

Restoring Sylvia—Reconstructing Sylvia Plath’s Ariel

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Abstract

In Sylvia Plath’s, Ariel, first released in the United Kingdom in 1965 and in the United States in 1966, her husband, Ted Hughes, meticulously altered the released work from Plath’s original manuscript. Hughes removed and replaced several poems in the US and the UK versions. Hughes is also responsible for changing punctuation, diction, and even the original title of the work. These changes and manipulations are superbly demonstrated in Ariel: The Restored Edition, released in 2004. In this edition, Frieda Hughes, daughter to Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, provides a very insightful, though possibly skewed, forward. Frieda Hughes understandably stands by her father’s decision in the editing of Plath’s manuscript. She presents Ted Hughes as a victim of circumstance, criticized for his molestation of Plath’s original work. Does replacing more personal and confessional poems with less offensive, more “suitable” works make the first editions of Ariel better than his wife’s true original collection? Why remove and change aspects of Plath’s original manuscript if not for Mr. Hughes’ own personal gain or protection?

In Sylvia Plath’s, Ariel, first released in the United Kingdom in 1965 and in the United States in 1966, her husband, Ted Hughes, meticulously altered the released work from Plath’s original manuscript. Hughes removed and replaced several poems in the US and the UK versions. The barred poems included, “The Rabbit Catcher,” “Thalidomide,” “Barren Woman,” “A secret,” “The Jailor,” “The Detective,” “Magi,” “The Other,” “Stopped Dead,” “The Courage of Shutting Up,” “Purdah,” and “Amnesiac.” Hughes is also responsible for changing punctuation, diction, and even the original title of the work. The original title was Ariel and other poems, and Hughes chose to shorten it to simply Ariel. These changes and manipulations are superbly demonstrated in Ariel: The Restored Edition, released in 2004. In this edition, Frieda Hughes, daughter to Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, provides a very insightful, though possibly skewed, forward. Frieda Hughes understandably stands by her father’s decision in the editing of Plath’s manuscript. She presents Ted Hughes as a victim of circumstance, criticized for his molestation of Plath’s original work. Frieda Hughes states that her father “saw the care of it [Plath’s work] as a means of tribute and responsibility” (Hughes 1). Ted Hughes said, as quoted in the forward by his daughter that he “wanted to make it the best book I could” (Hughes 1). Does replacing more personal and confessional poems with less offensive, more “suitable” works make the first editions of Ariel better than his wife’s true original collection? Though Frieda Hughes can not be faulted for defending her father, one is still left wondering: Why remove and change aspects of Plath’s original manuscript if not for Mr. Hughes’ own personal gain or protection?

Sylvia Plath was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1932. Even before entering at Smith College, Plath was an accomplished and published poet. Plagued throughout her life with depression, Plath attempted suicide twice before finally taking her life in 1963 at the age of thirty-one. In the year 1955, she met and married poet Ted Hughes, “who has been the controversial shepherd of her posthumous career” (Nelson 973). The marriage was not at all perfect, with each person’s determined and motivated nature often being the conflicting points of contention in their relationship. Hughes began seeing a mistress, collectively referred to as “the other woman” by Plath and her family, whom he later married nearly three years after Plath’s death (Hughes 1). This infidelity was a devastating revelation for Plath. Frieda Hughes, in reference to the voice of the Ariel speaker, points to this time in Plath’s life as the origin of the tone of the work. Mrs. Hughes claims that it was, “geared to cover the ground from just before the breakup of the marriage to the resolution of new life, with all the agonies and furies in between” (Hughes 1). Diane Middlebrook, in her book, Her Husband, illustrates this poetic life-cycle Plath intended to create, stating that “Plath had deliberated awhile before settling decisively on the title Ariel, and suggested that she was designing Ariel to begin with a birth and end with a rebirth” (Middlebrook 217).

Ted Hughes has been widely criticized for his edition of his late wife’s final manuscript, and the critiques are rightly deserved. What right does Hughes have for tampering with Plath’s collection of works? Frieda Hughes explains that many of Plath’s later works were rejected by several magazines and publishers, “though editors still in possession of her poems published them quickly after she died” (Hughes 1). This was Ted Hughes’ reasoning for excluding so many of Plath’s poems from the 1965-66 version of Ariel. Plath’s confessional style of poetry brings her personal experiences out in the open. This freedom of personal expression and the revelations Plath makes in her poetry, particularly the verses which were deleted from the original Ariel, exposed the imperfections in the relationship between Plath and Hughes. Perhaps this exposition was much too personal and truthful for Hughes. By editing the manuscript personally, he was able to present the work as he felt necessary. In Giving up: The Last Days of Sylvia Plath, Jillian Becker, close friend of Plath, recounts not only the poet’s final days, but also the attitude of Ted Hughes after her death. At the funeral, Becker recalls disturbingly harsh statements made by Hughes including, “Everybody hated her,” and “It was either her or me,” which he repeated numerous times during the course of the funeral (Becker 1). One particularly interesting statement made by Hughes that afternoon was, “She made me professional” (1). This bitter statement is clarified by Becker. As she elaborates:

I read and heard about an English preference for amateur status in the arts, in any field of study and every kind of sport. An Englishman did what he did for the love of it. Americans wrote to sell their work, their culture being so much more materialistic. Americans might love writing poetry too, but that was not enough to them. It had not been enough for her, and by foisting her mercenary outlook on him, she had corrupted him. (1)

Hughes obviously harbored resentment for his late wife, not just personally, but professionally as well. Given these harsh statements and feelings, the editorial injustices caused by this man

become all the more disgracefully cruel. The actions taken by Hughes after his ex-wife's passing serve as the last cowardly jab from a villain. Plath had defeated her husband in verse post-mortem. The censoring of her most "Hughes centered" poems proved to be his meager attempt at conquering Plath.

The deleted poems share several qualities from subject matter, to tone, to diction. At various points in each poem, a reference to Hughes is apparent. It is not essential to reinterpret these works, but rather to see the verses for what they are; confessional, personal, and honest; the way Plath meant them to be taken. Frieda Hughes articulates this best in saying that, "Her own words describe her best, her ever-changing moods defining the way she viewed her world and the manner in which she pinned down her subjects with a merciless eye" (Hughes 1). One of the most powerful and expressive of the extracted poems is "Amnesiac." It parallels another of Plath's poems "Lady Lazarus," which was included in the original release of *Ariel*, by implementing the redheaded woman image. In the final stanza of "Lady Lazarus" Plath writes, "Out of the ash, I rise with my red hair, and eat men like air" (Plath 9). This is a strong and authoritative statement of triumph, alluding to the mythical phoenix, a symbol of rebirth and resurrection. The tone is less overtly dominant in the lines of "Amnesia:"

Like the red-headed sister he never dared to touch,
He dreams of a new one,
Barren, the lot are barren" (Plath 71)

It is clear that this statement is a direct implication of her husband and an allusion to his adulterous affair. Their marriage had deteriorated so that the relationship between them has been reduced to that of siblings. Despite the more obvious supremacy like that of "Lady Lazarus," these lines do not lack in impact or significance.

Another apparent allusion to Ted Hughes is evident in "The Jailor." This poem is quite illusory with Plath stating that, "I have been drugged and raped...lever of his wet dreams" (Plath 23). This statement in itself is exceptionally potent and the subject matter raw and sincere and candid. This alone could serve as the catalyst for Hughes to remove it from the original release of *Ariel*. Nevertheless, a more prevailing statement follows in the sixth stanza:

All day gluing my church of burnt matchsticks
I dream of someone else entirely
And he, for this subversion,
Hurts me, he
With his armory of fakery (Plath 24)

This passage speaks for itself; the treacherous adultery of Hughes has made Plath the perpetual victim. Each of these extracted poems has a tone ranging from certainty, to defiance, to blame (both toward Plath herself and Hughes) and even strength. They are essential in the expression of Plath's anguish, confusion, and overall comprehension of the turbulent point in her marriage; a time best expressed through her verse.

Sylvia Plath was a confessional poet, taking her own personal experiences and feelings, and placing them in the forefront of her work. Ted Hughes, in editing her original manuscript, served one purpose, to protect himself. Those poems he mutilated and removed were part of Plath's original manuscript for a reason. The collection *Ariel* and other poems functioned as a cleansing, mentally and poetically, for Plath. Though Hughes did include many of the deleted poems in Plath's 1981 *Collected Poems*, it does not excuse or erase the disservice he did to Plath's readers, the genre of poetry, and Plath herself those decades prior.

Works Cited

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Biographical Sketch

Carly Cate is currently in her last term in the MLA program at Henderson State University, and working on her thesis concerning blindness in literature. Academics are her top priority and she has been fortunate enough to have presented research at several conferences in Seattle, San Francisco, and San Diego. Since being a Grad student, Carly has served as the Vice President for the English Club, she served as Secretary as an undergrad, and was asked to serve on The Common Book Committee this past year. Last term, Carly was hired to teach a section of Henderson Seminar, an introductory class for incoming freshman. She was the first Graduate student asked to teach such a course. She has worked as a GA during her two years in the MLA Program. Initially, Carly worked in the Graduate School and after serving a year, was offered the position of Graduate Assistant for the MLA Program. Upon completion of her degree, Carly plan to either pursue doctoral studies in literature in order to become a college professor or attend the Clinton School of Public Service. By attending such a school, Carly hopes she may be able to work with other countries in developing disability awareness, paying special attention to visual impairments. No matter which path she chooses Carly's hard work and dedication paired with the education she received from this institution will serve her greatly in any endeavor.