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 Sophocles[1]—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 μῆτερ Agave at 1118 and 1120) and
circumstantial (both mothers ignore their sons' pleas; both have become maenads).[4]
Such *contaminationes* 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

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[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 Iphigeneia (6.424–674); Scylla and Phaedra (8.19–151)', *ICS* 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 adapation 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 onomatopoetic gemination. The first is in Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* (1144f.):

> Ἴτυν Ἴτυν στένουσ' ἀμφιθαλῆ κακοῖς
> ἀηδὼν 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 ἀηδὼν ἁρμονίαν
> ὀρθρευομένα γόοις
> Ἴτυν Ἴτυν πολύθρηνον.

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

> ἀλλ' ἐμέ γ' ἁ στονόεσσ' ἄραρεν φρένας,
> ἃ Ἴτυν αἰὲν Ἴτυν 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.):

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[6] According to W. R. Halliday, *Indo-Eurapean 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 ἀηδών ('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 Ἴτυν see R. Jebb (Cambridge, 1894) *ad loc.*

[10] The scholiast to Aristophanes, *Av.* 212, in summarizing the *Tereus* reports Procne's lament as Ἴτυ Ἴτυ. 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. ΑΗΔΩΝ, 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 maller. 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]

University of Washington   DANIEL CURLEY

MARTIAL 14.100: *PANACA*

> Si non ignota est docti tibi terra Catulli,
> potasti testa Raetica vina mea.

The wine referred to in the second line of the epigram was produced near Verona, at the foot of the Rhaetian Alps. It was well regarded by most and was a favourite of the Emperor Augustus: for references see Mynors at Verg. *G.* 2.96 and my note at Mart. 14.100.2. It appears, however, to have undue prominence in this poem, supposedly about the earthenware drinking vessels which, presumably, were manufactured in the same area. There is also the question of why Martial refers to