



Ted Hughes
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A Prologue to *Capriccio*

by Steve Ely

Capriccio, Ted Hughes's 1990 collaboration with Leonard Baskin, is a breathtakingly opulent, large-folio fine-book comprising twenty poems by Hughes and twenty-five engravings by Baskin. The book was originally published by Baskin's Maine-based Gehenna Press in a limited edition of fifty copies, in which the regular edition (forty copies) retailed at \$9000 and the special edition (ten copies, each including a second set of prints, a sheet of Hughes's working manuscript and a watercolour by Baskin) retailed at \$14,000. The broadsheet advertising *Capriccio* asserted that 'the poems will not be published again in the poet's lifetime.'¹ The rationale for this statement is not difficult to discern. *Capriccio* was, at the time of publication, an unprecedentedly personal work for Hughes, addressing his explosive relationship with Assia Wevill; although the publicity for the book coyly avoided mentioning this, describing the poems more generally as being 'revelatory of the human condition'.² Hughes had hitherto seemed reluctant to write so explicitly and unguardedly about any of the women he had loved and the feelings of grief and guilt that he felt in relation to their deaths – the poems later identified as being about Sylvia Plath, Susan Alliston and his mother in the 'Epilogue' to *Gaudete* (1977) are so obliquely expressed that they conceal even as they reveal.³ This strategy of concealing while revealing also informs *Capriccio* – by publishing his first collection of overtly confessional poems in a prohibitively expensive limited edition, Hughes was able to fulfil an apparent compulsion to

¹ Gehenna Press sales broadsheet advertising *Capriccio*. Personal copy.

² *Ibid.*

³ Hughes confirmed the autobiographical basis of some of the 'Epilogue' poems in a letter to Terry Gifford & Neil Roberts, indicating that 'Once I said lightly' is about Sylvia Plath and 'I know well' is about his friend and former lover Susan Alliston (BL Add. MS 78756). In 1998 Hughes told Ann Skea that 'Waving goodbye from your banked hospital bed' is about Edith Hughes, his mother, see, 'Ted Hughes' *Vacanas: The Difficulties of a Bridegroom*', in Terry Gifford, Neil Roberts & Mark Wormald (eds.), *Ted Hughes: from Cambridge to Collected*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 82. Jonathan Bate has more recently argued that the last-named poem also incorporates allusions to Sylvia Plath, see *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life*. (London: William Collins, 2015), pp. 340-41. *Editorial Note*: Neil Roberts further highlights that both 'You Hated Spain' and 'The Earthenware Head' which would eventually be included in *Birthday Letters* had been published in 1979 in the *Poetry Book Society Supplement* and in 1980 in *The London Review of Books*.

publish, and at the same time conduct a controlled experiment in ‘testing the waters’ of audience reaction.

Hughes seems to have been emboldened by the response – or lack of response – to *Capriccio*, and in 1995 he went back on the promise of the Gehenna Press marketing department and published eight *Capriccio* poems (alongside eight poems subsequently to appear in *Birthday Letters* and three other ‘elegiac’ poems) in the ‘Uncollected’ section of *New Selected Poems*, where again, they seemed to have generated little critical or readerly attention, perhaps emboldening Hughes to publish *Birthday Letters* in 1998.⁴ However, the twenty poems of *Capriccio* in their original sequence were only made available to a wider audience after Hughes’s death, with the publication of the *Collected Poems* in 2003, which is where virtually all his readers encounter them. This presents us with a problem. The full text of *Capriccio* as originally conceived comprises not simply the twenty poems, but also Baskin’s twenty-five engravings, which fulfil the multiple roles of inspiring Hughes’s poems, informing their meanings, and interpreting, amplifying and augmenting their content. In a letter to Baskin dated October 21st, 1989, in which he discusses the *Capriccio* collaboration, Hughes writes, somewhat convolutedly,

I’ve been looking at the drawings again, which seem to me all marvellous, with several wonders and I’m quite sure it was the associations I make with what such drawings mean to you – I mean, my idea of the origin of the meaning of these images in you, these particular emblems and totems – that focused me on those of my verses. So to my mind, the combination is all of a piece at a deep level (as far as I’m concerned), though I can see that for you my verse might seem like an arbitrary choice of guest for that chamber.⁵

In a later, undated letter to Baskin, Hughes gives him the sequence of the *Capriccio* poems, but invites him to ‘toy’ and ‘make a curious counterpoint’ by artfully selecting and juxtaposing his engravings with particular poems as he puts the book together.⁶ In an earlier letter to Hughes, Baskin comments more generally on the dialectical, symbiotic nature of their collaborations:

⁴ Christopher Reid seems to suggest this in his note to the letter Hughes wrote to Seamus Heaney on 1 January 1998, in which Hughes explains the process which led to his decision to publish *Birthday Letters*. Reid writes, ‘When TH’s appeared in 1995, the inclusion of poems about Sylvia Plath and Assia Wevill passed without comment from reviewers.’ (*LTH* 704-5). The implication is that Hughes was relieved that the publication *New Selected Poems* of these poems did not provoke a revival of the controversies of the previous decades and thus gave him the confidence to go ahead with the *Birthday Letters* project.

⁵ Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Gehenna Press d.17, f. 5.

⁶ Bodleian, MS Gehenna Press d.17, f. 6.

As usual I have that profound feeling that we can inevitably inform, reinforce, elaborate, enlarge each other's work. I do not feel that way about any other writer or artist.⁷

Accordingly, the reader must ideally encounter the *Capriccio* poems and engravings together. The engravings are not simply illustrative and the poems are not merely ekphrastic paraphrases of the engravings, but independent works of art that nevertheless combine to create a single, integrated text. To read one without taking the other into full account leads to an impoverished reading of both – and of the whole artistic undertaking.

Aspects of the material textuality of the fine book itself also frame our understanding of *Capriccio*. A comparison of the final leather cover of the book (a red-brown stripe enclosed by two green stripes) with an earlier version contained in the archive of the Gehenna Press at the Bodleian Library, in which the central brown stripe is coffin-shaped, makes clear that the cover is a schematic representation of a freshly dug grave, framing the whole book in the context of death – specifically that of Sylvia Plath.⁸ Hughes believed that Plath's suicide had the effect of consolidating his relationship with Wevill in a way that might not have happened had Plath lived, even if she and Hughes had not been reconciled. In the *Capriccio* poem 'The Error' he writes:

When her grave opened its ugly mouth
 Why didn't you just fly
 Wrap yourself in your hair and make yourself scarce,
 Why did you kneel down at the grave's edge
 To be identified
 Accused and convicted [...] (CP 795)

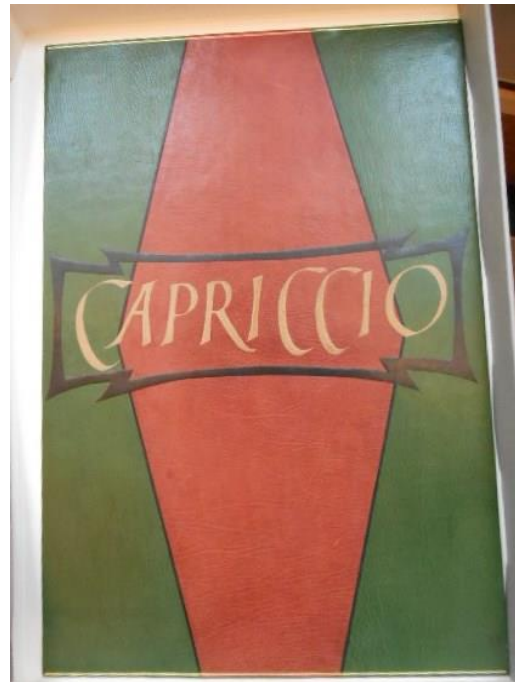
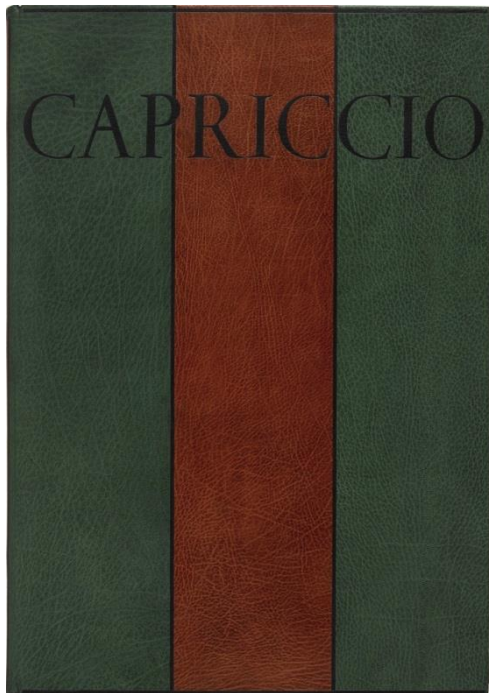
Although Hughes and Wevill had clearly developed a serious relationship, at the time of Plath's suicide they both had other partners with whom they had not definitively broken (Plath and Assia's husband David Wevill) and both were involved in other, more casual relationships. They were not living together, and it would have been easy, not to mention understandable, for Wevill to choose to 'fly' from the world of scandal, upheaval and accusation that descended upon her from February 1963. Nevertheless, Wevill chose to stay with Hughes, ultimately leaving her husband and moving in with him, despite her reservations.⁹ Over the following six years, the couple failed to develop a sustainable relationship. Hughes blamed

⁷ Leonard Baskin, Letter to Ted Hughes, 26 September 1984. Emory MSS 644 box 1, folder 13.

⁸ Oxford, Bodleian Library, Leonard Baskin, 'making copy' cover of *Capriccio*. MS Gehenna Press a10, f. 47.

⁹ Jonathan Bate describes Wevill's ambivalence about moving in with Hughes, his attempts to persuade her to do so and her fears of a relationship in which she would be 'immersed in the Hughes monumentality, his and hers', with 'Sylvia, my predecessor, between our heads at night.', *The Unauthorised Life*, p. 221.

this failure on the guilt and other complications that ultimately flowed from their roles in the events that led to Plath's death and the psychological burden this placed on them both. In a planning notebook for *Capriccio* held in the British Library, Hughes personifies the impact Plath's post-mortem presence had on Wevill as 'the homicidal ghost'.¹⁰ In a journal entry for 20 March 1969, four days before her suicide, Wevill writes of a 'terrible talk' about their relationship she had with Hughes in the lounge of the Manchester hotel they stayed in while Hughes was recording a television programme for the BBC. She reports Hughes as saying, presumably about his inability to commit to their relationship: "It's Sylvia – it's because of her", and comments: 'I can't answer that. No more than if it were a court-sentence. It says die, die soon. But execute yourself and your little self, efficiently.'¹¹ The teleological framework of *Capriccio* reflects Hughes's belief that Wevill's death was ultimately rooted in the death of Plath, hence the choice of cover design. However, before further considering this issue of the relationship between the poems and the artwork, it is necessary to deal with two important preliminary issues: the origin of the *Capriccio* project, and the significance of the book's name.



Final cover of the Gehenna Press *Capriccio* (left). 'Making Copy' in the Gehenna Press Archive at the Bodleian Library (right).

¹⁰ BL, Add Ms 88918/1/17, f. 166.

¹¹ Assia Wevill, Journals of Assia Wevill, entry for 20 March 1969. Emory MSS 1058, box 2.

From ‘Caprichos’ to *Capriccio*: the Origins of the Project

The collaboration that culminated in the 1990 Gehenna Press *Capriccio* began in 1976 when Baskin sent Hughes sixteen grotesque engravings and invited him to write poems in response to each image. The aim, as ever, was to produce a limited edition, fine-book which Baskin would publish via his Gehenna Press. By the summer of that year, Hughes had started work on the poems. In a letter to Hughes dated 22 June 1976, Baskin writes that he is, ‘delighted that “Capriccios” is occupying you, it will make a super book’.¹²

Hughes’s approach to the “Capriccios” work was business-like and schematic, and is effectively captured in a notebook in the Ted Hughes archive at Emory University, in which he refers to the collaboration as ‘Caprichos’ (Hughes and Baskin referred to the project casually or interchangeably as the Italian ‘Capriccios’ or Spanish ‘Caprichos’ throughout the various iterations of the collaboration, only definitively settling on *Capriccio* in November, 1989). Hughes prepared the blank notebook by sketching a thumbnail representation of each Baskin artwork in the top-right corners of successive double pages – the first double-page has a representation of a crow man, the eighth is a demon with a crow’s head protruding from his anus, the tenth is a grotesque hen, and so on.¹³ Having prepared his notebook with these shorthand *aide memoires*, Hughes then seems to have started to draft his poetic responses, starting with the first image and apparently intending to work his way through the lot, one after the other. Although much of the notebook remains blank, with only the first half-dozen or so thumbnail pages containing drafts, Hughes did in fact finish the ‘Caprichos’ sequence. Typescript drafts of the sixteen poems exist in the Ted Hughes archive at the British Library and Hughes sent a copy (along with a typescript of *Gaudete*) to Yehuda Amichai in May, 1977.¹⁴

However, the initial 1976 Baskin-Hughes ‘Capriccios’/‘Caprichos’ was never published, probably due to Hughes’s dissatisfaction with the poems he had produced. In a letter to Jennifer Habel (a postgraduate student at the University of Maryland who had written to Hughes enquiring about his collaborations with Baskin), dated 1 November 1993, he refers to the poems as being, ‘very lightly written’.¹⁵ Indeed, he never published the work as a sequence, although he did salvage or recycle some of the poems – ‘Caprichos’ poems comprise poems 2 to 7

¹² Emory MSS 644 box 1, folder 13.

¹³ Emory MSS 644 box 68, folder 48.

¹⁴ See BL, Add Ms 836691, ff. 10-25; and Yehuda Amichai, Aerogramme to Ted Hughes, 15 May 1977, Emory MSS 644 box 1, folder 3.

¹⁵ Emory MSS 644 box 54, folder 8.

of the ‘Seven Dungeon Songs’ in *Moortown* (CP 559-563) and the three poems of the Gehenna Press *Mokomaki* (CP 694-695). ‘For Leonard & Lisa’ in *A Primer of Birds* (CP 599) is a version of the *Caprichos* poem, ‘He cast off the weight of space’. The remaining six poems remained unpublished in Hughes’s lifetime, although four of them are published in *Collected Poems* as ‘[Caprichos]’ (CP 352-354). None of the *Caprichos* poems appear in the 1990 *Capriccio*.

After 1977, the *Capriccios/Caprichos* collaboration seems to have fallen into abeyance, until Baskin revived the project in 1986:

How did you like that group of prints I sent? I hope to do about twenty or so grotesques, diaboleries, arabesques, etc, forming, “Capriccio” & I hope the prints will turn you on to write an equally grotesque, diabolic, capricious poem to each. I intend a very small edition (25 copies) & we can sort out emoluments; I see the possibility, a year or two later, of a popular edition of “Capriccio” or embedded into another book of yr poems. I am very keen to make “Capriccio” a very great book & have been very busy on a woodcut of a beaked demon & have many other notions and ideas. I hope all of this exhilarates, invigorates and inspires you: please write!!¹⁶

Not only the name and the nature of the project (at this stage) suggest it was a revival of the earlier project. In the letter to Jennifer Habel cited earlier, Hughes writes,

Caprichos had a staggered history. He [Leonard] had a bunch of miscellaneous drawings. I wrote a series of verses [...] I don’t know what happened to his drawings. I salvaged a few of the verses. But then the title resurrected, and without my having seen any, but, I think, one or two of the early designs, I decided to write an integrated group of pieces from my point of view seriously. As I sent them to him, he picked up my mood, I think, to some extent. Anyway, he ended making that most magnificent book of books which I expect you’ve seen.¹⁷

The decision to write an ‘integrated piece’ seems Hughes’s oblique way of signalling that he’d decided to make his relationship with Assia Wevill the subject of his poems. At least one of the engravings Baskin supplied Hughes in 1976 was included in the 1986 batch (the demon with a crow’s head protruding from its anus). In a letter of 22 November 1986, Baskin writes to Hughes.

Here are the three latest for “Capriccio”. Do you remember the drawing in the original group of that indecorous bird looking out at

¹⁶ Leonard Baskin, Letter to Ted Hughes, 26 September 1984. Emory, MSS 644 box 1, folder 13.

¹⁷ Emory. MSS 644 box 54, folder 8.

the world, through his ass-hole, with his balls miraculously intact & visible?¹⁸

The engraving was included in the 1990 *Capriccio* as the accompaniment to ‘Possession’.

The account of the collaboration Hughes gives to Habel is a somewhat streamlined account of the actual nature of the project. In fact, Hughes was slow to respond to Baskin’s images and by mid-1989 he had become dissatisfied with the poems he had so far written and decided to redraft them in order to get deeper and more unflinchingly into his subject matter. This caused a delay to the production process and some frustration for Baskin. On 23 May 1989, he wrote to Hughes,

“Capriccio” will earn you some money, esp. if you could get the poems to me for printing [composition] resolution, well before I leave for Italy in very early July.¹⁹

On 9 July, after the ‘very early July’ deadline had passed, Baskin writes again:

Just the briefest of notes, upon our arrival in fantastic Florence. Before I left I sent the etched plates to Bobby Wakefield & the woodcuts to my printer in Hadley: work is thus going forward on ‘Capriccio’: Hosie tells me that you are reworking the poems??? I plan to visit London when you are not away or fishing, so we can meet & you can hand me the poems, please. Let me know exactly when in August will suit you.²⁰

Hughes seems to have made good progress with his redrafting and in a letter to Baskin dated 21 October, he indicates that he sent the ‘revised and full text’ to Baskin sometime in early or mid-October.²¹ In the same letter Hughes provides a sequential list of the twenty *Capriccio* poems which is entitled *Beleaguered by Complications*, presumably a reference to the chaos that beset Hughes and Wevill in the aftermath of Plath’s suicide and which prevented them from developing a stable relationship.²² In the same letter, he refers to the book (as opposed to the sequence) as *Caprichos*.²³ ‘Caprichos’ is a Spanish word, the plural form of capricho — meaning ‘whims’ or ‘fancies’ — ‘caprices’. In that letter he also changes the title of the opening poem of the sequence, ‘Superstitions’, to ‘Capriccios’, an Anglicised pluralisation of the Italian capriccio which has the same meaning as the Spanish

¹⁸ Emory MSS 644 box 1, folder 13.

¹⁹ Emory MSS 644 box 1, folder 14.

²⁰ Emory, MSS 644 box 1, folder 14.

²¹ Bodleian, MS Gehenna Press d.17, f. 5.

²² The ‘chaos’ arose from the difficulties the pair found in establishing a sustainable ménage in the context of the scandal attached to their relationship, the hostility of Hughes’s family to Wevill and the balancing of each partner’s various responsibilities and careers. See Bate, *The Unauthorized Life*, pp. 219-248, 265-283.

²³ Bodleian, MS Gehenna Press d.17, f. 2.

word.²⁴ By late 1989/early 1990, the title of Hughes/Baskin book has definitively become (the Italian) *Capriccio*.

Wort oder kunst? The Significance of the Name

The layers of allusion loaded into the word ‘capriccio’ carry great significance and orient the reader to an understanding of the book. The name might refer to an aspect of the character of Assia Wevill herself – a woman given to indulging her whims, horribly so in the manner of her death and that of her daughter.²⁵ The name might also allude to Hughes’s capricious decision to embark upon his ultimately disastrous affair with Wevill, ‘despite all marriages’ and to his decision – as a private man and public poet (in his role as Laureate) with a reputation for writing rather difficult ‘mythic’ poetry – to go against the grain and publish such an unprecedentedly personal sequence.²⁶ Both Ann Skea and Carol Bere point to the allusive importance of Baskin’s engraving on the half-title page, in which a crew-cut demonic figure emerges from a tomb.²⁷ Noting an etymology of capriccio that roots it in the Italian words for ‘head’ (capo) and ‘hedgehog’ (riccio), they each see a visual comment on the story of Hughes’s relationship with Wevill as one that will make the reader’s hair stand on end.²⁸ Speaking of standing on end, in a draft of an unpublished poem in the British Library, Hughes characterises Wevill’s overpowering sexual allure as, ‘the mystery that fevers imagination/And makes the prick stand up willy nilly’: a case of the big head (capo) being led by the little head (prick).²⁹ Another allusion to the lust that propelled Hughes into his relationship with Wevill is found in the etymological connection of ‘capra’ – the Italian word for ‘goat’ – with the word ‘capriccio’: Baskin’s engravings and drafts for the work

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Wevill gassed herself along with Shura, the daughter she had with Hughes, at her flat in Clapham, on 23 March 1969. Hughes subsequently had both cremated. See Yehuda Koren & Eilat Negev, *A Lover of Unreason: The Life & Tragic Death of Assia Wevill, Ted Hughes’ Doomed Love*. (London: Robson Books, 2006), pp. 201-202.

²⁶ Koren & Negev, *A Lover of Unreason*, p. 95.

²⁷ Ann Skea, ‘Poetry & Magic 3: *Capriccio*: The Path of the Sword’ (2007), <http://ann.skea.com/Capriccio1.htm>. [accessed, 19 July 2019]; Carol Bere, ‘Complicated with Old Ghosts’, in Joanny Moulin (ed.) *Ted Hughes: Alternative Horizons* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 29-37.

²⁸ An alternative etymology for capo-riccio is ‘head’-curly’ – curly hair being seen as an indication of a capricious character. <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/capriccio>, derived from Alberto Nocentini & Alessandro Parenti. *L’Etimologico – Vocabolario della Lingua Italiana* (Milan: Mondadori, 2010) [accessed 20 July 2019].

²⁹ BL, Add Ms 889/1/17, f. 167.

contain several representations of goats and satyrs.³⁰ So, loaded into the title is the sense of *Capriccio* as a book that is a risky departure from the norm for the poet, in which he narrates a story in which overwhelming goatish lust for a beautiful but capricious woman leads to irrationality, death and disaster.

We can gain further insights into the work by examining ‘capricci’ in the visual arts. In his book on the eighteenth-century Italian painter Giambattista Tiepolo, Michael Levey characterises artistic ‘capricci’ as works in which the free invention and imagination of the artist are given primacy, in contrast to the dutiful discipline that inevitably accompanies commissioned work. Initiatives of the artists themselves, ‘capricci’ were both entrepreneurial (designed to be sold on the open market to private buyers for profit) and ‘works of art’ in the modern sense – free, creative expressions of the genius of the artist – although ‘capricci’ became defined by conventions of their own. Tiepolo’s mid-eighteenth-century ‘capricci’ are typical of those of his precursors and successors in the genre in their presentation of bizarre scenes in which pensive and brooding figures are placed among the ‘ruins of antiquity in partly fantasy landscapes’.³¹ Levey comments further that,

there is something elegiac about these landscapes, where a limitless space extends beyond the foreground figures and motifs. The mood is a lulling one, half siesta and half magical, an afternoon mood where strange shapes are described and strange incidents occur.³²

It is this tradition of the artistic caprice that at least initially informed Baskin’s understanding of the collaboration with Hughes, and he expresses a kind a gleeful anticipation about working on a project in which they can both allow their dark and savage imaginations to run free in creating ‘grotesques’ and ‘diableries’.³³ Although the general tradition of the artistic caprice certainly informs *Capriccio* – the elegiac mood, the sense of foreboding, the occult undertones, the sense of life amid the ruins – it is Francisco Goya’s 1799 book of etchings, *Los Caprichos*, that is the most direct artistic influence on the work. We know that both Hughes and Baskin held Goya in the highest esteem, Hughes once telling his fishing friend Ehor Boyanowsky that he regarded Goya as one of the three greatest visual artists of all time and Baskin including a fulsome paean to him in his *Iconologia* that describes

³⁰ Although only ‘Opus 131’ is accompanied by representations of satyrs in the final version of *Capriccio*, the ‘Making Copy’ of the book in the Bodleian Library includes plans for satyrs and goats to accompany ‘Flame’ and ‘The Pit and the Stones’, MS Gehenna Press b.10.

³¹ Michael Levey, *Giambattista Tiepolo* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 99-102.

³² Levey, *Giambattista Tiepolo*, p. 102.

³³ Baskin, 28 September 1986, Emory MSS 644 box 1, folder 13.

him as ‘alone in the space he inhabits [as] the primal artist of this age’.³⁴ Like Hughes, Goya discharged a role as a royal functionary, being appointed Court Painter to Charles IV in the late 1780s. However, in 1792 he seems to have experienced a personal and political crisis from which he emerged a changed man, described by the critic Philip Hofer as, ‘bitter at times, secretive, far less exuberant’.³⁵ *Los Caprichos* was a product of this new Goya, elevating the tradition of the ‘capricci’ to a new level, using images drawn from witchcraft and the occult to bitterly satirise the corruption and irrationality of Spanish society. Sexual exploitation is a major theme of the work and Goya’s infatuated relationship with the aristocratic society beauty Maria Teresa Cayetana, the Duchess of Alba, ‘a vain [...] woman’, ‘ruled by her whims and caprices’, who nevertheless possessed a ‘great beauty and pride of race that made an irresistible appeal to a man of Goya’s comparatively humble origin’, is alluded to in several of Goya’s etchings.³⁶

There are many parallels between *Los Caprichos* and *Capriccio*: both are escapes by artists with official, state roles from public to private expression (in Hughes’s case, if not Baskin’s); both comprise artwork and text (each of Goya’s etchings has a caption aiding interpretation); sexual corruption is at the heart of both, as is a beautiful woman and her besotted artist lover; both exploit symbols and imagery from the occult. Furthermore, the caption of Goya’s ‘Capricho 43’ – ‘*El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*’, (‘The sleep of reason produces monsters’), which is at once a comment on the destructive irrationality Goya saw as characterising Spanish society and an assertion of necessity of the artists to be receptive to irrationality in order to fully release their creative potential – informs both Hughes’s and Baskin’s retrospective understanding of Hughes’s relationship with Wevill and their shared understanding of the creative process.

Some scholars have looked to the term ‘capriccio’ as it is understood in music to illuminate Hughes’s and Baskin’s work.³⁷ In classical music a ‘capriccio’ is a lively and virtuosic musical composition, often humorous or light-hearted. As such, the form is clearly not useful in understanding the Baskin/Hughes *Capriccio*, a ‘heavy’ book that begins with occult foreboding and ends in death. However, there is an alternative musical allusion which seems to offer some illuminating parallels with the book that may aid our understanding of it, namely Richard Strauss’s 1942 opera, also called *Capriccio*. Strauss’s opera is an attempt to answer a question that had

³⁴ Ehor Boyanowsky, *Savage Gods, Silver Ghosts: In the Wild with Ted Hughes* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2010), p. 63; Leonard Baskin, *Iconologia* (London: Andre Deutsche, 1988), pp. 204-206.

³⁵ Francisco Goya, *Los Caprichos*, ed. Philip Hofer (New York: Dover, 1969), p. 2.

³⁶ Vyvyan Holland, *Goya: A Pictorial Biography* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1961), pp. 74, 76.

³⁷ See Edward Hadley, *The Elegies of Ted Hughes* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), p. 141.

long preoccupied him: what is the most important part of an opera, the score or the libretto? This was a question summarised in the German phrase ‘Wort oder Ton?’: ‘the words or the music?’ The theme is dramatized around the conceit of a composer (Flamand) and a poet (Olivier) competing for the hand of the Countess Madeleine, an aristocratic society beauty, patron of the arts and presiding muse of an artistic salon. Flamand presents the Countess with a sextet he has composed for her while Olivier presents her with a love poem (actually Ronsard’s ‘Continuation D’Amours’ XXVIII). The Countess tells both Flamand and Olivier that their offerings, while excellent, are – on their own – insufficient, reminding Olivier when he presents his poem, ‘that Flamand is also wooing her with his composition in the next room’, and ‘that poetry, much as she loves it, cannot say all that she seeks to hear revealed.’³⁸

Strauss’s opera was initially a collaboration with the Jewish writer and librettist Stefan Zweig. Zweig had fled from Austria to England after the 1933 Anschluss and the initial planning was conducted by letter. The Gestapo intercepted Strauss’s replies to Zweig and the criticism of Nazi antisemitism he expressed in his letters incurred the wrath of Propaganda Minister Josef Goebbels, who had previously appointed the ambitious and accommodating Strauss to the important public role of Director of the Reichsmusikammer. The libretto was finally written by Clemens Krauss and the opera was premiered in Munich in 1942, the same year Zweig committed suicide with his wife. Strauss regarded *Capriccio* as the culmination of his career’s work, his artistic last will and testament, declaring that anything after *Capriccio* would be simple ‘*handgelenksübungen*’ (‘wrist exercises’).³⁹ Despite this, *Capriccio* was, ‘no big piece for the broad public’ but a piece for connoisseurs able to appreciate the issue of ‘Wort oder Ton’ and who wished to experience the words of the libretto in balance with the music and spectacle of the opera, ideally in an intimate arena.⁴⁰

As with the connection to Goya’s *Los Caprichos*, the parallels between Strauss’s opera and the Hughes/Baskin *Capriccio* are clear. Both works represent unexpected changes of content and style by important artists discharging public roles and a shift to a more personal vision; both works might be seen as the culmination of careers (interpreting Hughes’s *Capriccio* as the first fruits of the ‘confessional’ voice of the *Capriccio-Birthday Letters-Howls and Whispers* trilogy, and the book itself as the high point of Hughes and Baskin’s fine press work); both have a beautiful cultured woman at the heart, with two artists competing for her

³⁸ William Mann, *Richard Strauss: A Critical Study of the Operas* (London: Cassell, 1964), p. 374.

³⁹ Bryan Gilliam, *The Life of Richard Strauss* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 167.

⁴⁰ Norman Del Mar, *Richard Strauss: A Critical Commentary on the Life & Works* (London: Faber & Faber, 1986), p. 238.

favours (an echo of the David Wevill/Ted Hughes rivalry in the background of *Capriccio*); both were initially written and produced for a limited audience of cognoscenti. Furthermore, the Nazi context of Strauss's work and Zweig's flight from Germany and subsequent suicide is echoed in the Baskin/Hughes *Capriccio*'s characterisation of Assia Wevill as an émigré Jew who narrowly escaped being gassed and cremated in Hitler's death camps by fleeing Germany (with her family, in 1933) as a refugee, and who lived her subsequent life with a constant consciousness of her escape from the potential fate of 'the fire'. The horrible paradox of her ultimate fate – she gassed herself and Hughes had her cremated – haunted Hughes and is repeatedly alluded to or evoked in the *Capriccio* poems, including 'The Locket' (CP 783-4), 'Descent' (787), 'Folktale' (788), 'Snow' (789), 'Smell of Burning' (792-3), 'Shibboleth' (794-5), 'The Roof' (795), 'The Error' (795-6), 'Opus 131' (796) and 'Familiar' (797-8).⁴¹

However, the most significant parallel with Strauss's *Capriccio* is the way in which the nature of Hughes's and Baskin's collaboration echoes Strauss's theme of 'Wort oder Ton', although in their case the question becomes 'Wort oder Kunst': 'the poems or the artwork?' Earlier, I described the symbiotic, dialectical nature of Hughes and Baskin's collaboration on *Capriccio*, and in this respect Baskin's artwork and Hughes's poetry form a unity similar to that of the words and music in an opera, creating and exploiting, in Hughes's words, a 'curious counterpoint'. As I have argued earlier, as well as inspiring and shaping Hughes's poems, Baskin's work responds to, augments and develops their content, sometimes critiquing and satirising the conduct of the protagonists or the assertions of the speaker. As we will now see, in so doing, Baskin's engravings provide the basis for an enriched interpretation of the book that is simply not available via the text-only versions in the *Collected Poems*.

Text and Image in *Capriccio*

The interpretive connection between text and image is clear, for example, in the engraving that accompanies 'Folktale' (CP 788; the pages of the Gehenna Press *Capriccio* are not numbered), a poem which describes the mutual 'ransacking' of each other which Hughes and Wevill conducted in the first flush of their infatuation, and which is accompanied by an image of a grotesque vegetable skull and some thistles.

⁴¹ 'Ashes', an unpublished poem in the Ted Hughes archive at the British Library, overtly characterises Wevill in this way, BL, Add MS 88918/1/17, f. 230.



'Folktale'

On the back of a draft of this etching in the archive of the Gehenna Press at the Bodleian Library, Baskin has written in pencil, 'die todt und die distel': 'the dead and the thistle'.⁴² The etching thus can be seen to satirise Hughes's infatuation with Wevill as described in the poem through an allusion to the Dutch proverb, 'Give oats to an ass and he'll run after thistles', characterising Hughes as an ass and Wevill as the pernicious weed of the Parable of the Sower.⁴³ From this perspective, the skull would seem to represent the multiple deaths that flowed from Hughes's asinine behaviour in abandoning his wife, home, children and creative partner for 'such a woman'.⁴⁴

Baskin's engraving illustrating 'Descent' (*CP* 787) is of a plump, crow-like raptor draped in a feathery blue cloak. The way in which the cloak is drawn suggests that the plumpness of the bird is due to multiple layers of clothing beneath the cloak.

⁴² Bodleian, MS Gehenna Press a.7, f. 175.

⁴³ Jon R. Stone, *The Routledge Book of World Proverbs* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 20.

⁴⁴ In a planning notebook in the British Library, Hughes asserts his belief that his relationship with Wevill 'destroyed 4 lives, & probably five, yes probably 7'. The five are probably Sylvia Plath, Assia Wevill, Shura Hughes, Edith Hughes & Lonya Gutmann; see BL Add MS 88918/1/17, f. 66.



'Descent'

In *Baskin: Sculptures & Prints*, Baskin writes that in his work 'predacious creatures symbolise their human counterparts' and that distortion (especially enlargement) suggests evil, monstrosity, vanity and pride; crows represent many things, but are admirable in their will to survive and sometimes stand for outcasts, including Jews.⁴⁵ Thus the engraving functions as a symbolic representation of the multiple identities which the ambitious, cosmopolitan and polyglot Assia Wevill adopted during the course of her life after she and her family fled from Germany.⁴⁶ Primarily, however, the blue cloak alludes to the Dutch proverb, 'she puts the blue cloak on her husband', meaning, 'she blinds him to her adulteries', a proverb famously illustrated in the centre of the composition of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's painting *Netherlandish Proverbs*.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Leonard Baskin, *Baskin: Sculptures, Drawings & Prints* (New York: George Braziller, 1970), p.16.

⁴⁶ See Koren & Negev, *A Lover of Unreason*, pp. 7-9.

⁴⁷ Pieter Brueghel the Younger, *Netherlandish Proverbs*.

<https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/proverbs/gAF5UoqBDV3dMg>. [Accessed 16th August, 2019].



Netherlandish Proverbs

The suggestion of multiple layers of feathers in Baskin's crow engraving may allude to the multiple times Wevill has draped the blue cloak on her partners, and thus the raptor/crow becomes a dual symbol of Wevill and of the many men she has cuckolded. Of course, Baskin's satire applies equally as well to Hughes.

In a final example, the engraving paired with 'Fanaticism' (CP 788-9) (a poem which includes a representation of Wevill's habitual assertion that she would kill herself after the age of forty, at which age she anticipated that her beauty and attractiveness to men would have declined to a point at which she intuited her life would no longer be worth living) is a close-up portrait of a grotesque woman making a curious hand gesture.



‘Fanaticism’

There is a trace of a scar on the woman’s right cheek which may characterise her as *La Celestina*, a figure from Spanish literary and folk tradition represented in several of Goya’s *Los Caprichos*.⁴⁸ *La Celestina* first appears in Spanish literature in Fernando de Rojas’s 1499 novel *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea*.⁴⁹ She is a pimp-slashed former prostitute and brothel-keeper, a procuress, poisoner and witch, trafficking in sex. Alluding to *Los Caprichos* and its theme of ‘the sleep of reason produces monsters’, Baskin here exposes what he sees as the monstrous ugliness underlying Wevill’s beauty and her capricious exploitation of it, along with Hughes’s eagerness to be seduced by it. The hand gesture seems to represent a spider, a more conventional representation of which is part of the book’s colophon. Some female spiders devour their mates after mating, and Wevill’s serial marriages,

⁴⁸ For example, in *Caprichos* [2] ‘They say yes and give their hand to the first comer’ and [15] ‘Pretty teachings’.

⁴⁹ See Fernando de Rojas, *Celestina*, trans. Margaret Sayers Peden (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

sexually predatory nature and many affairs led some to characterise her as a ‘man-eater’.⁵⁰

However, there may well be another, more autobiographical significance underlying Baskin’s deployment of spider imagery. In a notebook held in the British Library in which Hughes seems to be listing memories of key events in his relationship with Wevill in preparation for writing the *Capriccio* poems, he refers to the occasion of the visit of Assia and her husband David to Court Green in May 1962 (when the flirtation that led to the affair apparently began) in the following way: ‘The country visit — the dream of the fish, the knowledge, *the spider* [my italics] the smile too welcoming, the wife’.⁵¹ It is not clear to what event this arachnid reference refers, an elision in the archival record which highlights a stumbling block in fully explicating the nature of the Hughes/Baskin *Capriccio* collaboration. Although it seems certain that the poet and the artist discussed the subject matter of *Capriccio*, and at least some of the biographical incidents that underpin the poems, any record of this is absent from their correspondence in the three major archives at the Bodleian Library, the British Library and at Emory University. It may be that these discussions were conducted orally, or that the relevant documentary material was weeded from archival material before deposit. However, one thing seems sure: in deploying the spider, the Yeshiva-educated Baskin was alluding to the following passage from the *Babylonian Talmud*:

[Rabbi] Assi stated, the Evil Inclination is at first like the thread of a spider, but ultimately becomes like cart ropes, as it is said, Woe unto them that draw iniquity with cords of vanity, and sin as it were with a cart-rope.⁵²

In ‘Folktale’ Hughes writes that one of the things he wanted to find in Wevill was, ‘the thread-end of himself’ (*CP* 788). Pulling on that thread led to an appalling denouement, and by his cryptic allusion to Rabbi Assi’s teaching, Baskin provides a commentary that passes a proverbial judgement on both Hughes and Wevill from the Jewish tradition that both he and Assia were inheritors of, in the words of the latter’s virtual namesake.

⁵⁰ For example, in his autobiography Al Alvarez characterises Assia as a woman ‘who made a pass at every man she met so automatically that it was hard to feel flattered’. *Where Did it All Go Right* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), p. 100.

⁵¹ ADD MS, 88918/1/17, f. 63.

⁵² *Babylonian Talmud*. Mas. Sukkah 52a: 11-13.

<https://juchre.org/talmud/sukkah/sukkah3.htm#52a>, (accessed 16 July 2018).

Combining the Mythic and Elegiac Modes

Capriccio is an important work in the context of Hughes's oeuvre for four main reasons. Firstly, it represents the high point of his work with Leonard Baskin – *Capriccio* is their most opulent and fully-realised fine book, a genuinely collaborative piece in which 'Kunst' is as important as 'Wort' and in which the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Secondly, with a focus on the 'Wort', it is the first of Hughes's published works that sustainedly and explicitly addresses his relationship with one of the women he loved and over whose death he felt such devastating grief and guilt, opening up the final great movement of his poetic career. Without the confidence Hughes gained from writing and publishing *Capriccio*, *Birthday Letters* may not have reached the form it did, or even have been published in Hughes's lifetime. Thirdly, archivally-informed close readings of some of the poems in *Capriccio* are able to provide the basis for intertextual readings of other poems in Hughes's oeuvre, revealing patterns of imagery and allusion that suggest very strongly that Hughes wrote about his relationship with Assia Wevill more frequently than has hitherto been understood.⁵³

Finally, a critical turn towards *Capriccio* allows us to consider the problematic terms 'mythic' and 'elegiac' which have, in recent years, gained currency in Hughes studies as lenses through which to identify what are increasingly being seen as the two dominant modes in his poetry, and which I have reluctantly used as a convenient shorthand in this article. 'Mythic' tends to be the term used to describe Hughes's externally focused work, in which he is concerned to explore ideas or themes, or to assert an intellectual position, particularly when he transforms his subject matter by using symbols, metaphors and imagery drawn from myth, folklore, religion, philosophy, theology or Jungian psychology. The *Cave Birds* sequence, with its (imputedly) arcane alchemical preoccupations and schematic framework is often agreed to be the type-specimen of the mythic mode in Hughes's work, although more familiar and accessible works such as 'Pike', 'The Howling of Wolves' and, of course, *Crow*, can be seen as 'mythic' in these terms.⁵⁴ Hughes's 'elegiac' work is usually understood as constituting his more personal poetry, in which he writes intimately about people, places and landscapes he once

⁵³ See Steve Ely, 'The Key of the Sycamore' in this issue of *The Ted Hughes Society Journal*, pp. 42-64.

⁵⁴ The main argument of Jonathan Bate's *Ted Hughes; The Unauthorised Life* is structured around the mythic/elegiac binary, in which context he is particularly dismissive of *Cave Birds*, referring to it as 'provisional', 'fragmented' and 'doomed', using language which has 'all the agony and none of the ecstasy of the mythologised self' (323-4). In his review of Bate's book, Neil Roberts defends *Cave Birds* and points out the tendentious nature of Bate's animus towards the book, *The Ted Hughes Society Journal* 5.1 (2016), p. 76.

knew that have passed or are passing from his life — either physically, or because of temporal or experiential estrangement. *Birthday Letters* is of course the type-specimen for Hughes's elegiac mode, although many of his *Elmet* poems and a range of others, including 'On the Reservations', the poem he wrote about the decline of the South Yorkshire coalfield communities, can also be seen as 'elegiac'. However, these categories are critically problematic for the ways in which they can lead to a tendency to suggest that a binary is operative in Hughes's work and that any given poem is *either* mythic *or* elegiac. If this was the case, then *Capriccio* would inevitably be seen as an elegiac sequence — after all, it's a series of poems about Hughes's dead lover, the mother of his child and the woman whom he would refer to as his 'true wife'.⁵⁵ But to see the book simply as elegiac would be a mistake. Other elements also inform and underpin this exceedingly rich text and also need to be taken into account. Ann Skea (perhaps the only scholar to have *sustainedly* engaged with *Capriccio*) has outlined at length how the sequence draws extensively on the Cabala.⁵⁶ The sequence also draws on other mythological traditions, including Jewish folklore and mythology, Norse & Near-Eastern mythology, spiritualism and demonology, and literary sources including the Bible, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Turgenev's *First Love*, Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*. Hughes seizes on and transforms these elements to produce a highly subjective, teleological account of his relationship with Assia Wevill that is every bit as 'mythic' as *Crow* or *Cave Birds*. *Capriccio* combines both mythic and elegiac modes — perhaps, in the context of Hughes's work, paradigmatically so. It is this that makes the sequence—even stripped of the riches of Baskin's engravings—so compelling.

⁵⁵ Ted Hughes, letter to Celia Chaikin, 14 April 1969, Emory MSS 1058 box 1, folder.2.

⁵⁶ Skea, 'Capriccio: The Way of the Sword'.