



Kalfopoulou, Adrienne. Review of *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking, Motherhood in Sylvia Plath's Work*, by Nephie Christodoulides, Rodopi, 2005, 264 pp.

Nephie Christodoulides' project foregrounds the complex, and complicating, influences of the mother in Plath's work; the treatment of motherhood is handled both from the perspective of Plath's experience with motherhood as much as it explores the defining role of Aurelia Plath on her daughter's development as a poet. As Christodoulides states in the introduction, motherhood "must be seen as a plurality and intrinsically linked to the notion of daughterhood," (xii) that goes beyond the already well mined biography of Plath's unique career, to the theoretical underpinnings of gendered subject formation.

Julia Kristeva's discussions of the semiotic, her focus on discourses of crisis in "About Chinese Women," *Black Sun* and "Sabat Mater" in particular, serve as the theoretical backdrop (that include references to Freud, Klein, Torok and others) of Christodoulides' thesis. The fragility of Plath's sense of self in relation to varying archetypes of the mother from "the devouring" figure that surfaces in a poem like "Medusa" to the self-sacrificing or self-effacing personae of "Heavy Women" and "Mary's Song," suggest that the various roles of abjection are, in Christodoulides' words, "a means to subject formation" and offer a way of "transcending the loose boundaries of self and other" (9). The problem, or paradox, lies in how Plath must negotiate her investment in language, or a symbolic textual self to harness the regressions of her semiotic (maternally identified) impulses. In the extensive references to Jacqueline Rose's *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, Christodoulides cites Rose to foreground how Plath continuously wagers the subjective/semiotic imaginary against the normative terms of the symbolic Law of the father. Whether it is in Plath's early juvenilia poems, or her exploration of fairytale paradigms or her fascination with shamanisms, "the call of the mother is there and cannot be eradicated" (61).

As has been often noted in Plath scholarship, Plath's use of strict meter and form and syllabic patterns, gives way in the latter Ariel poems to the uncanny enjambments and rhythmic incantations of her more experimental and haunting poems like "Lady Lazarus," "Gulliver" and "Purdah." What Christodoulides' contributes to this discussion is the reminder that Plath's uses of rhythms and forms becomes a "further manifestation of her wish to preserve the maternal semiotic in the paternal symbolic" (64). But this preservation of the maternal, or the attempt to do so, is fraught with an ultimately vain attempt to establish a foundation of autonomy, and (re)entraps the poet, and poem, as she endeavors to make her way, through language, into the realm of the symbolic. In considering the relinquishment of the maternal the poet, or her personae, experiences a failed subject-identity, and in re-presenting the loss of the mother as pure semiotic identification, the symbolic unravels itself precipitating Kristeva's much quoted notion in "About Chinese Women" that Plath, like Virginia Woolf and the Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva "disillusioned with meanings and words [...] took refuge in lights, rhythms and sounds: a refuge that already announces, for those who know how to read her, her silent departure from life" (Moi, *The Kristeva Reader* 157).

Christodoulides cites poems and other writings of Plath as examples of "successful mourning," of the mother's loss or exclusion ("Parliament Hill Fields", for instance), and connects this to an empowered creativity, or the act of writing poems, Plath's the "blood jet is poetry" ("Kindness"). But there is also the issue of what Christodoulides calls "authentication," of legitimizing oneself within terms not necessarily dependent on the semiotic, and/or maternal; here Plath's obsessions with nurture and orality based on a "premature weaning [that] led to her precocious acquisition of language" (95) come into conflict with her need to master the language that will help signify her loss.



Christodoulides' investigation is ambitious in its scope beginning with Plath's early juvenilia through to her marriage to Ted Hughes, her pregnancies and miscarriages, and finally to her own experiences as a young mother. Throughout Christodoulides' focus illuminates how Plath's maternal dependencies and her uses of the semiotic tropes of motherhood complicated the extraordinary ambivalences she felt in her roles as a daughter, poet, and mother.

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