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A Word with Many Edges: Sylvia Plath's Nomenclature for the Collection *Ariel*¹

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*Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes:
Nothing of him that does fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange. (The Tempest, Act I, Scene II)²*

i. Ariel in Literature

Though in his notes on the 1962 poems of Sylvia Plath's *Collected Poems* Ted Hughes describes the word Ariel straightly and simply as "[t]he name of a horse which she [Plath] rode, at a riding school on Dartmoor, in Devonshire," he introduces a more tortuous process in his introduction to this same collection that Plath used to name her poetry collection *Ariel* (Hughes 294). Hughes notes that "[s]ome time around Christmas 1962, she gathered most of what are now known as the 'Ariel' poems in a black spring binder, and arranged them in a careful sequence. . . . [but she] had her usual trouble with a title. On the title-page of her manuscript *The Rival* is replaced by *A Birthday Present*" (14-15). Though Hughes does not mention *The Rabbit Catcher* as another title which followed *A Birthday Present* and preceded *Daddy*, Linda Wagner-Martin mentions it (in Curry 154). And finally, "only a short time before she died . . . she altered the title [Daddy] again, to *Ariel*"³ (Hughes 15). Plath was well aware that the title of a book resonates somehow something of the very soul of its contents and their associations. A look at these tentative titles suggests that before the final one, namely *Ariel*, whatever she had chosen were rather personal in

¹ The original collection design prepared by Sylvia Plath herself would be the focus of my discussion throughout this paper.

² <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/tempest/full.html>. All the subsequent citations from this play would be from this source.

³ It is interesting to know that between the publication of *The Colossus & Other Poems* and the final arranging of *Ariel* collection, Plath intended for another collection of poetry *Tulips & Other Poems* with poems dating from 1960 and 1961. For more information see "These Ghostly Archives, Redux" by Gail Crowther and Peter K. Steinberg in *Plath Profiles* 3, Summer 2010, pp. 119-138: http://www.iun.edu/~nwadmin/plath/vol3/Crowther_Steinberg.pdf.

their connotations and most probably would not have traveled in their resonances "[o]ff from the center like horses" (Plath, *Collected Poems* 270). She needed a more reverberating and impersonal title (at least on the surface) for a collection of poems which she knew would move equinely through the years, not to be caught by "dark / Hooks" of "Dead hands, dead stringencies" (239).

But what was the significance of the seemingly impersonal word Ariel for Plath that she preferred it over the other titles and finalized her last collection of poems under it?

One very probable answer is that by choosing this title she aimed at embracing "various and conflicting histories" all at once (Beebee 7). These histories may well be personal, literary, religious or cultural. Each history chosen, there will be a particular story flowing from it, giving that history a different dimension and meaning. The very launch pad which will be a good starting point for finding about these probable histories is rooted in Plath's childhood. In her introduction to *Letters Home* Aurelia Schober Plath writes

My pack-rat tendencies led to recovery of an old theater program, the first play I took the children to. Sylvia was twelve, Warren nine and a half. The play was Margaret Webster's production of *The Tempest*. I told the children I would buy good tickets for us all, including Grammy, of course, if they read the play and could tell me the story of it. I gave Sylvia my copy of Shakespeare's complete works and handed Warren Charles and Mary Lamb's version . . . (31).

The production that Plath's mother talks of was the Saturday, January 20, 1945 production by the New Yorker Margaret Webster which took place at Colonial Theater in Boston, MA. On the left edge of the playbill Aurelia writes how "spellbound" the children were with the "magic" of the "first play" they ever saw (Playbill).⁴ In the long paragraph on the right part of the playbill she expounds on the children's fascination, writing "[t]hey were completely transported to the magic island of Prospero and Sylvia, in particular, will remember the enchantment that was continued on the train ride home." And indeed Sylvia Plath remembered it!

Ariel is the spirit who is only visible to Prospero in this play and is in fact a slave and servant to him because Prospero has saved him/her from entrapment in a tree by Sycorax, Caliban's mother, the hag-witch who ruled the island before Prospero's arrival. It is amusing that in all textual versions of the play Ariel is referred to with the male pronoun twice in the entire

⁴ My thanks are due to Peter K. Steinberg who kindly located this piece in Mortimer Rare Book Room at Smith College.

play⁵ and that, originally, the role was assumed by a boy-player, but beginning in Restoration adaptations (mid-1600s) it began to be essayed by a woman. Since the male actor Leslie French played the part in 1930, the role has been played by both men and women.⁶ It is exceptionally interesting that in the production the Plaths saw Ariel was played by Vera Zorina— a ballerina, musical theatre actress and choreographer born from a German father and a Norwegian mother.⁷ This small detail of Ariel being played by a woman might have affected Sylvia more than what her mother had thought of then.

When Ariel first appears in Act I, Scene II, it is by Prospero's bidding who calls Ariel "servant" and "my Ariel," expressions that frequent the play. Immediately after this command, Ariel says "All hail, great master! grave sir, hail! I come / To answer thy best pleasure; be't to fly, / To swim, to dive into the fire, to ride / On the curl'd clouds, to thy strong bidding task / Ariel and all his quality." Prospero is very autocratic with Ariel, and almost in every chance threatens her⁸ of a new entrapment if she fails to obey him, so Ariel has to conform to Prospero virtually in every deed until he sets her free. But Ariel was a servant to Sycorax too, as if this is a fate she cannot escape.

⁵ One of these references appears in Act I, Scene II when Ariel responds to Prospero saying "All hail, great master! . . . to thy strong bidding task / Ariel and all *his* quality" (emphasis mine). Another reference appears in the stage directions in Act III, Scene III: "Thunder and lightning. Enter ARIEL, like a *harpy*; claps *his* wings upon the table. . . ." and then "*He* vanishes in thunder; then, to soft music enter the Shapes again, and dance . . ." (emphases mine). But the usage of the word "harpy"— in Greek mythology one of several loathsome, various monsters with the head and trunk of a *woman* and the tail, wings, and talons of a bird— for addressing a male Ariel complicates its sexual origins and gives it an androgynous quality. This is not the only example of using such female resonating words for describing a supposedly male Ariel in this play. Phrases and words such as "a spirit too delicate," "[D]early my delicate Ariel," "my bird," "my dainty Ariel" and "chick" are the ones that Prospero uses throughout the play to address a supposedly male Ariel.

⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Tempest

⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vera_Zorina

⁸ By focusing on Vera Zorina's playing Ariel in the production Plath saw, the pronouns "she" and "her" will be used to describe Ariel in this production.



This play had three runs in three different theater centers in New York too in 1945: January 25 to March 17, 1945 in Alvin Theater; March 19 to April 21, 1945 in Broadway Theater and November 12 to December 1, 1945 in City Center Theater. Vera Zorina acted as Ariel in all these three productions as well.⁹ This photograph is from one of these New York productions taken by Eileen Darby showing Zorina as Ariel and Arnold Moss as Prospero (who had performed as Prospero at the Colonial Theater production in Boston too); the former begging to be released from Prospero's service now that she has obeyed his command to create the great storm, the tempest.¹⁰

⁹ <http://www.ibdb.com/person.php?id=66040>

¹⁰

http://images.ulib.csuohio.edu/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/shakespeare&CISOPTR=418&CISOBX=1&REC=4

Besides this slave-like nature of Ariel, women in general do not have a dominant role in this play and are usually depicted by male characters without being directly present on the stage (except Iris, the personification of the rainbow and messenger of gods; Roman Ceres, the counterpart of the Greek goddess Demeter; Roman Juno, the Greek equivalent to Hera and Nymphs. All these mythological figures are still "Ariel's disguise" who is primarily considered as male. So they are not women per se). Even Miranda, Prospero's daughter who has a limited presence through very short and girlish remarks, is very subordinate to the patriarchal wishes and rules of her father whose only duty in his eyes is remaining chaste. Likewise, when Ferdinand, Alonso's son, is charmed by Miranda he says "O, *if a virgin*, / And your affection no gone forth, I'll make you / The queen of Naples"¹¹ (emphasis mine). This is very telling since it indirectly reflects the 1940s and 1950s American society with all its sexual repression in which women were almost always considered as only secondary to men, and their needs, wishes and lives were set forth, interpreted and controlled by a strong patriarchy.¹² On the other hand, Miranda is more than humble and compliant with her would-be husband. Her lines in Act III, Scene I "I am your wife, if you will marry me; / If not, I'll die your maid: to be your fellow / You may deny me; but I'll be your servant, / Whether you will or no" are just one out of numerous such remarks. Considering Plath's pre-second-wave feminist considerations, these associations between this play in general and Ariel's subsidiary role in particular make a great sense. Therefore, a single childhood experience for an extraordinarily shrewd observer of the society changed into an everlasting importance to be used later on as a "woman poet" who had seen enough of that society during the 1940s and 1950s America. Ariel's invisibility to others, except to her master, may well be considered as a subtle parody of the invisibility of women, racial and sexual minorities and their problems and narratives under a unanimously conformed patriarchal

¹¹ Prospero's address to Ferdinand in Act IV, Scene I is engrossing too regarding this concept of virginity: "Then, as my gift and thine own acquisition / Worthily purchased take my daughter: but / If thou dost break her virgin-knot before / All sanctimonious ceremonies may / With full and holy rite be minister'd, / No sweet aspersion shall the heavens let fall / To make this contract grow . . . therefore take heed, / As Hymen's lamps shall light you."

¹² In her novel, *The Bell Jar*, Plath acrimoniously refers to the intertwined sexual connotations of morality, immorality; purity and virtue in the famous paragraph:

When I was nineteen, pureness was the great issue.

Instead of the world being divided up into Catholics and Protestants or Republicans and Democrats or white men and black men or even men and women, I saw the world divided into people who had slept with somebody and people who hadn't, and this seemed the only really significant difference between one person and another. (66)

American (and alternatively English) society that Plath lived in during 1940s to 1960s.

Another important point about this play is its genre which involves features of the early twelfth-century romance. Elements such as quest, fantastic adventurous journeys to far and exotic lands, transgression and redemption, loss and retrieval, exile and reunion are central to the genre of romance. These are also very central themes not only to Sylvia Plath's works but also to most of the post-WWII writers' works who felt lost and bewildered after the atrocities of the two wars and the threats of a coming nuclear age. "[T]he journey out, on the road, the journey inward, the journey to the interior of knowledge, into places no one dared venture" was characteristic of writing in the fifties (Karl 45). The romantic and utopian fancy of "American Dream" and "American Adam" were long dead when the disoriented post-WWII generation in America tried to make sense of the tawdry roller coaster of the consumerist culture turning around them. Thus, this play for the later poet Plath could have been a parody of the notion of a proof-against-all romantic and potential society that the American politicians and media drew heavily upon to invoke vulgar senses of patriotism and superiority in a society stricken by the plague of the Cold War and nuclear threats. Plath's contemporary America was not a magical land of forgiveness and happy endings like that of *The Tempest's*, but a land of "glass eye[s], false teeth . . . / Rubber breasts" that promised to fill the empty hands of its "mended" male applicants with an obeying Ariel-like "sweetie," who could absolutely "sew," "cook," "talk," "work," and "roll away headaches" as her "Herr" wished (Plath, *Collected Poems* 136, 221-22, 246).

These inherent notions of women's obedience interwoven in the texture of the then American society can be found in a mixture of colonial and feminist readings of the play too: if Prospero is the colonizer man then Ariel is the colonized woman: though she is not will-less, but is neither rebellious nor disloyal. She is almost always a good partner and negotiator with her colonizer because she knows that any defiance on her part would cost her the relational freedom her master has given her on the condition of keeping his orders. This notion of subservience central to colonial/post-colonial studies could not have been far from Plath's mind at the time of writing *Ariel* poems since colonial studies had come to the foreground during the 1950s with the publication of some important works such as *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization* by Dominique-Octave Mannoni and Pamela Powesland (1956, London). *Discourse on Colonialism* by Aimé Césaire (1955, France) is particularly noteworthy because of its focus

on Hitler and the Nazi Party's persecution of Jews as a form of colonization of the non-Aryan white people by Europeans.¹³ *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) by Frantz Fanon are other examples that came out in the time of Plath's life. Whether Plath had read any of them or anything with the theme of colonization is not known to me,¹⁴ but the important thing about all these books is their major themes of dependency, the fear of abandonment, inadequacy and inferiority complex of the subordinate colonized in dealing with their colonizers which might well be applicable to the case of the 1940s and 1950s American women's perception of themselves as dependent on the male members of a patriarchal society. Besides, considering Plath's continuous concern with war and cruel killings of people throughout the world in her *Letters Home* or *Journals*, her choice of the name Ariel who is colonized by the colonizer Prospero, can be read as a criticism of the then practice and conduct of the imperialist countries who ignited and pursued many gory wars to serve their own interests.¹⁵

But *The Tempest* is not the only literary work in which the character Ariel and hence the word Ariel appears. John Milton uses this name for "a rebel angel, overcome by the seraph Abdiel in the first day of the War of Heaven" in his epic poem of 1667, *Paradise Lost*.¹⁶ Considering her *Letters Home* and the notes in LibraryThing,¹⁷ we know that Plath had read this book, so this might have been a probable source for her choice of the name *Ariel* for her poetry collection. Ariel's being a "rebel angel" in Milton's work is particularly fascinating knowing that Plath herself had a defying personality against all the traditions which had caged her and other women in a way or another back then. Ariel is also a guardian sylph of virgins who appears to Belinda, the heroine of Alexander Pope's mock-heroic narrative poem of 1712, *The Rape of the Lock*.¹⁸ It is notable that in his poem "To a Lady, with a Guitar," based on Shakespeare's *The*

¹³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discourse_on_colonialism

¹⁴ My search in the only source available to me, www.librarything.com, was a disappointment as it did not hold any records on such themes read by Plath.

¹⁵ For a list of these wars involving imperialist countries you can refer to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_wars_1945%E2%80%931989

¹⁶ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ariel_\(angel\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ariel_(angel))

¹⁷ <http://www.librarything.com/catalog/SylviaPlathLibrary&deepsearch=Milton>. This link tells us that not only had Plath read this book but also Milton's other works and Milton-related works for her English 39b in spring 1953 (My thanks are due to Peter K. Steinberg for introducing this website to me).

¹⁸ <http://www.librarything.com/catalog/SylviaPlathLibrary&deepsearch=+pope>. According to this source Plath had read *The Centuries' Poetry: An Anthology* which included poems by Pope. But upon my e-mail inquiry from the

Tempest, Percy Bysshe Shelley¹⁹ identifies the character Ariel with poet and his/her songs with poetry (see footnote 16). It should not be forgotten that this freely flying spirit is the symbol of imagination and the autonomous creation/creativity for Romantics in general. So, the name Plath chose for her poetry collection can simply stand for a poet and his/her created poetry in general. But the name Ariel is darkly associated with death in Shelley's case. On July 8, 1822, less than a month before his thirtieth birthday, Shelley drowned in a sudden storm while sailing back from Leghorn (Livorno) to Lerici in his schooner, *Don Juan*. The name "Don Juan," a compliment to Byron, was chosen by Edward John Trelawny, a member of the Shelley-Byron Pisan circle. However, according to Mary Shelley's testimony, Shelley changed it to "Ariel." Though many speculations point to the storm as the real cause of the capsizing of Shelley's schooner and his subsequent death, there were others who claimed that he "was depressed in those days and that he wanted to die."²⁰ Plath and Shelley's death/suicide at the rough age of thirty, Shelley's own "resolute repudiation of outer authority or the despotism of custom,"²¹ and the kind of serpentine love life that he conducted are highly inviting for considering Shelley's life and destiny as a probable source for Plath's choice of the word Ariel for her poetry collection.²²

Lilly Library, David K. Frasier warned me that "[t]he cataloging record is misleading as all the Lilly holds in the set in the Plath library is volume 2 [of the above title] (Donne to Dryden)." Therefore, the exact source that Plath has used to read Pope's works is still unknown to me considering my limited accessible sources.

¹⁹ This link <http://www.librarything.com/catalog/SylviaPlathLibrary&deepsearch=Shelley> tells us that Plath had knowledge of Shelley.

²⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Percy_Bysshe_Shelley. After been cremated, Shelley's ashes were interred in the Protestant Cemetery, Rome, near an ancient pyramid in the city walls. His grave bears the Latin inscription, Cor Cordium ("Heart of Hearts"), and in reference to his death at sea, a few lines of Ariel's song from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: "Nothing of him that doth fade / But doth suffer a sea-change / Into something rich and strange."

²¹ <http://www.nndb.com/people/854/000024782/>

²² *Ariel* or *The Life of Shelley* is a biography of Shelley first published in 1923 in French by the French author André Maurois (1885-1967). So, it might have been an additional source for Plath's knowledge on Shelley.



Shelley's grave in Rome

Ariel is also the name of the main character of its namesake Russian science fiction novel by Alexander Beliaev published first in 1941. This was his last published work before he died of starvation in the Soviet town of Pushkin on January 6, 1942 while it was occupied by the Nazis.²³ Beliaev's wife and daughter, who managed to survive the Nazis' occupation, were taken away to Poland by the Nazis. After the war, they were transferred back to the USSR and sent to a Gulag camp.²⁴ It is not very hard to find some correlations between the Russianness of this title and the mania of the Red Scare prevalent during the Cold War era in America. If aware of this novel and its writer's whereabouts at all, by choosing the word Ariel Plath may well have wanted to be a reminder of a recent history which had caused the most inexcusable chagrin of humanity to be always remembered by posterity.

ii. Ariel in Mythology

One detail of Plath's life that may have had an effect on selecting this title for her poetry collection should not be forgotten either. According to Hughes' claims in his introduction to Plath's *Collected Poems*, at the time of writing *Ariel* poems Plath had pointed out that they "began with the word 'Love' and ended with the word 'Spring'" (Hughes 14). This is an expressive illumination since Plath wrote the title poem "Ariel" together with "Poppies in October," on her thirtieth birthday on October 27, 1962, hence the notions of revitalization.²⁵ Surprisingly enough, these two poems have specifically the hints of rebirth and rising up from the dead: the poem "Ariel" starts with the depiction of red morning's birth from the "[s]tasis in darkness" which happens while the writer/rider is foaming with her horse, like an "arrow," through the air (Plath, *Collected Poems* 239). This poem is filled with kinetic and color-coded images that affirm a progression toward a richer life, full of promises and new beginnings. Another reading that endorses promises of renewal in this poem comes from Julia Gordon-Bramer's article. Considering the original design of *Ariel* poems by Plath herself, Gordon-

²³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Beliaev

²⁴ The Gulag, the main Soviet forced labor camp systems established on April 25, 1930 during the Stalin era (was liquidated officially in January 1960) majorly for political repression in the Soviet Union, was another blow to humanity that had not yet recovered from the atrocities of WWII and its notorious Holocaust.

²⁵ Though "Lady Lazarus" was in progress from October 23 to 29, 1962, it has been categorized as an October 29, 1962 poem and not an October 27, 1962 poem in Plath's *Collected Poems*.

Bramer reads the first twenty two poems of this collection, among which is "Ariel," on the basis of twenty-two-card suit of Major Arcana or trumps in a Tarot de Marseille deck. According to her, the poem "Ariel" exactly corresponds with the fourteenth card, Temperance.

This card symbolizes "balance of nature, surrender to passion, art, personal expression" (Gordon-Bramer 95). But what is more, it symbolizes recovery, health, joining forces and transcendence.²⁶ These meanings are very obvious not only in this particular poem but also in the whole collection of Plath's *Ariel*. The red wings of this angel are remarkably corresponding to the red rider in "Ariel" who is literarily flying into the eyes of a rising sun with her horse. On the other hand, angels in general refer to the supernatural aspect of existence. So, by basing her poem "Ariel" on the image of this card, Plath may have wanted to refer to her final supernatural flight, her suicide, which is in a way a promise of resurrection, hence her final choice of the name *Ariel* for her poetry collection. According to David Trinidad "[i]n Plath's *Ariel*, a woman emerges triumphant from a dark night of the soul" which automatically brings the notions of rebirth to mind too (149).



Although "Poppies in October" starts with grim and somber images such as "sun-clouds," "ambulance," a pale sky full of "carbon monoxides," dulled eyes, "a forest of frost," and pale-blue "cornflowers," and although a poppy itself is a symbol of sleep, oblivion and death in most cultures, the very contradiction that Plath creates here by juxtaposing the images of red poppies— which usually come in full bloom late spring to early summer— with a cold and dreary month of the year is suggestive of the possibilities of life even amidst the fierce coldness (Plath, *Collected Poems* 240). Ferber proposes that "poppy, or rather its capsule or head . . . was associated with the goddess Demeter (Latin Ceres), probably because it often flowers at harvest time . . . Perhaps the poppy head, filled with seeds, represents fertility; perhaps it stands for the beginning of the growing season . . ." (161). In classical mythology in general, the bright scarlet

²⁶ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Temperance_\(Tarot_card\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Temperance_(Tarot_card))

color of poppy signifies a promise of resurrection after death.²⁷ Reading this poem through the twentieth card, Judgment, in the Major Arcana or trumps in a Tarot de Marseille deck, Gordon-Bramer suggests themes such as "resurrection" and "healing" associated with this poem too (96).



The twentieth card of a twenty-two- card suit in a Tarot de Marseille deck

Closely related with these mythological associations is the goddess Sekhmet,²⁸ the warrior, lioness goddess of Upper Egypt who protected the pharaohs and led them in warfare. Since Sekhmet is the goddess of war she is closely associated with blood, hence she's dressed in red, winning her the title the *Scarlet Lady*. She also was seen as a special goddess for women, ruling over menstruation. She is closely associated with the notions of fire, because she is also a solar deity, hence the title *Lady of Flame*, and is often considered as an aspect of the goddesses Hathor— an Ancient Egyptian goddess who personified the principles of love, beauty, music,

²⁷ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poppy>

²⁸ I first got the idea of the goddess Sekhmet from Anna Dillon's article "An 'I' Elated: The Ecstatic Self as Creative Process and Product in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath" in *Plath Profiles*, volume 1, summer 2008, pages 115-126: <http://www.iun.edu/~nwadmin/plath/vol1/dillon.pdf>. Sekhmet is variably spelled as Sachmet, Sakhet, Sekmet, Sakhmet and Sekhet; and given the Greek name, Sachmis: <http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/sekhmet>. For all the subsequent information presented on Sekhmet please refer to the latter link.

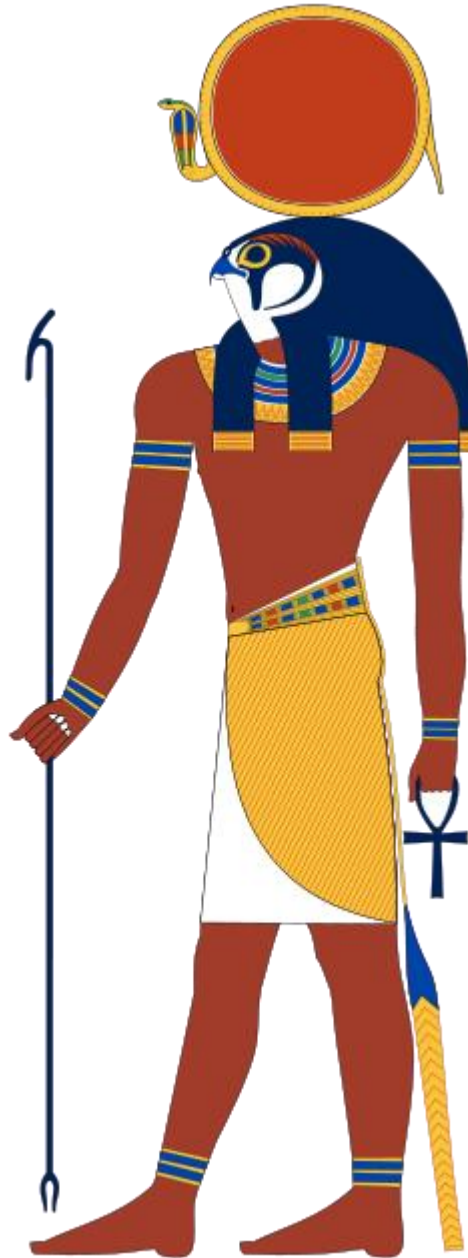
motherhood and joy, depicted as Mistress of the West welcoming the dead into the next life²⁹— and Bast— a fierce lioness war goddess, almost with the same attributes of Sekhmet, protecting Lower Egypt.³⁰



Bast. The defender of the pharaoh and the later chief male deity, Ra; defeating their enemies with arrows of fire, hence the titles Lady of Flame and Eye of Ra

²⁹ <http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Hathor>

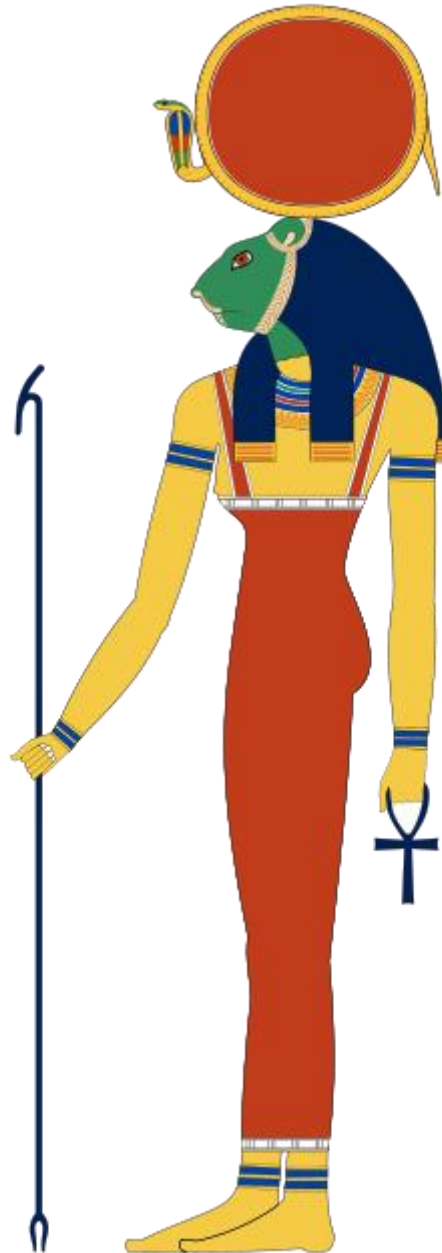
³⁰ [http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Bast+\(goddess\)](http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Bast+(goddess)). Also spelled Bastet, Baset, Ubasti, and Pasht. Her name means female devourer. It should not be forgotten that the meanings and associations of these goddesses is prone to change throughout history. So, they may have newer or more moderate affiliations.



Ra is represented in a variety of forms. The most usual form was a man with the head of a hawk and a solar disk on top, a man with the head of a beetle (in his form as Khepri), a man with the head of a ram, and also a phoenix, heron, serpent, bull, cat, lion and other creatures



Goddess Hathor in a red dress wears the headdress of a sun disk and cow's horn. Goddess of the sky, love, beauty, motherhood, music and cows



Sekhmet, the goddess of warfare, pestilence and desert, with the head of a lioness and a solar disk and uraeus³¹ on her head. She is also the provider of cures to ills. So, the name Sekhmet literally became synonymous with physicians and surgeons during the later phases of Egypt ancient history

³¹ <http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Uraeus>. The Uraeus: rearing cobra, the stylized, upright form of an Egyptian spitting cobra, used as a symbol of sovereignty, royalty, deity, and divine authority in ancient Egypt.

Whether Plath was exactly aware of all these Egyptian mythological associations at the time of writing the poem "Ariel" in particular and naming her collection *Ariel* in general is not known, yet the motifs of fierceness (arrows), femininity (lioness goddess, Godiva), blood (red color and the mouthfuls of black sweet blood berries), fire (the cauldron of morning), nudeness³² (Godiva), motherhood (the child's cry) and sun are loudly present in the poem "Ariel" and sporadically in other poems of the collection *Ariel*. These associations become much more relevant when we see that Ariel in *The Tempest* has used fire as a main tool for setting the tempest. In answer to Prospero Ariel says "I boarded the king's ship; now on the beak / Now in the waist, the deck, in every cabin, / I flamed amazement: sometime I'd divide, / And burn in many places; on the topmast, / The yards and bowsprit, would I flame distinctly, / Then meet and join. Jove's lightnings, the precursors / O' the dreadful thunder-claps, more momentary / And sight-outrunning were not; the fire and cracks / Of sulphurous roaring the most mighty Neptune / Seem to besiege and make his bold waves tremble, / Yea, his dread trident shake." Therefore, by relating a centuries-old myth with a far-reaching seventeenth-century play Plath has killed two birds with one stone and has corroborated in a way her ideas in her poetry.

iii. Ariel in Religion

In the entry of July 25, 1952 in her *Unabridged Journals*, Plath talks of herself not as a devout Christian but as a "skeptical . . . a matter worshiper" (120). In her letter of December 10, 1955 to her mother she writes "[i]ronically enough, I am not really a Christian in the true sense of the word, but more of an ethical culturist: labels don't matter, but I am close to the Jewish beliefs in many ways" (Plath, *Letters Home* 201). In another letter of October 22, 1961 she defines herself as a "pagan-Unitarian at best" (433). Therefore, religious resonances of the word Ariel in general and its Jewish roots in particular become more appealing considering these observations by Plath on her own religious beliefs.³³

³² Occasionally, Sekhmet was also portrayed in her statuettes and engravings with minimal clothing or naked. It is interesting that Plath's other images in the poem "Ariel" also closely correspond to Sekhmet and her cult. For example, the word "furrow" that Plath uses in the sixth line of the poem strongly resembles the word "pharaoh" in pronunciation whom Sekhmet protects. Similarly, words such as "darkness (dark)," "brown," "Nigger-eye," "black" and "shadows" in Plath's "Ariel" can be representative of Egypt's people (Plath, *Collected Poems* 239).

³³ In her article "Tangled up in Blue: Sylvia Plath's Use of Dantean Structure" in *Plath Profiles*, volume 5, summer 2012, Laura Chéreau suggests "[i]t could be possible that Plath had Jewish roots on either side of her family, most

Ariel is an archangel found primarily in Jewish and Christian mysticism and Apocrypha. In the Bible's book of *Isaiah* (Isaiah 29:1-7), Ariel is a symbolic name for Jerusalem, meaning "Lion of God" ("Ari" in Hebrew means Lion and so is a symbol for bravery and courage³⁴ and "-el" means God³⁵) or "Hearth of God"³⁶ referring to "Israel's lion-like strength."³⁷ Plath repeats this meaning almost literally in her title poem to emphasize her rider's strength: "God's Lioness / How one we grow, / Pivot of heels and knees!" (Plath, *Collected Poems* 239).³⁸ Hitchcock's Bible Names Dictionary defines the word Ariel as "altar; light or lion of God" too.³⁹ If we accept that the meaning "alter of God" has some implications such as sacrifice, offering, loss and surrender, then can we claim that Plath considered her suicide as a sacrifice and surrender of any sort and so chose this title as a symbolic reference to what she did? After all, "all she wanted to say simply was that if I [Ted Hughes] didn't go back to her she could not live" (in *Trinidad* 149).

Of course, one cannot help thinking of the associations between the Jewish roots of this word and Holocaust in general and Assia Wevill, Ted Hughes's Jewish mistress who had dealt a devastating blow upon Plath's life, in particular. Therefore, the title of Plath's poetry collection, *Ariel*, shrieks like "[a]rrows that lacerate the sky, while knowing / the secret of their ecstasy's in going . . . to trace a wound that heals / only to reopen as flesh congeals: / cycling phoenix never stops" (Plath, *Collected Poems* 330).

By the Middle Ages, Ariel had become the name of one of seven water spirits who were led by the archangel Michael, according to the cabalistic Jewish tradition.⁴⁰ Among the common

likely on her mother's . . . side (183)." In order to consolidate her claims, Chéreau names some of Plath's poems that were written during or after Jewish holidays. "Wintering," "Stings," "Elm," "The Detective," and "The Swarm" are only some of them.

³⁴ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ariel_\(city\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ariel_(city))

³⁵ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ariel_\(The_Tempest\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ariel_(The_Tempest))

³⁶ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ariel_\(angel\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ariel_(angel))

³⁷ <http://www.ccel.org/e/easton/ebd/ebd/T0000300.html#T0000304>

³⁸ Plath also uses the word "lioness" in her October 28- 29, 1962 poem "Purdah" writing "The lioness / The shriek in the bath / The cloak of holes" (244).

³⁹ http://www.ccel.org/ccel/hitchcock/bible_names.html?term=Ariel

⁴⁰ It is an open secret that Hughes' practice of occult and his "knowledge of primitive legends and . . . shamanism, as practised in primitive societies" had impressed almost everyone around him including Plath (Feinstein 41). This couple's cabalistic practices are well researched by Julia Gordon-Bramer in her article referred to in the Works

folk, it was simply the name of an air or water spirit.⁴¹ These two meanings become highlighted not only through the images associated with air and water in Plath's title poem, but also throughout Plath's *Ariel* collection too. So, like a "[d]ynasty of broken arrows" the title *Ariel* flies in the air, and wherever it drops it splits open a vast horizon of reasons for its being chosen as the final stamp on a life-long collection by Plath (Plath, *Collected Poems* 248).

iv. Ariel in Popular Culture

For sure, nobody can assert that Plath was fully aware of all the implications and meanings mentioned above or the ones which will follow at the time of choosing the title *Ariel* for her poetry collection, but in any case, these are some speculations that cannot be ignored either, because words are never innocent nor "dry and riderless" as they carry the colossal burdens of centuries-long prejudices and associations and so there would never be an end to the ceremony of their echoes (Plath, *Collected Poems* 270). Therefore, no matter how tangential they may appear, some details on the word Ariel and their probable relation to Plath are still absorbing. Ariel is an unincorporated place in Cowlitz County, Washington⁴² and the name of a town and its namesake lake in Wayne County, Pennsylvania, United States.⁴³ The latter was first settled in 1822 and has been running some thriving businesses well into the present century. So, the word Ariel was not unfamiliar to the Americans within the American borders, and by choosing it for her last poetry collection Plath might have intended to accentuate in a way her own American roots rather than her English associations through her English husband. Related to this issue of locality is the Ariel, the car, "made by the Ariel Co, Boston (later Bridgeport, Connecticut) from 1905 to 1906, then Sinclair-Scott Co, Baltimore, Maryland in 1906."⁴⁴

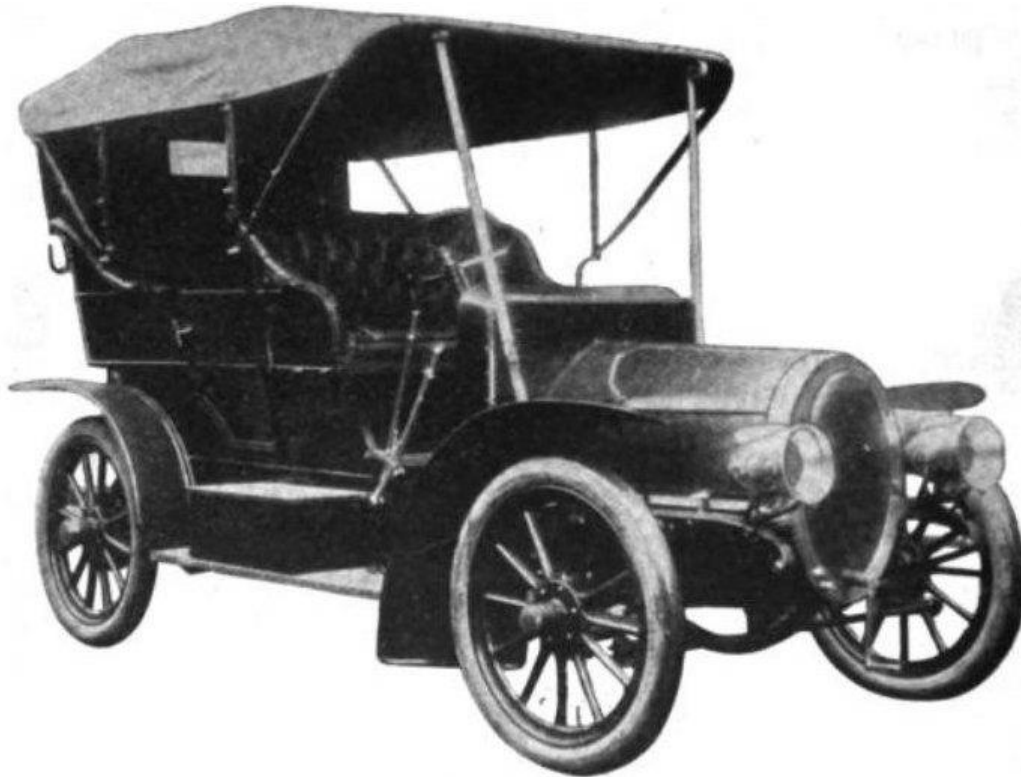
Cited. Therefore, the probable knowledge of the name of such a spirit is not a mere accident in Plath's case. This tendency to occult makes *The Tempest* doubly important for Plath since magic is one of the central elements in that play too.

⁴¹ <http://www.mythencyclopedia.com/Am-Ar/Ariel.html>

⁴² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ariel,_Washington

⁴³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lake_Ariel,_Pennsylvania

⁴⁴ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ariel_\(American_automobile\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ariel_(American_automobile))



*This photo is from an article entitled "The Ariel 1906, 30 H.P. Four Cylinder Touring Car" by E.P. Clark on page 116 of the tenth volume of **Cycle and Automobile Trade Journal**, dating from April 1, 1906, published by Chilton Company⁴⁵*

On the other hand, Ariel Motorcycles was a British motorcycle manufacturer based in Bournbrook, Birmingham. It was one of the leading innovators in British motorcycling, and was part of the Ariel marque. The company was sold to BSA in 1944 but the Ariel name survived until 1970 when it closed down its business. The original company was established in 1870 to make bicycles. The name came from the first penny farthing bicycle, which was so light they called it the Ariel "spirit of the air." It merged with Westwood Manufacturing in 1896 and made a powered tricycle in 1898. In 1902, Ariel produced its first motorcycle.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:1906Ariel.jpg>

⁴⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ariel_Motorcycles. In fact, the company dates back to 1847 when Ariel made an early pneumatic-tyred wheel for horse drawn carriages.



Ariel motorcycle badge

Ariel Motorcycles produced many models since its opening, but it is amusing enough that in 1959 it produced a model called Ariel Arrow and in 1963 another one called Ariel Golden Arrow.⁴⁷ I could not find enough sources to date the exact month of the latter's production, but for a native American and a later Englisher who was very responsive in her works to advertisements and different journals and magazines, these corporations and their products could not have been unknown. If so, then, can we assume Plath's choice as a criticism of a desperately blind and mercenary high technology and industrialism just "50 years ahead of" her (Plath, *Letters Home* 356)?⁴⁸

⁴⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Ariel_motorcycles

⁴⁸ If the brand of a British motorcycle company has ever been the source for Plath's choice of the name Ariel for her poetry collection, then the above discussion of her emphasis on her American roots can be reversed to a heart-felt sense of being English, the feeling that she talked of from time to time in her letters home and journals.



Ariel Golden Arrow



1961 Ariel advert - by now there's more than one model in the family...⁴⁹

⁴⁹ <http://www.realclassic.co.uk/arielleader08040800.html>

Another science related theme comes from the Ariel, a British satellite research programme conducted between the early 1960s and 1980s. Six satellites were launched as part of the programme, starting with the first British satellite, Ariel 1, which was launched on April 26, 1962,⁵⁰ and concluding with the launch of Ariel 6 on June 2, 1979. The first four were devoted to studying the ionosphere, the remaining two to X-ray astronomy and cosmic-ray studies. The first two spacecraft were constructed by the United States National Aeronautics and Space Administration, with subsequent spacecraft being produced in Britain. All launches were conducted using American rockets; Ariel 1 on a Thor-Delta, and the remainder on Scouts.⁵¹ Plath may well have been aware of the programme since she lived in England at the time, and so this final choice of hers may well be again a reflection of her deep concerns over unbridled scientific progresses that threatened humanity for their negative contribution to warfare.

Every Plath scholar is aware of the recurrence of some certain images throughout her works. Plant imagery, moon imagery, water and sea imagery, war imagery, color imagery and animal imagery are just but some of them. Closely associated with the moon imagery— with all its associations of an indifferent and selfish matrilineal control in particular and barrenness and femininity in general — is Ariel, the fourth-largest of the twenty seven known moons of Uranus, discovered on October 24, 1851 by William Lassell. All of Uranus's moons are named after characters from the works of William Shakespeare or Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*.⁵² Maybe by her meticulous choice of this name for her poetry collection Plath had in mind a strong criticism of a limited femininity in general and a limiting matrilineal control in particular that she abhorred with all her life.

Ariel is also a weekly in-house magazine of the BBC which had been in print for seventy five years until December 2011, the date that it stopped being published in hard copies and went on-line.⁵³ A rough calculation shows that it should have been launched sometime around 1936 when Plath was only four years old. But later on, when she proved herself as a published writer, either she or Hughes had many affiliations with the BBC recording poems and plays, giving

⁵⁰ Pay close attention to this date in the discussion that will follow on Plath's mother since April 26 (1906) is the date of Plath's mother's birthday.

⁵¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ariel_programme

⁵² [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ariel_\(moon\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ariel_(moon))

⁵³ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2011/oct/20/bbc-ariel-magazine>

interviews or discussing literature. In 1932 Arthur Eric Rowton Gill (Eric Gill), a British sculptor, typeface designer, stonecutter and printmaker, produced a group of sculptures, Prospero and Ariel, Ariel between Wisdom and Gaiety and others for the BBC's Broadcasting House in London.⁵⁴ So, Plath might have seen the magazine and these monuments while attending the BBC departments and was simply fascinated with this reverberating word in a setting that meant a lot to her in the terms of literary achievements, hence the name of her poetry collection.



Ariel between Wisdom and Gaiety

⁵⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eric_Gill



Prospero and Ariel; their choice was fitting since Prospero was a magician and scholar, and Ariel, a spirit of the air, in which radio waves travel. Additional carvings of Ariel can be found on the building's exterior in many bas-reliefs, some by Gill, others by Gilbert Bayes⁵⁵

According to [Dictionary.net](http://www.dictionary.net) ariel in zoology is used as an adjective for certain birds noted for their graceful flight; as, the ariel toucan; the ariel petrel.⁵⁶ Could this meaning be ascribed to Plath's own sad and irretrievable flight from the earth on February 11, 1963?⁵⁷

⁵⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Broadcasting_House

⁵⁶ <http://definitions.dictionary.net/ariel>

But the last among these trivia is the gripping similarity between the word Ariel and Plath's mother's name Aurelia.⁵⁸ Aurelia is a feminine given name from the Latin family name Aurelius, which was derived from Aureus meaning golden.⁵⁹ The Latin word for gold is aurum.⁶⁰ The adjective form of the name Aurelia, Aurelian, is an archaic word for lepidopterist, one who is interested in butterflies. The term is derived from aurelia, meaning chrysalis, and relates to the golden color it may attain just before the butterfly emerges.⁶¹ The relevance of the name Aurelia to entomology automatically invokes the memory of Sylvia Plath's father who was a professor of biology as well as an entomologist with a specific expertise on bees. Therefore, it is very probable that by choosing the word Ariel (pay attention especially to its sound similarities with two variants of the name Aurelia, Auriel and Aurielle) for her poetry collection Plath meant a simultaneous reference to both her father and mother, albeit rather circuitously in this case, who had both an everlasting effect on her life. What is more, The Society of Aurelians in London was one of the oldest organized bodies of specialists in any branch of zoology. They collected and documented insects from the 1690s. The history of the society is known only from the works of Benjamin Wilkes in his book *The English Moths and Butterflies* (1748-9). The society flourished for a time but came to an abrupt end in March 1748. While members of the society were in a meeting in Swan Tavern in Exchange Alley, a great fire broke out in Cornhill and enveloped them. All the members escaped, but their entire collection, library, and records were destroyed. This event was documented by Moses Harris in *The Aurelian; or, Natural History of English Insects* (1765). The loss disheartened the group so much that they never managed to regroup again (see footnote 61 for the source). Whether Plath ever knew about these books is not known

⁵⁷ For other references of the word Ariel, please see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ariel>

⁵⁸ I first got the idea of sound similarities between the words "Aurelia" and "Ariel" from Julia Gordon-Bramer's article "Fever 103⁰: The Fall of Man; the Rise of Woman; the Folly of Youth" in *Plath Profiles*, volume 4, summer 2011, pages 88-104: <http://www.iun.edu/~nwadmin/plath/vol4/Gordon-Bramer.pdf>

⁵⁹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aurelia>. Julius Caesar's mother's name was Aurelia.

Aurelia has twenty five variant forms: Aranka, Arela, Areli, Arelie, Arella, Arely, Aural, Auralia, Aurea, Aurel, Aureliana, Aurelie, Aurelina, Aurellia, Aurene, Auriel, Auriella, Aurielle, Aurita, Ora, Oralia, Oralie, Orel, Irelee and Orelia. The variations Auriel and Aurielle are the closest in sound to the word Ariel: <http://www.thinkbabynames.com/meaning/0/Aurelia>

⁶⁰ <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/aureateness>

⁶¹ [http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Aurelian+\(entomology\)](http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Aurelian+(entomology))

to me,⁶² but since her father was an entomologist so it is very probable that he knew about such a society and its unfortunate history, and maybe these books were among Otto Plath's personal library not known to the public. Therefore, Plath may have known indirectly about Aurelians through her father's profession. Besides, one cannot help finding some links between the disbanding of Plath-Hughes' bond and marriage because of Assia Wevill's abrupt fire which burnt down everything.

"The Aurelian" is a short story first written in Russian as "Pil'gram" by Vladimir Nabokov during his exile in Berlin in 1930. After translation by Nabokov and Peter Pertzov it was published in English in the *Atlantic Monthly* in November 1941. The similarities between this story and the details of Plath's life are very interesting and stunning. Paul Pilgram, the protagonist, is a first class entomologist, keeping a butterfly shop in an obscure street, born of a Dutch mother and a German sailor father in Berlin. He is a "flabby elderly man with a florid face, lank hair, and a grayish moustache, carelessly clipped" who is "churlish, heavy," short-tempered and always groaning (atlantic.com).⁶³ The "mine host" of the small bar that he attends on Saturdays calls this slightly limping man whose legs seemed too thin for his body "Herr Professor."⁶⁴ He has got married to his wife Eleanor "almost a quarter of a century before" in 1905.⁶⁵ The only dream of this man in life is to have a *pilgrimage* to far and exotic hunting grounds to collect butterflies. But life has never been kind to him to materialize his dream, business always slack, "always a gap somewhere, and, even if luck did come his way now and then, something was sure to go wrong at the last moment." But finally, on April 1,⁶⁶ "of all

⁶² My only handy source on the issue, www.librarything.com, did not indicate whether or not these works were either known to or read by Sylvia Plath.

⁶³ <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1941/11/the-aurelian/306224/>. All the subsequent citations from this story would be from this source.

⁶⁴ Pay close attention to the word "Herr," the one that Plath uses four times in her October 23-29, 1962 poem "Lady Lazarus." Pilgram's limping leg is poignantly a reminder of Plath's father's limping due to the amputation of one of his legs because of diabetes.

⁶⁵ Sylvia Plath's mother was born on April 26, 1906. She married Otto Emil Plath on January 4, 1932, and Otto Plath died on November 5, 1940.

⁶⁶ This date is particularly important for Plath, since her daughter Frieda was born on April 1, 1960 at 3 Chalcot Square home in London. Though not included in the original design of *Ariel* by Plath herself, she has written the poem "Little Fugue" on April 2, 1962 which is very directly, at least on surface, related to the memories of a "[g]othic and barbarous, pure German" dead father whose "[b]lack and leafy" voice (almost exactly Paul Pilgram's characteristics) haunts his daughter who still survives despite everything (Plath, *Collected Poems* 188). There are even direct references to some words such as "delicatessen" and "sausages" and to the idea of limping, "[y]ou had

dates," life smiled on him and he could sell a collection of "small clear-winged moths that mimic wasps or mosquitoes," "*uralensis*," to a rich amateur entomologist named Sommer for "nine hundred and fifty marks" (emphasis mine). When he decides "that the dream of his life was about to break at last from its old crinkly cocoon," he buys train tickets to Spain,⁶⁷ leaving behind everything, his shop, his wife and many debts and unpaid taxes, heading to the station. But on the verge of leaving, when he went to his shop at the last moment to take some small change from his clay money pot, he had a stroke and died. So, he never fulfilled his dream of travelling to far lands to see glorious bugs. An ill-fated end, an unaccomplished life, stamped with death, like that of Plath's.

Another interesting detail about this story is Eleanor, Pilgram's wife. She is a childless and obedient woman with a "small face wax-pale and shiny" and "plastered corns on her feet," "used to all sorts of disappointments," looking forward all the week to the slow silent strolls with her stolidly coarse husband on Sunday mornings, who is finally left lonely by her husband. Her plight is a reminiscence of Aurelia Schober Plath's— and of course that of Plath's herself— during her tough married years with an autocrat Otto Plath, according to what Aurelia Plath writes in her introduction to Plath's *Letters Home*. Bearing all the aforesaid similarities between the names Ariel and Aurelia, the details of this short story make a double sense.⁶⁸ Therefore, by choosing one simple name for her poetry collection Plath has created an enigmatic and to that extent complicated web of straining familial relations, as if bringing in two chief culprits responsible for her lifetime heavy burdens of a deeply felt unhappiness.

one leg," in the poem that Nabokov uses in his story too (188). Further, the lack of communication between Paul Pilgram and the people around him, and the one between the narrator of "Little Fugue" and her dead father is another salient detail worth mentioning.

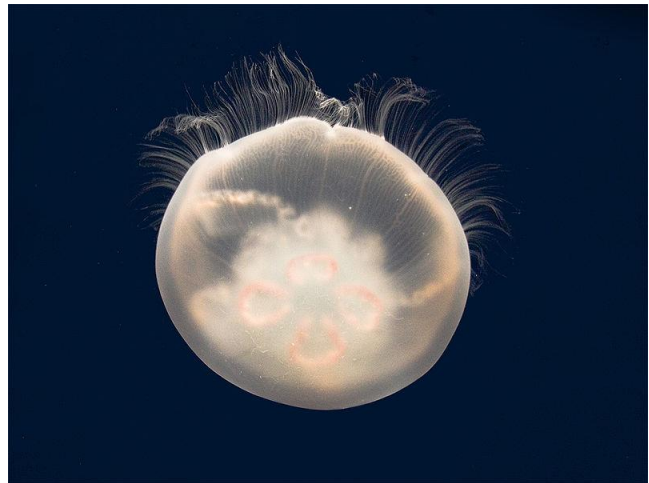
⁶⁷ Spain has a particular significance in Plath's life. Not only is it the place that she honeymooned with Hughes in 1956 but also it is the place that Assia Wevill and Hughes had a ten-day escapade to almost in the middle of September 1962 after Hughes ditched Plath in Ireland on "Wednesday night, 19 September" 1962 (Koren & Negev 104). "[I]t was three months before Plath found out about the trip and, when she did, she was outraged"(107).

⁶⁸ The name Aurelia appears in another literary offspring, the 1943 comedy *The Madwoman of Chaillot*, by the French dramatist Jean Giraudoux. Countess Aurelia, the benignly eccentric madwoman of the title, is an aging idealist who sees the world as happy and beautiful (like Plath's mother?) and happens to save the world from the nefarious plans of some devil men that seek only wealth and power, corrupting everything, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Madwoman_of_Chaillot. The title of this play is also reminiscent of the nineteenth-century poem "The Lady of Shalott" by Alfred Lord Tennyson. It is very interesting that this poem is about a woman who broke "the rules of her enchantment" because of a man, but the man was indifferent to her, and so she died because of this violation (Bassnett 74). Apparently, the literary vortex is much trickier than what one might think of at first.

Closely associated with the notions of motherhood, sexuality and femininity is the word areola (Aureola is a female given name that sounds like Aurelia which in turn sounds like Ariel), diminutive of Latin area, meaning "open place." In anatomy, an areola is any circular area such as the colored skin surrounding the nipple.⁶⁹ This meaning is well preserved in the title poem "Ariel" when Plath says "Nigger-eye / Berries cast dark / Hooks — / Black sweet blood mouthfuls" (239). The associations between nipple-berries and blood-milk reveal the most omnipresent of all Plath's concerns which is obviously the issue of femininity and all its appendages. Then, no surprise if Plath has chosen the name Ariel for her final collection of poetry.

On the other hand, Aurelia is a genus of scyphozoan jellyfish, and we know that jellyfish together with other sea creatures are among some of the main motifs in Plath's works.⁷⁰ Aurelia aurita, a species in the genus Aurelia, is known as the moon jelly too. Every Plath scholar knows that moon has always had strong associations with notions of motherhood (albeit negatively), femininity, barrenness, vulnerability, selfishness and indifference in her works. Additionally, Aurelia aurita has two main stages in its life cycle—the polyp stage (asexual reproduction) and the medusa stage (sexual reproduction).⁷¹

This medusa stage is particularly important since her poem "Medusa," which most critics consider as a fulmination of Plath's against her mother, is full of images reminiscent of a jellyfish.



An adult moon jelly fish

⁶⁹ <http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/areola>

⁷⁰ Plath uses the word jellyfish once in her juvenilia poem "Aquatic Nocturne" and then in her January 29, 1963 poem "Gigolo." It is also interesting that in the latter the jellyfish, which Aurelia is a genus of, is closely associated with breast too: "Bright fish hooks, the smiles of women / Gulp at my bulk / And I, in my snazzy blacks, / Mill a litter of breasts like jellyfish" (267).

⁷¹ http://www.tolweb.org/treehouses/?treehouse_id=3373

So once more, Aurelia (Ariel) jellyfish in its more particular divisions assumes strong associations for Plath's choice.

Of course, there would still be further revelations in future in regard to Plath's scholarship, but this paper merely aimed at showing that names are more than mere tags and so deserve much closer attention in regard to their past and history.

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