Key to Aurelia S. Plath Shorthand Annotations in Smith College’s Sylvia Plath Collection, Mortimer Rare Book Room

By Catherine Rankovic

Sylvia Plath’s mother Mrs. Aurelia Schober Plath donated Sylvia Plath-related papers, periodicals, books and materials to the Smith College Libraries in December 1983. This gift included papers and clippings from Mrs. Plath’s personal files and correspondence as well as manuscripts and published samples of creative works Sylvia Plath wrote and left in her mother’s care at their family home in Wellesley, Massachusetts, U.S.A. Sylvia and her British husband Ted Hughes left the U.S. in 1959 to live in England. Sylvia died in London in 1963.

Aurelia Plath (1906-1994), after being widowed in 1940, made her living teaching secretarial skills including a professional note-taking system called Gregg shorthand. Gregg enabled clerical workers to write efficiently and accurately words as they were being spoken. Aurelia Plath at home sometimes wrote quick notes and commentary in Gregg in the margins of books or letters. After Sylvia’s death Mrs. Plath corresponded with Plath scholars and fans, family and colleagues, and publishers. She also kept on file articles about Sylvia, both published and unpublished, and reviews of her own book, a collection of Sylvia’s letters published as Letters Home (Harper & Row, 1975). Aurelia Plath hand-wrote many notes on these, now at Smith College.

Sylvia Plath never learned to write Gregg shorthand. It is found only on papers and in books Aurelia Plath kept or collected. Mrs. Plath’s handwritten annotations in her daughter’s archives are mostly in longhand, not shorthand, but every note counts when it’s about the people who knew Sylvia Plath and the lives she touched and altered.

The Smith College Aurelia S. Plath shorthand data set includes the date and type of the artifact (such as a letter or manuscript), where on the artifact to locate the shorthand, the instrument used to write it, the box and folder holding the artifact in the Smith College Libraries’ Mortimer Rare Book Collection, contextual information, and transcriptions from Gregg shorthand into English. Unlike translations from spoken languages, transcriptions from Gregg shorthand are word-for-word. Catherine Rankovic is grateful to Smith College’s Karen V. Kukil and the library staff for their help and guidance.

The shorthand in the Sylvia Plath Collection at Smith College is the property of the Estate of Aurelia S. Plath. The Estate granted Plath scholar Catherine Rankovic written permission to publish the shorthand transcriptions for scholarly purposes. The transcriptions are copyrighted by Catherine Rankovic.