



Names and Revisionist Re-Naming in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath

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The present paper discusses the revisionist significations encoded in the abundant use of names in the poetry by the American writer Sylvia Plath (1932–1963). The paper attempts to show that there is an undeniable continuity of the theme both within Plath’s poetry and in her semiautobiographical prose fiction. It is highlighted that Plath’s consistent use of names contains an introspective self-analysis and a re-interpretation of personal, cultural, biblical, and mythological meanings associated with the names that frequent Plath’s poetry. To illustrate this point and to show the different significations that the revisionist treatment of names acquires in Plath’s oeuvre, the present paper focuses on her late poems, “Lady Lazarus” and “Fever 103” (Plath 1980, 244, 231).

To begin with, the inclusion of the myriad of names into the poetic texture of Plath’s works may be regarded as a form of intertextuality in keeping with Julia Kristeva’s definition of the term as interrelationship with other texts through different textual features and modes of revision. According to Kristeva, “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (Kristeva 1986, 37). Apart from the meaning of literary influences, the term intertextuality comes to signify that any text is a product of a specific culture, the ideological particularities of which manifest themselves in specific discursive structures reflective of their relationship with the prevailing ideologies. The text, in other words, perceived as a web of intertextual links, reveals the workings of dominant ideologies and inherent structures that constitute the basis of individual perception of the world (Ibid.).

Thus taken, a name as a particle of an intertextual web, when incorporated in a host text, unavoidably provides resonance to the idiosyncrasy of the created text by unfolding a narrative of its own constituency. In Plath’s oeuvre, this resonance more than often functions as a revision or critique of meanings inherited from fictional texts, religion, and (cultural) mythology. It is namely this revisionist nature, activated through intertextual links, that undercuts the authority present or implied in the narratives of which the names that abound in Plath’s works are a

part. Names, on the other hand, act as a bridge to culture and a way of criticizing limitations imposed on women of Plath's generation by the strict gender politics of the Cold War era.

As argued by Pat Macpherson, Plath's writing demonstrates that the social order encoded in the system of symbolization did not help a creative woman in society which functioned according to rigid gender norms: "in post-war mass culture, a monstrous norm of Family was hatched. Taking Freudian ideas about how children acquire gender identity, and avoiding any claims of the unconscious" a model of the nuclear family was created, the individuality of whose members was defined "by means of sex roles." In such a gendered culture women were considered "expressive" both by nature and nurture" while men were regarded as "instrumental." Macpherson also states that "the cruellest assumption <...> was the paradox that one's role came naturally, and failure to be fulfilled was a sign of sickness. So each citizen was set self-policing to enact a 'fulfilled' conformity convincing to others if always fraudulent to oneself" (Macpherson 1991, 3).

Gender conflict and the exploration of the feminine identity are much a part of Sylvia Plath's poetry. In many of the ways, elucidated by myth and archetypal critics, Plath's writing is revisionist. The American critic Alicia Ostriker defines the revisionist mode of writing as a challenge to the traditional definitions of woman as absence or Other. A revision of the manner in which naming functions and how that involves a construction of identity and subjectivity constitutes the focus of feminist revisionist criticism. According to Ostriker,

Whenever a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture, the poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist: that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible (Ostriker 1987, 212–213).

By implication, the revision of myth entails both a close attention to its original meaning and an examination of the reasons for the inevitability of its change. Since change inevitably implies re-creation, it serves as an affirmation of the creator's agency and subjectivity. Revision also implies rebelliousness since it demonstrates a refusal to accept what may exist as archetypal truths or cultural norms (Ibid, 211–216). Rachel Blau DuPlessis similarly notes that the revision of myths manifests itself as replacing of "archetypes by prototypes. They do not investigate moments of eternal recurrence, but rather break with the idea of an essentially unchanging reality." Furthermore, prototypes "offer similar patterns of experience to others rather than imposing these patterns on others" (DuPlessis 1979, 299)¹. As argued by Rowena Fowler, "contemporary women poets offer us a serious, engaged, and formidably satisfying encounter with classical myth. The past is revealed as a constant presence which the poet must both escape and confront" (Fowler 2006, 381).

In Plath's writing, *the projection of multiple identities on the myriad of names reveal a struggle to forge an identity as well as to establish the writing subject's position with regard to the narratives that these names embody. Drawing on Susan*

¹ Emphases in the original.

R. Van Dyne, such trajectories of selfhood can be read as an urge to escape from confinement in the subjective or a desire to “revisit life”² in order to construct a new identity through a probing into personal and cultural history (Van Dyne 1993, 31). In this regard, Plath revisits not only her live but also offers a revised version of (woman’s) history. We may remember here the goals of the revisionist mode of poetry, explicated by Alicia Ostriker: “Since the core of revisionist mythmaking for women poets lies in the challenge to and correction of gender stereotypes embodied in myth, revisionism in its most obvious form consists of hit-and-run attacks on familiar images and the social and literary conventions supporting them” (Ostriker 1987, 216).

The poetic personae of Plath’s late poems published in *Ariel*³ demonstrate how much Plath’s vision of womanhood, by implication, personal identity has changed from the perfectionist Smith girl contemplating possibilities of releasing a genius from a female body which she envisioned as “an engine of ecstasy” (Plath 1991, 14). As mentioned by numerous critics⁴, in these posthumously published poems Plath’s self-identification with the biblical Lazarus in “Lady Lazarus” or with the Virgin Mary in “Fever 103”⁵ may be read as a poetic embodiment of transcendent states where gendered mind/body divisions are enshrouded in revisionist significations. According to Robert Lowell, the *Ariel* poems feature a reborn, self-created woman:

In these poems, written in the last months of her life and often rushed out at the rate of two or three a day, Sylvia Plath becomes herself, becomes something imaginary, newly, wildly, and subtly created – hardly a person at all, or a woman, certainly not another ‘poetess,’ but one of those super-real, hypnotic, great classical heroines (Lowell 1966, front cover).

Lowell suggests that in her late poetry Plath managed to break through layers of ambiguity and self-doubt and give voice to her creative self. When Lowell states that Plath became “certainly not another ‘poetess’”, he seems to refer to her poetic effort to avoid being associated with the “mob of scribbling women”⁵. Lowell sug-

² This is a paraphrased version of Van Dyne’s book *Revisiting Life: Sylvia Plath’s Ariel Poems* (1993).

³ I am referring here to Plath’s collection of poems *Ariel* published posthumously in 1965. According to Peter Porter, this collection contains “poems written just before her death.” *Ariel* “was one of the most powerful books written since the war” (Porter 155). The other collections were *The Colossus* (1960), *Crossing the Water* (1971), and *Winter Trees* (1971) (Ibid.).

⁴ Kroll (1976), Rose (1991), and Marsack (1992), to mention but a few.

⁵ According to MacKethan and Miller, “In the mid 1850s, Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote a letter to his publisher angrily lashing out at the “damned mob of scribbling women” whose books often sold in the thousands, sometimes hundreds of thousands, driving more deserving writers (such as Hawthorne) out of the literary marketplace. His now-often-quoted and intemperate private comment was later recuperated and institutionalized as part of a general campaign against nineteenth-century American women writers in particular and women’s writing in general” (MacKethan and Miller).

gests that, in her late poetry, Plath turned deeper into her self and reflected this introspection in writing which gave birth to what he calls “super-real, hypnotic, great classical heroines.” However, when Plath sought to represent what she imagined was her real self, the power of pain caused by the abandonment of her husband and the darkness of her inner landscape⁶ became so intense that it engulfed the part of identity associated with the “great classical heroines” and called forth instead “super-real, hypnotic” representations of the suffering self.

The poem “Lady Lazarus” stands out in Plath’s pantheon of the imaginary, newly, wildly, and subtly created heroines. Rendered through the transmuted form of the biblical narrative of the Lazarus resurrection (John 11:43), Plath’s version depicts a woman who is shedding off the relicts of death such as “the sour breath” and “the napkin” (P l a t h 1980, 244, lines 10, 14). According to Leonard Sanazaro, “Plath’s Lady Lazarus has a disturbing appearance. Her body is an icon of the World War II atrocities. Her skin is as ‘Bright as a Nazi lampshade,’ her ‘right foot’ is a ‘paperweight,’ and her face is ‘a featureless, fine / Jew linen’” (S a n a z a r o 1983, 56). As stated by Linda Wagner, the speaker of “Lady Lazarus” has “the great and terrible gift of being reborn <...> she is the Phoenix, the libertarian spirit” (W a g n e r 1984, 71).

However, the speaker does not depend on God’s will for her resurrection. Rather, she envisions herself as a willful magician who can preside over her own death and resurrection (Ibid.). The speaker’s self-identification with the narrative of resurrection, implicit in the name of Lazarus, reminds us of Sir James George Frazer’s description of primitive peoples’ perception of their name: “unable to discriminate clearly between words and things, the savage commonly fancies that the link between a name and the person or thing denominated by it is not a mere arbitrary and ideal association <...> primitive man regards his name as a vital portion of himself <...> of his personality” (F r a z e r 1963, 284). The association of a name with magic that “Lady Lazarus” suggests can be explained with reference to Steven Axelrod who states that “having studied Sigmund Freud and James Frazer, [Plath] <...> wrote poems with psychoanalytic and mythic dimensions, the most startling and unsettling such poems of her time. These poems enact loss and grief in such a devastating fashion that one wonders how the reader, much less the author, can survive them” (A x e l r o d 2003, 1).

The miracle of resurrection or ongoing survival stresses the paradox between death as isolation and life as sarcastic emotional exhibitionism. Lady Lazarus unveils the body/self, and this act may be read as the exhibitionist self-scrutiny and an ironical imitation of the psychoanalytical treatment of the psychic wounds by “the talking cure.” Psychoanalytical encounter, in the words of Elizabeth Wright, “restages the old drama through ‘transference’” and in this way “offers oneself a chance to emancipate [oneself] anew” (W r i g h t 1984, 15). In Plath’s public/

⁶ I am using the phrase “inner landscape” in the same sense as Lindberg-Seyersted who read Plath’s description of landscape as setting as a projection of inner states (L i n d b e r g - S e y e r s t e d 2002, 39).

pseudo-psychoanalytical encounter, the speaker does not so much try to reduce the tensions and excitations associated with trauma and desire through *transference* as she is focused on transforming herself into a monster possessing the power to annihilate her Doctor who has lead the speaker to this suicidal show. David Wood holds that the imagery and tone of Lady Lazarus may have been affected by a suggestion to Plath “to be the stage hostess for the American night of a proposed poetry festival due in 1963 <...>.” This “may well have provided the inspiration for the image that helps Lady Lazarus play out the tensions within her by stage managing her own defiant recovery in the public eye” by addressing the people she knew and telling them resolutely of her intension to divorce her husband, the famous British poet, Ted Hughes. Wood goes on to say that the dramatis persona mediates in a symbolic form what has tormented her or might torment her in the future (Wood 1992, 149).

“Fever 103” stands as a landmark of Plath’s poetic vision of her identity that is mapped as a self-identification with names like the Virgin Mary and Isadora Duncan suggested by the reference to “Isadora’s scarves” (Plath 1980, 231, line 12). The juxtaposition of these names may be read in the light of Plath’s statement that the poem is “about two kinds of fire – the fires of hell, which merely agonize and the fires of heaven, which purify. During the poem, the first sort of fire suffers itself into the second” (quoted in Butcher 1976, 337). The treatment of “the fires of heaven” as a transformed version of “the fires of hell” recalls the Rosicrucian mandala which, in the words of Jolande Jacoby, depicts “the Saviour in the center of a flower with a double row of eight petals, surrounded by a fiery garland of rays. It is divided into four parts by a cross, whose lower shafts are burning *in the fire of the instincts* and whose upper shafts *are sprinkled with tears of heavenly dew*” (Jacoby 1973, 137)⁷. Along the Jungian mytho-psychological lines, this symmetry may be interpreted as a striving for the unification of opposites and the transformation of instinctual energy into spiritual energy through the canalization of libido into an analogous symbolic form which leads into purified transcendental states.⁸ The questioning of the empirical and aesthetic realities encoded in the above discussed dichotomy may also point to Plath’s familiarity with Jung’s analytical psychology based on the study of myth and religion⁹.

“Fever 103” opens with a question “Pure? What does this mean?” (Plath 1980, 231, line 1) and closes by suggesting that the knowledge of purity as an abstract concept can be apprehended only after the body (and the text) are transformed and renewed. In that, the poem ironizes the chiasm between the matter and the spirit embodied in the Virgin Mary¹⁰. To reinforce this association, the poem includes another name reference, Isadora Duncan: “Love, love, the low smokes roll / From me like Isadora’s scarves, I’m in a fright // One scarf will catch and anchor in the

⁷ My emphasis.

⁸ See Jung (1972, 67–91).

⁹ Christodoulides writes about Plath’s interest in Jung (n. d., 1).

¹⁰ For the discussion of this dualism see Ostriker (1993).

wheel” (Ibid., lines 11–13). Robyn Marsack suggests that Plath’s poem “refers to the death of Isadora Duncan, who revolutionized modern dance with her barefoot performances in floating chiffon, and who was choked to death when her long scarf caught in the wheel of a car” (Marsack 1992, 10). The suggestion that creative women are destroyed if they choose to defy socially approved gender behaviour can also be traced in Plath’s semiautobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* (Plath 1963). There, the treatment of the Rosenberg execution and the negative attitude of the protagonist, Ester, to the prevailing gender norms embody Plath’s critique of the restrictive gender politics of the 1950s. In “Fever 103” the recognition of herself as spiritualized and perfect occurs after the speaker recognizes herself as “a pure acetylene / Virgin / Attended by roses” (Plath 1980, 231, lines 46–48). However, the painful irony here is that the speaker compares herself to an acetylene torch about as transcendent as the gas oven that one year later took Plath to her death by suicide at the age of thirty.

Thus taken, both poems, “Fever 103” and “Lady Lazarus,” exhibit overt intertextuality in Kristeva’s sense. The poems not only expose relationships between texts and discourses operative in mythology, religion, and culture but also offer overt critique of the prevailing ideological structures and strictures inherent in these discourses. This is also very much in accordance with the tenets of revisionist writing as delineated by Alicia Ostriker. She argues that, when women turn to male-devised cultural and archetypal myths and literature, they find that their history is distorted. When searching in the past, a woman poet often feels alienated from the past and herself. Nevertheless, a return to myth or any other narrative of universal significance from a new point of view allows a woman artist to become visible by affirming her subjectivity and constructing her identity as a woman “usually by the simple device of making Other into Subject” (Ostriker 1987, 216). The celebration of subjectivity that is implicit in the analyzed poems delineates a contrastingly different selfhood, if compared to the portrayal of womanhood, in (a patriarchal) culture, religion, and classical mythology. Furthermore, revision of narratives associated with specific names may serve as an example of a paradigm of woman artist’s struggle to name herself as a subject in her own right. From such a perspective, the act of turning back into the narratives that the above discussed names unfold may be read as a search for points of identification and resistance reminiscent of the revisionist stance advocated by Adrienne Rich. She holds that re-vision of texts “would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name – and therefore live – afresh” (Rich 1979, 35). In this light, Sylvia Plath’s revisionist re-naming may be viewed as a manifestation of her desire to differentiate herself from a silent/silenced female ancestry and a manifestation of her will to name her(self) rather than allow others to name and define her.

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Irena Ragaišienė

Vardai ir įvardijimo revizavimas Silvijos Plath poezijoje

S a n t r a u k a

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: *revizionizmas, intertekstualumas, lytis, subjektyvumas, identitetas, biblinės ir mitologinės asociacijos.*

Straipsnyje nagrinėjamos vardams suteikiamos reikšmės Silvijos Plath (1932–1963), XX a. antros pusės amerikiečių poetės, kūryboje. Pateikiamas kūrybos biografinis ir socio-kultūrinis kontekstas, pabrėžiama, kad XX a. šeštojo dešimtmečio lyčių politika, nulemta šaltojo karo grėsmės, nustatė griežtas vyrų ir moterų veiklos sritis. Silvija Plath susidūrė su dilema – jai reikėjo apsipręsti, ar priimti tradicines moteriškumo normas, ar pasipriešinti dominuojančiai lyčių politikai ir tapti kūrėja. Nors asmeniškai Plath sėkmingai suderino *eros* ir *logos*, kūryboje ji dažnai grįždavo prie tuo metu lyties aspektu hierarchiškai traktuojamų šių žmogaus būties aspektų. Straipsnyje teigiama, kad Plath kritinis požiūris į šią jos visuomenėje akcentuojamą opozicinę priešpriešą lemia reikšmes, suteikiamas į jos poezijos tekstūrą įpintiems vardams. Vardų significacijos analizė tiriama remiantis D. Kristevos intertekstualumo samprata bei anglosaksiškoje feminizmo kritikoje pateikiamu revidavimo (*revisionism*) aspektu. Pasirinktų Plath eilėraščių analizė siejama su psichoanalitinėmis, mitologinėmis, kultūrologinėmis išvalgomis. Tai padeda atskleisti kompleksiškas Plath lyriinių subjektų tapatybės trajektorijas, kurias siekiama modeliuoti reviduojant egzistuojančių naratyvų veikėjų vardus. Išvadose teigiama, kad Silvijos Plath įvardijimo revidavimo strategijas galima interpretuoti kaip pasiryžimą išreikšti savo subjektyvumą tekstu ir taip sukurti savitą savivokos sklaidos ir individualaus požiūrio į gyvenimą diskursinę išraišką.

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S u m m a r y

Keywords: *revisionism, intertextuality, gender, subjectivity, identity, biblical and mythological associations.*

The present discussion focuses on the analysis of significations surrounding names and revisionist re-naming in the poetry by the famous mid-century American poet Sylvia Plath. Analysis of selected texts is related to the biographical and socio-historical contexts. It is highlighted that the American 1950s is characterized by rigid gender norms whereas defiance of these norms had been regarded as deviance. Although Plath managed to successfully combine writing with married life and motherhood, the theme of gender distinctions attached to the mind / body dualism frequently resurfaces in her oeuvre. The hierarchical positioning of these oppositions often determines discursive trajectories that the revisionist treatment of names acquires in Plath's poetry. According to a number of critical accounts, the revisionist re-naming serves as a projection of a struggle to delineate personal identity by revisiting and revising universally significant narratives and positioning oneself with regard to their naming of woman's agency and subjectivity. These tenets are analyzed through the lenses of Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality and the critical stance of revisionism as defined by critics like Alicia Ostriker and Rachel Blau DuPlessis to mention but a few. This study also includes concepts of psychoanalysis, cultural studies and mythology to uncover the complex significations that the names entwined in Plath's poetic texture encode. Thus taken, Sylvia Plath's revisionist re-naming may be read as repositioning of one's selfhood with regard to gendered subject/other positions perpetuating the patriarchal discourse.

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