

PROCNE'S ABSENCE AGAIN

Vergil, *Ecl.* 6. 78–81:

[quid loquar] ut mutatos Terei narraverit artus,
 quas illi Philomela dapes, quae dona pararit,
 quo cursu deserta petiverit et quibus ante
 infelix sua tecta super volitaverit alis?

In *CQ* n.s. 30 (1980), 127 ff. Mr A. Hudson-Williams clearly and illuminatingly exposes the difficulties contained in these lines. It seems possible, however, to carry the analysis further; and in the following I offer, with Mr Hudson-Williams's findings as a starting-point, some suggestions towards a solution of the problems.

The chief difficulty concerns Procne's apparent absence from this summary of a myth of which she is surely one of the chief characters. 'Indispensable a member of the cast as she normally is, one of the two great child-slayers of antiquity, Procne seems entirely forgotten.'¹ Philomela appears to have ousted her completely from the story.

But let us have a closer look, first at 79. We do not possess the version(s) of the myth on which Vergil modelled his own summary of it. For us its treatment in *Ov. Met.* 6. 424–674 is the chief source for the details of the story. If we may go by him, it was Philomela who, after the meal, by suddenly appearing before Tereus, bloodstained and with unloosened hair, ghastly as an Erinyes, and by thrusting the head of his son into his face, sprung upon him the realization of the atrocity of which he was the victim.² Vergil's *quae dona [Philomela] pararit* perfectly tallies with that. And as to *dapes* – the killing of Itys was Procne's plan, and it was she who inflicted upon him the first, and fatal, wound; but immediately after that Philomela cut his throat, and the bloody job of carving him up and preparing his flesh as a dish for his father was done by both sisters together.³ Clearly, Ovid is making Philomela's share in the action as great as possible; after all, it was Philomela who had been wronged by Tereus, much more than Procne, and it was she who, by enlisting the help of her sister, contrived to obtain the revenge she was seeking.⁴ By her determination in spite of her helplessness and by her resourcefulness it was she who started the series of events that ultimately led up to the horrible meal:⁵ that, and no more, seems to be what Vergil is hinting at by saying *quas illi Philomela dapes pararit*. Concerning the sisters' respective parts in the punishment of Tereus, Vergil in 79, taken by itself, does not necessarily imply anything different from what Ovid is saying in express words.

Nevertheless, there remains some doubt about this interpretation. We could feel easier about it, if only we had some mention of Procne in 80–1, to balance the prominence given to her sister in 79, to make sure that she has not been completely ousted by her. The trouble is that Procne apparently is absent, not from 79 only, but from 80–1 as well.

Is she really? The indications in the text are strangely contradictory, as Mr Hudson-Williams shows. On the one hand, the only possible way to find room for her in 80–1 is to suppose her to be the subject of *petiverit* and/or *volitaverit*. There has been some doubt who is the subject in these clauses; no scholar, indeed, seems to have thought of Procne, but some have opted for Tereus. Mr Hudson-Williams, however,

¹ p. 129 (all page references are to Mr Hudson-Williams's article).

² *Ov. Met.* 6. 656 ff.

³ *Ov. Met.* 6. 641 ff.

⁴ cf. *Ov. Met.* 6. 542 ff.

⁵ *Ov. Met.* 6. 574 ff.

conclusively argues that only Philomela can be the subject: 'in the absence of any hint, either from the language or from the context, I do not see what justification there can be for postulating a change of subject [after 79] and appointing a new one. Making Tereus the subject, whether of the two verbs or of the one, saddles this master artist with the language of a novice. The subject of all four clauses can only be *Philomela*.'⁶ That argument excludes, not Tereus only, but Procne as well.

But on the other hand '*sua* in 81 can refer only to the queen';⁷ and in the tradition as we know it Procne, not Philomela, is the queen, Tereus' wife. If we do not want to suppose that Vergil was following some divergent tradition,⁸ *sua* seems to indicate that Procne, after all, must be lurking somewhere quite near.

More important still, through comparison with a great number of passages from Greek and Roman poets Mr Hudson-Williams shows convincingly that 80–1 allude, not to one metamorphosis, but to two: that *quo...petiverit* and *quibus...alis* refer to the nightingale and the swallow respectively. 'The nightingale seeks solitude, the swallow the society of man. From these passages and other references to the habitats of the two birds we may assume that, in a mention of the sisters' transformation, an allusion to woods, trees, or uninhabited places, points to the nightingale, one to roofs, houses, or towns, to the swallow.'⁹ Two birds, two metamorphoses – that can only mean that both sisters must be present in these lines, not Philomela alone, but Procne as well!

How can we account for this confusing hide-and-seek? Not, I am afraid, by the suggestion of Mr Hudson-Williams that, 'while Philomela is the grammatical subject of each of the four clauses, she is to be interpreted as a composite figure symbolizing the two sisters'.¹⁰ Philomela either is the subject of *volitaverit*, or she is not; either she is Tereus' wife, or Procne is; we cannot have it both ways. The only possible conclusion is that the textual tradition cannot be sound.

In fact, there is, independently of the above considerations, reason to distrust the soundness of the text in these lines: there must be something wrong with *ante* in 80.¹¹ That it cannot qualify the whole clause *quibus...alis* is shown by Mr Hudson-Williams;¹² he seems to accept, hesitatingly, an old proposal of Heyne to take it with *sua* only: 'previously – ill-fated one! – her own'.¹³ This interpretation, however, involves a very unlikely word-order, strained to the point of unintelligibility; it confers on the clause a sentimental, even nostalgic colouring which surely seems out of place;¹⁴ and it cannot explain the very heavy emphasis laid on *ante* by both the enjambment and the parenthesis of *infelix*. *Ante* cannot be right; it stands out as a flaw against the otherwise smooth perfection of the wording of these lines, and will have to go.

⁶ p. 128.

⁷ p. 129.

⁸ On supposed divergent versions of the myth in which Philomela was the wife of Tereus see pp. 127–8 with note 19.

⁹ pp. 129–30 with note 24.

¹⁰ p. 130.

¹¹ *Ante* has been suspected before: O. Ribbeck conjectured *alte*; but this is a mere stopgap, and does not solve the problems concerning Procne's absence.

¹² p. 128. The argument takes only Philomela and Tereus into account as possible subjects. When one tries Procne, the result is a similar absurdity: why should Vergil want to point out expressly that the last-mentioned transformation actually was prior to the other? Incidentally, the false impression of a temporal priority of *volitaverit* in relation to *petiverit*, created by *ante*, is probably one reason why it has not generally been seen that the two clauses in 80–1 are parallel and simultaneous and allude to the two transformations of the two sisters.

¹³ pp. 128, 130.

¹⁴ The interpretation of *ante* as qualifying *sua* is usually supported with Ov. *Met.* 2. 490, '*quondamque suis erravit in agris*'; here the nostalgic sentiment is perfectly in place, but the situation of poor Callisto is very different indeed from Procne's!

In order to replace it, and at the same time to bring elusive Procne out of her hiding-place into full light, we must find a word that meets the following requirements: it should be a noun in the nominative that can identify Procne as the subject of *volitaverit*; and, preferably, it should possess some palaeographical plausibility as a candidate for taking the place of *ante*. The number of words answering to this description is very small indeed. *Uxor*? but, apart from palaeographical considerations, its distance from *Terei* in 79 would be too great. *Ultrix*? but the picture of the avenger hovering over the house in the shape of a meek swallow is surely preposterous; nor would Vergil have admitted an ugly homoeoteleuton like *ultrix infelix*. But what about *Atthis*? *Ante* could conceivably be the product of a scribal 'correction' of an illegible or mutilated *Atthis*. True, Philomela is as Athenian as her sister, and therefore *Atthis* by itself would not be sufficient to distinguish Procne from her. But Vergil wrote his lines for readers who knew the myth, who probably even knew the particular treatment of it which he himself was following as his model, and who would be expecting to find in them some allusion to Procne and her transformation. For such readers, *Atthis infelix*, after a series of three successive clauses with a common subject, would be a clear indication of a change of subject; and the allusion to a double metamorphosis in 80-1, which they could not fail to recognize, and the clue which *sua* in 81 contributed, would be sufficient to establish that the new subject could actually be no other than Procne, for whom they were waiting. Moreover, *Atthis* does not stand alone, but is qualified by *infelix*: Procne is not called merely 'the woman of Athens' but 'the mourning woman of Athens', and this qualification implies an allusion to the moving motif of the bird-mother with her plaintive cry 'Itys, Itys!' lamenting the death of her son; cf. the description of the swallow in spring in Hor. *Od.* 4. 12. 5 ff.:¹⁵

nidum ponit Ityn flebiliter gemens
infelix avis.

One more allusion, on a different level, is implied in the choice of *Atthis* as the noun designating Procne. Medea, the other murderess of her own children, was a barbarian, but Procne, daughter of a king of Athens, should have known better: something like this seems to be what Vergil is hinting at by calling her *Atthis*. The tragic contrast between her Athenian background and the barbarousness of her deed could very well have been something of a *τόπος* with Vergil's sources. At any rate, Horace in *Od.* 4. 12. 5 ff., part of which we quoted just now, seems to expand and make explicit the very same thoughts which Vergil, in his allusive style, condenses into *Atthis infelix*:

nidum ponit Ityn flebiliter gemens
infelix avis et *Cecropiae* domus
aeternum opprobrium, quod male *barbaras*
regum est ultra libidines.

Vague and allusive Vergil's language in these lines certainly is; but it is the calculated vagueness of a master, whose art here consists precisely in the subtlety with which he is just hinting at the outlines of a story which his readers are supposed to be familiar with. Masterliness there is in other respects too: see how natural is the word-order, how smooth the enjambment, and how neatly the surprise of the sudden transformation of the woman into a bird is expressed in the juxtaposition of *Atthis infelix* and *quibus...volitaverit alis*.

There are three passages in Silver Latin poetry in which *Atthis* is used in connection with Procne or Philomela, swallows or a nightingale, each of which clearly represents an echo of Vergil's lines. They are:

¹⁵ This important parallel is quoted by Mr Hudson-Williams, p. 128 n. 21.

[Sen.] *H.O.* 199 f:

fugit vultus Philomela suos,
natumque sonat flebilis Atthis.

Martial 1. 53. 9 f.:

sic ubi multisona fervet sacer Atthide lucus,
improba Cecropias offendit pica querelas.

Marital 5. 67. 1 f.:

Hibernos peterent solito cum more recessus
Atthides, in nidis una remansit avis.

The similarity of the first of these passages to that of Vergil is striking: a reference to Philomela and her transformation sets the mythical scene, and after that, *Atthis* qualified by an epithet similar in meaning to *infelix*¹⁶ suffices to evoke her sister;¹⁷ even the place of *Atthis* at the end of a line is the same in both. But the deeper implication of the choice of *Atthis* to denote Procne does not make itself felt here, and the Vergilian imitation sounds rather mechanical and conventional.¹⁸

The first epigram of Martial alludes to the nightingale,¹⁹ and therefore presumably to Philomela; this variation from the Vergilian model entails the qualification of *Atthis* through a nicely found new epithet in old style. The other epigram is about swallows and ends in a play on Itys and his unnatural mother. But in both epigrams the mythical element is secondary: in both the reference is primarily not to human beings in the world of myth but, by means of conventional mythical allusions, to birds in the world of reality. Especially the way in which in the last one *Atthides* is introduced bluntly, without a mythical setting, without a qualifying epithet, and in the plural, as a conventional appellation of a particular kind of bird, represents the end of an evolution in which imitation of a famous model can be seen gradually fossilizing into a mechanically used cliché.

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¹⁶ The line confirms the interpretation of *infelix* given above.

¹⁷ In *TLL* s. *Atthis* I do not understand the sentence introducing the reference to the three passages: 'sic appellantur Philomela et hirundines (a Procne)'.

¹⁸ There seems to be traceable some influence of Horace, op. cit., as well: see *natum sonat* ~ *Ityn gemens* and *flebilis* ~ *flebiliter*.

¹⁹ This passage can be added to Mr Hudson-Williams's list of references to woods in connection with nightingales, p. 129 n. 24(a).