

**Janine Rogers and Charlotte Sleigh, “‘Here is my Honey-Machine’:
Sylvia Plath and the Mereology of the Beehive.” *The Review of
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Janine Rogers and Charlotte Sleigh breathe new life into Sylvia Plath's 1962 poetic sequence of "bee poems" by developing a relevant and unique methodology that primarily draws upon entomological theories put forward by the poet's father Otto Plath, and his doctoral advisor William Morton Wheeler, where "connections between the social insects [. . .] and human society proved irresistible" (299). Rogers and Sleigh refreshingly eschew dominant critical trends that see Plath's biography and writings as intrinsically interlinked; and instead base their study within an interdisciplinary framework that analyses Plath's work in context with scientific philosophy. Rogers and Sleigh's intelligent and nuanced argument suggests that Plath's 'bee poems' reveal layered contemplations on "formative, figurative and linguistic levels" (294), as well as commentaries about poetic ownership of language, the tradition of lyric poetry, and even scholarly entomological work of the mid-twentieth century.

Citing an award-winning Master's Thesis by Amanda Jernigan ("Wholes and Parts (All Puns Intended): The Mereological Vision of Richard Outram's Poetic Sequences") as a template, Plath's poetry is thus examined through the concept of mereology – the study of wholes and parts. Making the connection between the cooperative 'part' played by a hive bee in relation to its hive 'whole', and the role played by an individual poem within a poetic sequence; the authors cleverly uncover a direct link between the structure of Plath's 'bee poems' and scientific theories espoused by her deceased father. Rather than using this connection as an example of Otto Plath's personal role as Plath's fatherly poetic muse however, Rogers and Sleigh instead suggest that the poet's fixation with bees and bee-keeping (which they note can be traced back to June 1958) offers an understanding of "the mereological concept of identity: the self as an individual and as part of society" (299). This insight, it is argued, is integral to understanding the themes Plath's 'bee poems' and her wider literary corpus investigate.

Rogers and Sleigh also devote attention to hypotheses made by sociologists contemporary to Plath's era who suggest that, while hive bees are serenely socialised as obliging parts within a whole structure, this social structure leaves no anomalies: "insect societies had no lunatics or criminals, but they had no geniuses either" (299). Opening this to a wider debate and drawing on views formulated at Ivy League interdisciplinary colloquiums, as well as Plath's own critical essays, Rogers and Sleigh question the idea of poetic ownership – if the poet is akin to the hive bee; and the poem, like the hive, is superorganismic, then who is its owner? Plath herself hints at the "self-composition of the poem once its subject is in place" (301), predating what MIT Professor Lewis Thomas would later suggest in 1974: "language is simply alive, like an organism [. . .] words are the cells of language, moving the great body, on legs" (301). Rogers and Sleigh endeavour to show how Plath's 'bee poems' reflect these concerns. The people who populate her poetry, specifically in "The Bee Meeting" are reminiscent of dumbly socialised hive bees as they are, "described for their social roles just like insects" (302). Indeed the entire poetic sequence is rife with the poet's struggle to own the "language hive" (305), with Plath's lapse into repetitive

chants, for example, demonstrating the difficulty of articulating words that hold meaning or make sense.

It is these anxieties of language and reflections on the self that tie Plath's 'bee poems' to the lyric tradition – where the “unconscious production of language and text [. . .] pours out of the poet as a pure emotive response” (307). Rogers and Sleigh extend bee and honey metaphors to lyric poetry, situating Plath's pastoral settings within Yeatsian and Dickensian realms, amongst others. What is most compelling, however, is the assertion that Plath's perceived castigation of husband and fellow poet, Ted Hughes in these 'bee poems' can actually be interpreted as a comparison between her work and that of the long lyric tradition – which Hughes is said to represent. “He [Hughes/the lyric tradition] has worked too hard and perhaps attempted ownership of language, which, as we have seen, is something of a fool's errand [. . .] when he encounters words/bees in their uncomfortable reality, they swarm onto him” (309). This analysis and re-evaluation of Hughes's position within Plath's oeuvre is timely, interesting and indicative of the strong arguments outlined in this article.

Rogers and Sleigh offer a fascinating analysis of Plath's 'bee poems'. As scholars working respectively in the disciplines of literary studies and the history of science their unique methodology illustrates the possibilities of interdisciplinary collaboration and points to the many avenues of exploration that still require scholarly attention within the field. This article is well researched and lively, and marks a remarkable new contribution of knowledge to Sylvia Plath studies.

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