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OVID, *MET.* 6.640: A DIALOGUE BETWEEN MOTHER AND SON

In telling the story of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela (*Met.* 6.401–674), Ovid transformed tragedy—the *Tereus* of Sophocles¹—into epic. The result was a narrative that followed the tragic plot but with a very different presentation. For example, Ovid incorporated into his episode events from the play's prologue, such as the marriage of Procne and Tereus (426ff.), the birth of Itys (433ff.), and the voyage of Tereus to Athens (444ff.). In addition, he brought offstage action into the limelight, including the violation of Philomela (549ff.), the slaughter of Itys (636ff.), and the metamorphoses of Tereus and the sisters (667ff.). Finally, he explicated innermost thoughts, like the lust of Tereus (455ff.) and the rage of Procne (581ff.)—emotions whose external manifestations would have been clear in performance, but whose effects the reader perceives from the inside out. So sequential and immediate a treatment owes much to the shift from one genre to the other.

Augmenting the Sophoclean kernel via *contaminatio* are transformations of Euripidean tragedy. In particular, Procne's obsession with punishing her husband and anguish over killing her son are reminiscent of the dilemma facing Euripides' Medea.² Moreover, it is conceivable that Ovid's inspiration for the Dionysiac festival (of which there is no trace in the fragments or *testimonia*) derives not from the *Tereus* but from the *Bacchae*.³ It is likewise impossible to assess from the fragmentary evidence the poet's debt to Sophocles in his depiction of Itys' death (639–41):

tendentemque [sc. Ityn] manus et iam sua fata videntem
et 'mater! mater!' clamantem et colla petentem
ense ferit Procne.

Here also the *Bacchae* seems a primary model: parallels with the death of Pentheus are both verbal (Pentheus twice cries to his μητρὶς Agave at 1118 and 1120) and circumstantial (both mothers ignore their sons' pleas; both have become maenads).⁴ Such *contaminatio*es yield an episode neither wholly Sophoclean nor Euripidean, but utterly Ovidian.⁵

Perhaps the most Ovidian touch is Itys' 'mater! mater!' (640). Apart from its recollection of Pentheus' final plea, the dual cry evokes a Greek tragic motif: the

¹ For extant *testimonia* and fragments of the *Tereus* v. *TGF* 4 Ff 581–95b. Discussion of the play's scope and content follows the *communis opinio*, e.g. G. Dobrov, 'The Tragic and the Comic Tereus', *AJP* 114 (1993), 189–234. That the *Tereus* was Ovid's primary source (the prevailing view since Welcker) is reasonably certain; v. the remarks of F. Bömer, *P. Ovidius Naso, Metamorphosen: Kommentar, Buch VI–VII* (Heidelberg, 1976), *ad init.* All subsequent references to Bömer pertain to this volume. Other works cited more than once will be referenced by authors' names following initial citations.

² D. H. J. Larmour, 'Tragic *Contaminatio* in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: Procne and Medea; Philomela and Iphigenia (6.424–674); Scylla and Phaedra (8.19–151)', *JCS* 15 (1991), 132. Cf. especially 624ff. with *Med.* 1021ff.

³ I. Cazzaniga, *La saga di Itis nella tradizione letteraria e mitografica Greco-Romana* (Varese, 1951), vol. II, 57ff. Cf. Bömer *ad* 587f.: 'Bei Sophokles ist eine [Überlieferung], nach Lage der Dinge, vielleicht vorhanden gewesen, aber heute kaum mehr nachzuweisen'.

⁴ Cazzaniga, 61. Although Procne outwardly reverses her transformation before the murder (603), she retains a Bacchic ferality ('veluti Gangetica . . . tigris', 636f.).

⁵ Ovid's application of *contaminatio* brought novelty to other episodes as well. The Medea episode (7.1ff.) focuses not on her filicide but on the metamorphic aspects of her myth, e.g. the rejuvenation of Aeson (159ff.) (Larmour, 132f.). Similarly, Pentheus (3.51ff.) supplicates not his 'mater' but his 'matertera' Autonoe (719). The reader of the Medea and Pentheus stories is surprised both by the suppression or adaptation of such well-known tragic moments, and by their appearance in another narrative.

lament of the nightingale. Although references to the nightingale's song are common in Greek tragedy, either as an ornament of an idyllic landscape (e.g. Sophocles, *O.C.* 671ff.) or as an example of insurmountable woe (e.g. Euripides, *Helen* 1107ff.), in three cases the song itself is reported through onomatopoeic gemination. The first is in Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* (1144f.):

"Ιτυν "Ιτυν στένουσ' ἀμφιθαλὴ κακοῖς
ἀηδῶν μόρον.

In the Greek mythographic tradition, the nightingale was the metamorphosed *alter ego* of Procne,⁶ whose call—'Itys!'—was heard as mourning for her slain son.⁷ In this passage the call is doubled—'Itys! Itys!'—in imitation of the repetition that characterizes birdsong.⁸ So Euripides in the *Phaethon* (67–70 Diggle):

μέλπει δὲ δένδρεσι λεπτ-
ὰν ἀηδῶν ἀρμονίαν
ὀρθρενομένα γόοις
"Ιτυν "Ιτυν πολύθρηνον.

In Sophocles' *Electra* the calls are separated to fit the dactylic metre,⁹ but their mimetic effect remains (147–9):

ἀλλ' ἐμέ γ' ἄ σπονόεσσ' ἄραρεν φρένας,
ἄ "Ιτυν αἰὲν "Ιτυν ὀλοφύρεται,
ὄρνις ἀτυζομένα.

It is tempting to speculate that Sophocles included a similar cry in the *Tereus*.¹⁰

In all of Greek poetry the gemination is unique to tragedy.¹¹ A single 'Itys!' is the norm for Latin verse,¹² with the exception of *Culex* 252: 'vox Ityn edit Ityn'. Yet some authors adopted the spirit of the tragic motif. Horace did so through alliteration (*Carm.* 4.12.5f.):

nidum ponit Ityn flebiliter gemens
infelix avis.¹³

The author of the *Epistula Sapphus* employed a dual construction (154f.):

concinit Ismarium Daulias ales Ityn.
ales Ityn, Sappho desertos cantat amores.

Though the calls themselves are isolated by separate sentences and couplets, the close repetition of 'ales Ityn' simulates the customary gemination. Ovid himself offered another variation in the *Fasti* (4.482f.):

⁶ According to W. R. Halliday, *Indo-European Folk-tales and Greek Legend* (Cambridge, 1933), 100f., the names Procne and Philomela were probably invented by Sophocles for the *Tereus*, as pre-Sophoclean variants of the myth feature the proleptic names Aedon and Chelidon, respectively. A mistaken etymology for φιλομήλα ('lover of song') might explain her later association with ἀηδῶν ('songstress') in Hellenistic and Latin authors.

⁷ Halliday, 88.

⁸ Similar is the doubled cry of the hoopoe, ποῦ; ποῦ; which represents Tereus' 'endless and unsuccessful search' for Procne (Halliday, 93). Cf. Tzetzes on Hesiod, *Op.* 566.

⁹ On the variable quantity of υ in "Ιτυν see R. Jebb (Cambridge, 1894) *ad loc.*

¹⁰ The scholiast to Aristophanes, *Av.* 212, in summarizing the *Tereus* reports Procne's lament as "Ιτυν "Ιτυν. The fragments, however, do not reveal whether this cry was in the actual play.

¹¹ See D'Arcy Thompson, *A Glossary of Greek Birds* (Oxford, 1937), s.v. *ἈΗΔΩΝ*, for a full catalogue of Greek (and many Latin) references to the nightingale and her song.

¹² E.g. Propertius 3.10.10; Ovid, *Am.* 3.12.32.

¹³ I thank Dr S. Heyworth for this observation.

ut amissum cum gemit ales Ityn,
perque vices modo 'Persephone!' modo 'filia!' clamat [sc. Ceres].

Ceres' reiteration of 'Persephone! filia!' is likened to an implicit 'Itys! Itys!'.¹⁴

With 'mater! mater!' Ovid adapted the tragic commonplace for Latin epic. An account of Procne's metamorphosis afforded him an opportunity to treat her lamentation, which had no shortage of literary precedents. Furthermore, the tragic gemination was appropriate for an episode with Sophoclean and Euripidean elements. Yet Latin authors seemed to have disdained directly writing a doubled 'Itys!', preferring their own inventive versions of the nightingale's song. Ovid's invention was to place a geminated cry in the mouth of Itys, not Procne.¹⁵ His 'mater! mater!' is a full-fledged literary transformation, combining the doubling of Greek tragedy with the ingenuity of the Latin poets.¹⁶

On the surface, the *Metamorphoses* is a collection of episodes about 'shapes changed into new bodies' (1.1f.). These episodes consist in transformations of earlier literature, which not only ensure novelty, but also serve as poetic analogues for the subject matter. The reader, while being entertained, witnesses a metamorphic dialogue between Ovid and his tradition. In the Tereus episode, the dying words of son to mother are the poet's response to the great tragedians. Yet in answering the motif 'Itys! Itys!', Ovid made the motif seem to answer him. In the chronology of the mythographic tradition, Itys' cry precedes that of Procne. His final words may be read aetiologically, as an invocation that colours her lament as an eternal reply. 'mater! mater!' thus becomes the putative source—the mother—of 'Itys! Itys!'.¹⁷

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¹⁴ Perhaps Seneca, *Ag.* 671f. ('cantat tristis aedon | Ityn in *varios* modulata sonos'), captures the tragic gemination as well.

¹⁵ Cf. M. S. Haywood, 'Ceyx, Alcyon and Ovidian Wit (*Metamorphoses* 11, 544–67)', *Eranos* 86 (1988), 172f., who argues that Ovid reverses the traditional call of the halcyon or kingfisher, 'Ceyx! Ceyx!', by making the drowning Ceyx call out the name of his wife Alcyon (544f., 562f., 566f.).

¹⁶ 'mater! mater!' might also clarify the ambiguity in the metamorphoses of the sisters (667ff.). In two of the Greek citations (*Ag.* 1145, *Phae.* 70), the bird crying 'Itys! Itys!' is identified as ἀηδών. The evocation of these passages in Itys' cry encourages the reader to follow Greek tradition and identify Procne with the nightingale.

¹⁷ My sincere thanks to Dr Stephen Hinds at the University of Washington for his insightful comments and advice, as well as to the editors for their practical criticism.