchcraft, such as female power versus powerlessness, martyrdom versus heresy, and the other versus the self, demonstrating her complex understanding of the supernatural concepts.

Conclusion

My doctoral thesis has provided an insight into Sylvia Plath's poems in which the discourses, narratives, themes, and figures share the characteristics of engaging with the supernatural. I have offered several ways to define the supernatural and considered how Plath might have understood the concept in Western thought, history, politics, and literature. Plath's poems inform us about the broader cultural context of the post-war and early Cold-War era, in which we find examples of the vocabulary of magic and the supernatural partaking in a variety of discourses. My research demonstrates that the supernatural is deeply rooted in our thinking and language. The rhetoric of the witch-hunt is not something that belongs to the superstitious past, but it functions as a tool of politicians, particularly in the US, such as Senator Joseph McCarthy. In post-war America, the Salem witch trials defined McCarthyism. For Plath, it provided ways to express her frustration with injustices in society and her disapproval of American politics in the early Cold War. My focus on the witch-hunt showed that it is a significant reference point of the supernatural and a metaphor in American history and politics, of which Plath was aware.

One of the central research questions of this thesis has been to investigate the portrayal of the witch in Plath's writings and in what context she employs this supernatural female figure. In Plath's poetry, witches are "daunted", "crooked", "baked into gingerbread" are "burning", "kindled, and curled", "angry", and "wicked" (CP 21; 32; 75; 135; 280; 308; 319). The descriptions in the poems demonstrate that when Plath explicitly names witches, she means the wicked maternal figures, seeking inspiration from the Grimms' fairy tales, popular discourses, psychoanalysis,

and other literary witch figures. This research finding is far from what critics previously claimed, arguing for Plath's proto-feminist employment of the witch imagery. On the contrary, for Plath, witches and other concepts related to the supernatural do not have one meaning. They have multiple layers and express her contradictory and ambiguous thoughts she acquired from literary, cultural, and political discourses. Plath differentiated between two identifiable witch figures, evil maternal witches and the wrongly prosecuted witch figure. The former generally has been overlooked by critics as one of Plath's interests in the supernatural. Plath's poetry taps into several characteristics comprising of the witch figure that we still see today being represented. She portrays the old maternal hags familiar from fairy tales and other literary texts in poems like "The Disquieting Muses", depicts a feminist interpretation of the witch who defies the patriarchal institutions in "Lady Lazarus", tells the story of a wrongly prosecuted witch in "Witch Burning", and even, suggests in the bee sequence that the racist associations of witchcraft can be reclaimed by marginalised groups, and particularly black women.

Unlike many critical works in the past, my research has considered the significance of historical sources as influences in Plath's poetry. For her, the prosecuted witches of the early modern period signified racial injustices and McCarthyism, such as the electrocution of the Rosenbergs. She represented the historical witch figure more subtly and symbolically than the literary maternal witch. Plath rarely uses explicit language in her poetry referencing the metaphorical witch-hunt as an embodiment of near-present political oppressions, but focuses on the power dynamics between the prosecuted and the prosecutor. In my research, I have demonstrated Plath's emotional resonance with the early modern witch-hunt and her

well-informed and powerful allusion to the subject, expressing her personal and broader political struggles. While I recognise that Plath understood the witch as a gendered figure foreshadowing the feminist deployment of the concept, she chiefly associated the witch with the marginalised groups, encompassing gender, race, and political nonconformists.

The innovativeness of employing the conceptual and historical framework of the early modern witch-hunt allowed me to examine a unique aspect of Plath's engagement with the supernatural. While some critical works considered supernatural themes in Plath's writings, my research demonstrates that without defining and understanding the context in which concepts and themes are sourced, we cannot acknowledge their full meanings and allusions in Plath's poetry. My six chapters discussed what, and how Plath knew of the early modern witch-hunt, classical literature on magical powers, folkloric beliefs about witches, fairy tales, and more, which influenced her poetry. Poems like "Witch Burning", "Fever 103", "Daddy", and "The Bee Meeting" show that the previous so-called 'mythical' and 'occultist' approaches to Plath's poetry have been reductionist. They underestimate that she considered herself "a damn good high priestess of the intellect" (qtd. in Clark, *Red Comet* xviii). However, it is not only Plath's well-defined knowledge of the witch-hunt period that influenced her writings, but vocabulary in popular and consumer culture. Her poems inform us about the presence of supernatural narratives in public discourses. My research reveals that the post-war and early Cold-War era, particularly in America, was filled with supernatural references, which varied across the deployment of fairy-tale narratives in women's magazines, popular psychoanalytical thoughts, and the rhetoric of politicians and religious authorities.

My research also clarified the differences between witchcraft, associated with witches, and the concept of magic, and how Plath deployed these concepts in various contexts. I conclude that, for Plath, magic was an umbrella term that she associated “with abracadabra from the alphabet” and the “magic golden apples” (CP 319; 335). Therefore, she primarily understood it as the language and narratives of myths and fairy tales. In her mature poetry, magic is linked to paternal and male power, which expresses the ambiguities of her father figure. The line “I am the magician’s girl who does not flinch” (CP 212) from “The Bee Meeting” reveals not only that paternal magic is protective, but it is paralysing and domineering. Plath’s poetry references the patriarchal magician and his magical powers to reflect on the male dominance of society, which corresponds to her ambivalent feelings toward the overpowering presence of her father figure. Yet, magic is not only associated with children’s literature or paternal power, but with it is colour-coded as white and black. In Plath’s writings, whiteness and blackness are always ambiguous; they present contradictions in power, desire, freedom, and agency. The bee poems demonstrate the ambiguities of whiteness and blackness regarding magic, power, the other, and the self. The description of the bees from “Black on black, angrily clambering” to the collective power and kinship of the “mass / Black” who defy the white mind (CP 213; 218) shows that blackness – identified with black magic – is perceived as dangerous when it is associated with the other. It is not surprising that the criminalisation of magic and the fear of witchcraft occurred roughly the same period when the dominant nations of Europe began to colonise the world. Some of the post-war discourses and writers, such as Dennis Whitley, reinforced the racist association between Satanism and black magic as a magical practice of black people.

My analysis of Plath's poems argues that she was aware of the colonial echoes and the racial rhetoric of witchcraft. Plath's bee poems reflect on these associations, highlighting her awareness of the racist rhetoric of supernatural concepts. Yet, like many writers of her time, she also writes from a white middle-class point of view, disregarding the realities of the marginalised groups. From "Lady Lazarus" to "Wintering", we can observe the teenage Sylvia Plath's provocative thoughts that compare the US racial inequalities to the persecution of witches. In Renée R. Curry's reading, the speaker of the bee poems "experiences the self both the colonizer and colonized" (161). While in my Introduction I claimed that black magic, meaning diabolism and often associated with witchcraft, and white magic, meaning benevolent supernatural powers, are – to some degree – opposites, for Plath, these ideas are much more ambiguous and both white and black magic can be powerful, dangerous, oppressive, and even liberatory.

A unique contribution of my thesis in Sylvia Plath Studies has been the emphasis on supernatural themes in her drafts. My Introduction underlined that no critic in the past has focused on this particular reading of Plath's manuscripts. I conclude that she deployed vocabulary and narratives associated with the supernatural in her poetry when she aimed for high emotional intensity. The drafts of her poems, "Lady Lazarus", "Fever 103°", "Daddy", "Burning the Letters", "Ariel", and "Stings", all written in autumn 1962, use the witch-hunt as a metaphor. In these drafts, Plath likewise regularly attributes magical powers to language. Though we do not know what her intentions were, the shared language of the October 1962 manuscripts expresses the pattern of interest, emotional resonance, and preoccupation with the theme of prosecution of witches at the time, which is a unique

discovery of my research. As established, Plath deleted the allusions and references from the final versions of her poems, which I interpret as her erasure of the highly charged and often-political language. We can imagine the prejudices and sexist labels Plath's poetry would have received from the earlier male literary critics if she kept lines such as "[And there's always a mob & an executioner] / [A priest & and a torturer]" in "Lady Lazarus" and "[Spirit] word after [spirit] word [gives itself up] is lit!" in "Burning the Letters". In my view, Plath's reduction of the supernatural content of her poems is a self-censoring practice, suggesting that she was aware of the highly charged connotations of the language she used. On the other hand, her erasures gesture towards a broader cultural phenomenon. Despite living in a secular society, we attribute magical powers to language, particularly speech acts with supernatural allusions, such as curses, oaths, and prayers.

My research has cultivated a fresh approach to Plath's engagement with the supernatural, focusing on her intellectual curiosity and artistic deployment of narratives, themes, and vocabulary associated with the concept. According to Elizabeth Sigmund, there was "no witchcraft or blackness about" Plath's interest in magic ("part two, undated"). My thesis comes to a similar conclusion. For Plath, the supernatural was primarily an intellectual interest of which she had knowledge from popular, political, historical, and literary discourses. While the creative partnership between Hughes and Plath is undeniable, my research also debunked the narrative that Hughes initiated her into the world of magic and the occult. Plath's familiarity with topics, such as the early modern witch-hunt and literary representations of magic, is primarily connected to her childhood and young adult years in post-war America. She studied the New England witch-hunt in her high school education and

read about the subject as an adult. To my knowledge, there is no established research on Ted Hughes's knowledge of the European witch craze. Plath's encounters with texts, for example, the Grimms' tales, *The Tempest*, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, offered her various interpretations and understandings of magic in Western culture and history. She had extensive knowledge and interest in the themes of the supernatural. When Plath, Hughes, and other friends played the "game of Ouija board" in the poet Richard Murphy's house, Plath wrote a poem "in a parody of Hughes's style" about the experience (Murphy). Murphy's phrasing echoes Plath's writing on the deployment of Tarot as a card game she played with her friends. I argue that the occultist practices the couple experimented with during the late 1950s, which had been on the forefront of criticism for decades, had nowhere near the associations of witchcraft or black magic for Plath. She was an amateur practitioner of magical practices, which she considered as playful activities. Despite being somewhat superstitious, I argue, Plath was not as much of a believer as Hughes was.¹³

I would like to reflect on the limitations of my research and the future studies my thesis might inspire. My doctoral thesis has centred on discourses and narratives of the supernatural from a Western perspective encompassing ancient Greek and Roman mythology, the early modern witch-hunt, the nineteenth-century new spiritualist movements in the US, the political rhetoric in post-war America and Britain, and the hypothesis of witch-cults and its revival in England. When I planned my research, I had to narrow down which poems I would close read for which chapter

¹³ Plath wrote in July 1962 about the end of her marriage, which ended on Friday the 13th: "O we are very superstitious in our house" (L2 796).

and topic. In the future, I would like to extend my research on the supernatural in Plath's writings with themes, such as supernatural ecologies, and consider the overlooked poem "Dialogue Over a Ouija Board". I would also like to study Plath's poetry readings with the approach of performativity. The new edited collection of *The Poems of Sylvia Plath* (2024) will allow extensive research into less publicised materials. While I could not visit archival places in the US, I hope to do this in the future. The Lilly Library at Indiana University, the Smith College Special Collections, and the Emory University's Harriet Rosenstein research files provide plenty of possibilities to reconsider the sensationalised themes and look at Plath's archives from a more holistic perspective.

I hope my doctoral thesis will encourage new research into Plath's writings and art and open new doors to study poetry and supernatural themes with a critical lens. My thesis has demonstrated that our vocabulary is ingrained with the supernatural, originating from long historical and cultural traditions. Politics, literature, the media, religion, and public discourses deploy them just as much as poetry does. Further, my research has shown the long-standing connection between poetry and magic and the magical powers attributed to poetic language. Plath also recognised these associations and expressed interest in the supernatural themes, narratives, and vocabulary surrounding our language, history, culture, and poetry. My doctoral research has offered a glimpse into the presence of the supernatural in Plath's poetry, life, and art, which previously has been underestimated. Studying the supernatural themes and vocabulary of Plath's poems and more broadly, of poetry is relevant, timely, and it gives an understanding of our culture and literature.

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