

The Magician's Girl:

An Interview with Julia Gordon-Bramer, Plath Scholar and Mystic by Robert E Shoemaker

Julia Gordon-Bramer is a Sylvia Plath scholar with a special interest in occult practices, especially the Tarot of which she is a regular practitioner. I first met Julia as I was onboarding to become the next poetry editor for Plath Profiles. In the process of bringing our new staff members together to train with former editors and contributors, I got to know Julia and become familiar with her work. I wanted to go deeper in order to understand the workings of the occult in Plath's poetry and Julia's personal interests, as these resonate deeply with my own current research questions on poetry and magic. What does it mean for poetry to be "magical"? What might a magical poetics look like? Julia, when asked these and other questions, was more than game to talk Plath, poetics, magic, Ouija, Tarot, Kabbalah, and many other fascinating topics.

What follows is an excerpt from the transcription of my oral history interview with Julia, which will soon be permanently housed in Naropa University's Archives and Special Collections. I am interviewing a variety of poets on their interests in the occult as part of a larger project on magical poetics. For more information on this project, contact me, Robert Eric Shoemaker, with the address at the end of this selection.

-Eric

...(Begin Interview Selection...)

Robert Eric Shoemaker: Maybe now's a good time to ask particularly about the connection between Tarot and Plath. It seems like that was a big, a huge milestone for you. So can you tell me how that first started?

Julia Gordon-Bramer: Okay, so first, I was in graduate school. This was 2007. I was at the University of Missouri, St. Louis, getting my MFA in creative writing, poetry and fiction. And, you know, I've always loved Plath, and I had a semester-end project where I got to pick my subject, and I wasn't really sure what to do. And I remember having some really lame ideas. And my professor said, "Why don't you write about Sylvia Plath? You know that she makes you on fire here." And I had approached him about how I'd seen a lot of Tarot imagery in her work and....as a professional Tarot card reader, of course, that really interested me. I [had been] probably reading [Tarot] about 30 years back then...so I had brought it up to my professor Stephen Shreiner, and he had never heard anything about this. He didn't know that she did anything with Tarot, this interested him. He said, "Well, write about it, see what you can dig up." So, I did my digging as my—it was supposed to be the semester end project—and it really became my life's work.

Initially, I realized that the book *Ariel*, not the original publication, but the restored edition... restored by Sylvia Plath's and Ted Hughes's daughter, Frieda Hughes...she [Frieda] wanted *Ariel* published as her mother had intended. And when I saw the ordering of the poems, it became quite clear to me— So, "Morning Song" is the Fool card, and "The Couriers" is the Magician, and "The Rabbit Catchers" is the High Priestess, and, you know, and it goes on in perfect Tarot order. And I realized, when you know the Tarot card meaning that's corresponding to each of these poems, it just unlocked the meaning of the poems in an incredible way.

I had to prove that this wasn't just my theory, and at first I just had basic hints, like in "Daddy," of course. She [Plath] says, "with my gypsy ancestress and my weird luck and my Taroc pack, and my Taroc pack, I may be a bit of a Jew." So, I was like, is Taroc pack the same as Tarot? and I looked it up and sure enough, it is. And the whole Jewish thing got me headlong into Kabbalah, ancient Jewish mysticism, upon which Tarot is structured.

Kabbalah is a real deep, heady subject to get into in an interview...here's where I lose most people, they ask me about the Plath stuff, and if I say the word Kabbalah, all of a sudden, they go fuzzy and, you know, it's like, "Yeah, I don't know about all that." But think of it like all of the occult practices. And even non-occult practices, like mythology, numerology, astrology, even astronomy kinda gets in there. They have this organizational system to them, and they all relate. And so, what I mean by that is if I'm looking at a mythological story, you know, the Greek gods or whatever, it has a corresponding constellation in astronomy...and there's even numbers assigned to this thing, which is where the numerology gets in. [Then], there's alchemy. I mean, it goes on forever. This...this series of connections, it's like a connect-the-dots game of relationships. And so, you know, when I explore a Plath poem,

what I learned was every poem in *Ariel*—now, this is not true for every single poem she's ever written, but *Ariel* was her masterpiece—every poem in *Ariel* has at least six different meanings...

You know, what a poem can do is mind blowing, how the same set of words can be interpreted all of these different-yet-related ways. So, when you explore a Plath poem, like let's just take the first one in *Ariel*, "Morning Song." And, she says, "Love set you going like a fat gold watch." Well, on a historical level, she wrote that poem on Valentine's Day in 1962. "Love set it going," you know. And the "fat gold watch—" there was a new element that had just been discovered in science called Lawrencium, and one of the further lines... "take your place among the elements," like, it's so obviously part of a news story that she brought into that which, which is awesome. But...most poets would stop there and say "Okay, cool. There's this, like other double meaning here—" but Plath, she did more than that. She did triple, quadruple...she just had this gift for milking the meanings of words and going in all these different directions and saying different, yet related things. So, yeah, it's just phenomenal. What she did with one set of words, in the poem, is truly a spell, it's truly magic. And it's working on us on those subconscious levels, even if we don't understand...

RES: Yeah. Mhm. It's that correspondence. Yeah...

And you, you've mentioned that people are afraid of this, sort of, weirdness of the occult meanings of Plath's poems. And then, I guess, in general, of the weirdness of the occult.

JGB: Sure.

RES: Even though, you know, as you say in in your volumes, it's in so many poets' and other writer's work...

JGB: ...You know, I think the “intellectual atheist” is the predominant view, and it’s interesting because Plath herself, she called herself an atheist, but she was the most spiritual atheist ever. And she also called herself a pagan. And she called herself [this] regularly, especially in her last months, when she was corresponding with a Catholic priest. And she was, of course, married to Ted Hughes, they were into all kinds of occult activities together, doing Ouija boards and crystal balls and astrology and [automatic] free-writing. And, I mean, it just goes on and on with those two, and so, a very spiritual atheist, and certainly not atheist in any sort of traditional sense of the word. I think most atheists have no interest in spirit, and Plath seemed beyond fascinated, she was quite obsessed, I think, with talking to the other side, channeling the other side. And I think she did a pretty good job of it in a lot of respects...

RES: ...I’m very curious about the the channeling aspects and how that influenced her writing.

JGB: Ted Hughes taught her meditation, and he was a practitioner of Kundalini [Yoga]...it’s a kind of energy work, and it’s about aligning your chakras. Having the energy rise from the base root chakra all the way up through the crown of the head and really opening up to the source. And we know for a fact that Ted Hughes practiced this meditation regularly and taught it to Sylvia. That was around the time that Ted Hughes has been knocked for kind of taking all the credit for Sylvia’s greatness. But I really, I really give it to him because Sylvia wrote, before she met Ted, she wrote some nice, neat little poems and and some of them were good, but she wasn’t half the person she became, you know, and she became who she was not just from the intensity of the relationship with Ted Hughes, but the training by Ted Hughes—and he did train her...they did meditation, and they did all these spiritual endeavors...all of this stuff

was her training ground to open up to spirit. And now, whether you want to call it spirit, as in, a possession, or whether you want to call it spirit as in channeling the source, maybe the great creative source. There are different belief systems. So, some people would believe this is evil and that she’s been possessed by demons. I don’t believe that. I’m more of the source crowd. But, well, you know, certainly in the early 1960s, late 1950s—source is kind of a New Age word that they didn’t have back then.

It was all very Yeatsian. And, you know, Sylvia likened herself [and Ted] to William Butler and Georgie Yeats, practicing in their towers. She’s been quoted saying such things. And so, Ted developed her. And when she drew upon, when she got into the subconscious, then I think she was able to really see the symbols, past and present, going through mythology, going into science, you know, going into alchemy. People say, you know, “woah, woah, alchemy. That’s totally out there. That’s totally weird.” Well, her mother got her master’s thesis on Paracelsus, the first and foremost alchemist, and Plath read all of her mother’s books. That’s another fact. And, Plath was quite a mystical child and teenager before Ted Hughes.

So, it all just totally lines up. All the evidence is there. She went to the Unitarian church, and she used to go to Sunday school where her Sunday school homework was on zodiac, and she was carving alchemical symbols in wooden sticks at summer camp. She was not your normal kid having your normal American childhood. She was getting into the occult stuff way before the average person, way before me, and I was young at it...

RES: ...There is a connection [in] Plath’s writing or in your own writing between gender and the occult. I think it connects to this training idea of Ted for Sylvia.

JGB: Mm-hmm.

RES: It's, you know, a lot of their relationship has interesting relationships of gender and power.

JGB: So I...I wrote this book, which has just been sitting on my hard drive for a couple of years now, called *The Magician's Girl*, which is basically looking at the relationship between Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes from the occult perspective...as far as gender, I just mention it because I call it *The Magician's Girl* after that line in "The Bee Meeting," um, "I am the magician's girl. I do not flinch." And I bought rights to a photograph that I want to use for the cover of Sylvia and Ted from 1956, and it's a very cute couple picture, and she's looking down demurely and he's looking at her. It's almost like father-daughter, you know, which is a little creepy and a little Oedipal. Or, Elektra, in this case. And...on one hand it feeds all, it perpetuates all the clichés about her. Because most people look at "Daddy" in poems like that and say, "Oh, look, she's aligning Ted with her father and making them both these terrible men," and they're just sort of saying the victim thing and missing the alternate meaning...meanings.

But, I do think for the times, I mean, we know that the fifties and sixties was a real repressive time for women. And she was a product of her time, and she's written many times... "Ted's career is more important than mine," and, "I want to be the perfect homemaker," you know, she had all of those sort of, uh, subservient aspirations, if there can be such a thing. But, at the same time, she couldn't quite fight her own ambition and ego to to be great...she still was true to herself in all that she could be...

But yeah, back in that time, men owned the poetry scene, I mean, never mind mysticism. Men were, it was a paternalistic society entirely. And men were [considered to be the] serious poets and women [considered to] just kind of

dabble at it. You can read about what Plath's friends, Adrienne Rich or Anne Sexton, for example, they were sort of, along with Sylvia, they were sort of breaking through that, but still several notches below in status. And the kind of money they were making and where they were published, you know, the men were seen as the great poets, [pictured smoking] their pipes, and the women were just, um, "Oh, she's talented," you know, a talented little girl kind of thing...let's look at, traditionally with mysticism—men, men are shamans. Men are sorcerers. Women are witches. You know? It's almost, ah, insulting...

You probably heard of some of the [New Age] ideas, like *The Secret*, or something like that. You know, the idea is, we create our reality. Sylvia did it on every level. Except I think, well, I have some theories about, like, where she went wrong...but as far as art goes, she was the genius's genius and a complete master of symbolism and layering of this meaning, which I think is the ultimate poetic spell. I think it's a spell as much or more than anything else could be. And that's why she's lasted and continues to last.

RES: I agree. I think you're right to point at layering meaning as the casting of this spell. I think that's a very—that's, to me, a very exciting definition. Of a magical poetry. What that could mean, because it is something that you can develop control of, I guess, that you can craft...I don't know if you're thinking that any of her practices, uh, artistic or mystical, were, like, if she did go too far in those or if they were in any sense dangerous to her. Mentally and physically.

JGB: I have some theories. You know, Al Alvarez, who was a famous London Times critic and friend of Sylvia Plath, he wrote an article called "Did Black Magic Kill Sylvia Plath?" ...He knew enough about them personally to know that they were practicing and that he...when Sylvia learned of Ted's betrayal and felt so humiliated and degraded, I mean, no doubt, she lost it.

She had kind of a breakdown, and yeah, she was doing witchy bonfires and putting a lot of hate out there, to speak in New Age [lingo] about it for a minute...You know, what we put our mind on grows. She was growing anger. She was growing hate. She was growing discontent beyond what she was able to manage.

But getting into more mystical points of view.... Kabbalah, as I said, is ancient Jewish mysticism. Now, I'm not saying this is right or wrong, but the rabbis of old, when they were practicing this, they determined that no one under the age of 40 and no female should ever do Kabbalah. So it was for men over 40, end of story, and they determined it was not safe for anybody outside of these parameters, and God's punishment, they believed, was insanity. And I thought, "Well, that's really interesting." And, you know, Ted was not 40 when he did it. He was in his early 30s, and, um, and he certainly had his pains, too. And I don't know, it might be argued that he was, you know, he had his version of insanity. It wasn't maybe the same as Sylvia's, but, yeah, she broke the rules of Kabbalah. Absolutely, she did. And, certainly her focus got very, very negative toward the end. I think nobody can deny that. And nobody can deny that she probably had some biological problems contribute to it. You know, just with depression. She probably had a clinical depression...she may have been bipolar..

She gave Ted all her power, and she got totally weak. And she wasn't looking at her own reactions and she just wasn't helping herself at all... she was feeding and manifesting this monster inside of her, basically, which ultimately was her own demise... If she'd been my friend, I'd be saying, you know, "Girl, quit giving him all your energy. You're gonna take care of yourself." And she was so broken in those last days, and you've got to also remember it was a winter from hell, it was the storm of the century in London, as far as snow and ice. Her pipes burst, and there was

no heat. And she had two small children...they all had the flu, you know? She'd been abandoned with babies, and, I mean, it was just like a culmination of everything going wrong. So, you can see how that would be the breaking point to someone already fragile.

RES: Right. Right. I think it does make sense that all of that sort of combined, um, to create the perfect storm...I don't know if you've noticed this in your own work or anything, but the more I look at different writers who use mystical practices to create their poetry, the more I see different tendencies for self-destruction in certain cases.

JGB: Sometimes. I'm reading Merwin right now, and you know, W.S. Merwin was a friend of Plath and Hughes, and he's quite mystical. I mean, he was more into Buddhism and meditation and stuff, but there's a lot of mysticism in there, but he's an example of the positive use of it. And it doesn't have to take everyone down. It's just, it's ego, you know...I think, ultimately, ego took Plath down, too, she couldn't handle—she was really striving to be such a perfectionist. And when her life plan fell apart and didn't go, her husband wasn't who she thought he was, and everything just started to crumble...well, she was so orderly and so controlled, and she had such a grip on how her life was gonna go. And for the most part, that really worked for her. And, I mean, she got her Fulbright, and she got all her different awards...but she couldn't handle the heart, you know, that was something else. That was something a little less able to be controlled.

...She's the Vincent Van Gogh or she's the Jack Kerouac, the...what did Kerouac say...the roman candle burns out brightly, but fast. And so many people say, "Oh, what if? What would she have done if she had lived to be 60 or 70 or 80 or or even older?" I'm not sure she would have pulled out the poems of such intensity that she

did at 30. Because, I mean, I just believe—this is getting into my spirituality; she was on her path, and her path was to do it all young and burn out, and, like Van Gogh or Kerouac, some people have all the intensity up front, and we love them. And we're fascinated by them because usually they die young and beautiful, like Jim Morrison. You know, like all the rock stars, Kurt Cobain, you know. We can ask, "God, how [did they do what] they did at that young age?" But I think if Plath had lived, she would be less acclaimed, and she would have just been one of the old-timey greats like Mick Jagger is. Does that make sense?

RES: It's, uh, it does, and I think that there's a lot to that. I mean, I think that's why people are so drawn to biographical reads [of Plath]...because it was so, uh, flash-bang-quick. You know, and there was a big, a big, ah, number at the end, I guess.

JGB: Yeah, right. You know, they left. They left with a bang...And that gives us a feeling of, incompleteness. As the audience, anyway. And the, "Oh, my God." You know, we love them so much, and it's like they're immortalized because they're stuck in that moment. And so, a healthy life lives through that moment and goes on and does some other things and ages and grows old, and that moment cannot be sustained. Not forever. You're not gonna be at the top of the charts forever. You might do it for 10 years, you know, and same with poetry...

I often look at Plath's poems and wonder if she'd even get published today. You know, when I read some, because, frankly, they're very white, they're very heterosexual, you know, they're not current. Today, we want a mix of expression and representation of the people out there who have been silenced in the past. So, even though these are ultimate works of genius, she was right for her time. She was exactly right for her time.

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