

Review: “Reclaiming Assia Wevill: Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, and the Literary Imagination” by Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick *by Gary Leising*

More than the “Other Woman”: A Review of *Reclaiming Assia Wevill: Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, and the Literary Imagination* by Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick. Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press, 2019.

The twenty-first century has seen the publication of significant works in Sylvia Plath studies including 2000’s *The Unabridged Journals*, 2004’s *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, the two volumes of her letters in 2017 and 2018, and 2019’s *Mary Ventura and the Ninth Kingdom*—that only lists newly published works by Plath. A list of remarkable new criticism and biography remains incomplete here because of space but includes Tracy Brain’s *The Other Sylvia Plath* (2001), Heather Clark’s *The Grief of Influence* (2010), Carl Rollyson’s *American Isis* (2013), Andrew Wilson’s *Mad Girl’s Love Song* (2013), and the edited collections *The Unraveling Archive* (Ed. Anita Helle, 2007) and *Sylvia Plath in Context* (Ed. Brain, 2019). There are, of course, two more biographies to excite Plath scholars in 2020: Rollyson’s *The Last Days of Sylvia Plath* and Clark’s *Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath*. As we are gifted with more by and about Sylvia Plath, it is also worth noting a stunning new volume

on the so-called “other woman” in Plath’s life: *Reclaiming Assia Wevill* by Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick (LSU Press, 2019). As Plath studies evolve with greater access to Plath’s archive, we should also value how much we can learn about the lives and work of those who played significant roles in Plath’s life.¹ The value of Goodspeed-Chadwick’s book for Plath’s readers, however, goes beyond the insightful chapter on Plath’s representations of Wevill; the book’s presentation of Assia Wevill as a person worth knowing more about than as “other woman” or inspiration for Plath’s and Hughes’s poems performs a necessary act of “feminist recuperation of [Wevill’s] reputation, artistic work, and influence” (1).

Reclaiming Assia Wevill begins with the useful story of how readers of Plath and Hughes have come to know Wevill with a fascinating literature review beginning with Yehuda Amichai’s poem “The Death of A.G.” We are reminded that for years Wevill was elided from public knowledge of their lives. She was “Ted’s girl” in the 1975 collection of Plath’s Letters Home and referred

¹ Here I think about the idea of “archive” as expanded to include more than papers, letters, journals, and drafts; a person’s many other forms of archival imprints are also of scholarly import; see Gail Crowther and Peter K. Steinberg’s *The Ghostly Archives* for excellent discussion of this as it pertains to Plath.

to as “Olga” in Edward Butscher’s 1976 *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness*. Goodspeed-Chadwick’s book works against this “traditional approach to Assia,” which includes “the eclipse of her personhood; and the disregard or lack or acknowledgement for her own artistry” (5). The awareness that Assia has been reduced to the role of muse—another woman to spur on Plath’s jealous, angry poems or a temptress who has seduced Hughes away from his wife—might be the most useful idea a reader can take away from this book. That is, after reading this book, we no longer continue to see Assia as something of a bit player (again, the “other woman”) in a famous literary romance.² Goodspeed-Chadwick provides a

more developed treatment of [Wevill that] rewrites the trope of villainous and/or seductive mistress and the beautiful but destructive woman. Instead of serving this reductive stereotype or archetype, we serve better justice to Assia and other women when we realize that Assia was a victim in her life, too, and what we have done, ultimately, is blame the victim for her traumatic outcome and ending. (23)

Wevill is immortalized in Plath’s and Hughes’s writing, but Goodspeed-Chadwick shows us how Hughes in particular “has crafted a legacy for Assia that defames her rather than giving her fame” (76). Such a portrayal extends beyond the poems of Plath and Hughes that Goodspeed-Chadwick intelligently discusses to the twenty-first century portrayals of Wevill addressed in the book’s final chapter, which addresses the film *Sylvia* and representations of Wevill in fiction.

2 At Literary Hub, for example, Hughes and Plath made Emily Temple’s “Famous Literary Relationships from Best to Worst” as second worst; only Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald ranked below them.

One of the book’s strengths can be seen in examining its second chapter, “Sylvia Plath’s Representations of Assia Wevill.” Here we find thoughtful explanations and discussion of the five poems Plath wrote inspired by Wevill’s presence in her life. Goodspeed-Chadwick usefully balances biographical details with close reading and theoretical discussion. Though all good, I find the analysis of “Childless Woman” especially strong, perhaps because this seems like the least discussed of these five poems. The discussion of the various poetic devices—symbol, metonymy, simile, and imagery—reminds readers how rich with figurative meaning Plath’s poems are. Of note in this chapter is the way Goodspeed-Chadwick frames the discussion of the poems with feminist theory. In her conclusion, she reminds us that we only have Plath’s (and in her next chapter, Hughes’s) voice to describe Wevill. We are missing Wevill’s description of Plath and Hughes: “[t]his omission in the literary imagination,” she reminds us, “should be noted by readers, scholars, and teachers...as we think about gendered expectations and roles” (52). This is a vital feminist argument, and we can extrapolate from Goodspeed-Chadwick’s treatment of Wevill as a “woman who deserves better than what she encountered in her life” (3) to consider how society (both past and present) describes, values, and treats women, whether it be in literary texts, the media, courtrooms, or through health care.

As Goodspeed-Chadwick notes that “Plath’s body of work has long fascinated an academic audience and a general one simultaneously” (52), it is worth praising this book’s ability to reach a wide audience. Goodspeed-Chadwick writes effectively for both scholars and general readers. She lays out arguments underpinned by feminist critics such as Judith Butler and Iris Marion Young with discussion of Rita Felski’s “literature of shock.” Yet she also crafts her arguments with a structure that seems to this

reader to be a kind of good storytelling as, for example, she explains the representations of Wevill in Plath's poetry. Her discussion of "Words Heard, by Accident, Over the Phone" sets up the analysis of its "themes of defilement and victimization" (42) with a clear discussion of the biographical incident that inspired Plath. Goodspeed-Chadwick tells such stories from Wevill's life not only in a compelling fashion, but also with utter reliability as she draws on various biographies and letters, making us aware of contradictory tellings. The depth of research here demonstrates that in the contested zone of the Plath/Hughes/Wevill triangle, this book understands what we can and cannot know and how we might make our best interpretations of the lives and the work.

Goodspeed-Chadwick shows us that viewing Assia Wevill in a limited, one-dimensional manner affects the ways in which we might see other women, both in literature and in our own times. Thus she offers us a view of Wevill as successful translator of Amichai's poems as well as the writer of a very successful and praised advertising campaign.³ She argues that "one way we can redress misogynistic or sexist wrongs is to seek out, validate, and celebrate significant women and their work" (149). This book does so for Assia Wevill; it serves as a vital critical assessment to stand alongside Yehuda Koren and Eliat Negev's biography *Lover of Unreason*. Doing as much for Assia Wevill serves as a model for all of us engaging in scholarship on or teaching the work of Plath and Hughes. As Goodspeed-Chadwick concludes: "This book will serve its purpose if Assia's life can be viewed and understood as a paradigm that demonstrates the personal is political, that literature and the 'real world' reflect and inform each other, and that women's lives and bodies need championing now as much as ever" (178).

³ Wevill's cinematic "Lost Island" ad for Sea Witch hair color receives much discussion. Available for viewing online, it is a remarkable accomplishment illustrating, Goodspeed-Chadwick notes, Wevill's glamorous intelligence and professional success (140-141).