

# The Silence of the Shuttle: The Voiceless Procne and the Absent Philomela in Aristophanes' *Birds*

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## 1. Hypothesis to Sophocles' *Tereus* (P. Oxy 3013, Translated by Parsons 1974)

Pandion, the Ruler of Athens, having (two) daughters, Procne and Philomela, united the elder, Procne, in marriage with Tereus the king of the Thracians, who had by her a son whom he named Itys. As time passed, and Procne wished to see her sister, she asked Tereus to travel to Athens to bring (her back). He, after reaching Athens and receiving the girl from Pandion and making half the return journey, fell in love with the girl. And he disregarded his trust and violated her. But, as a precaution in case she should tell her sister, he cut out the girl's tongue. On arriving in Thrace, and Philomela being unable to speak her misfortune, she revealed it by means of a piece of weaving. When Procne realized the truth, driven mad by jealousy... she took Itys and killed him and after cooking him served him up to Tereus. He ate the meal without realizing. The women took to flight and became, one of them a nightingale, one a swallow, and Tereus a hoopoe.

## 2. Aristophanes, *Birds* 209-219: Tereus calls Procne and asks her to begin singing<sup>1</sup>

ἄγε, σύννομέ μοι, παῦσαι μὲν ὕπνου,  
λῦσον δὲ νόμους ἱερῶν ὕμνων,  
οὓς διὰ θείου στόματος θρηνηῖς  
τὸν ἔμὸν καὶ σὸν πολύδακρυν Ἴτυν,  
ἐλελιζομένη διεροῖς μέλεσιν  
γένυος ξουθῆς. καθαρὰ χωρεῖ  
διὰ φυλλοκόμου μίλακος ἦχῳ  
πρὸς Διὸς ἔδρας, ἴν' ὁ χρυσοκόμας  
Φοῖβος ἀκούων, τοῖς σοῖς ἐλέγοις  
ἀντιψάλλων ἐλεφαντόδετον  
φόρμιγγα, θεῶν ἴστησι χορούς·

Come, partner in song, stop your sleeping, and let loose the melodies of sacred songs, which you sing in mourning, with your divine mouth, for my son and yours, much-mourned Itys, singing clear, trembling songs from your whirring beak. Your pure sound travels through the green-haired oaks to the home of Zeus, where golden-haired Phoebus is listening, accompanying your elegies on his ivory-inlaid lyre, and setting up choruses of the gods.

## 3. *Odyssey* 19.518-522: Penelope recounts the myth of the nightingale

ὡς δ' ὅτε Πανδαρέου κούρη, χλωρηῖς ἀηδῶν,  
καλὸν ἀεῖδησιν ἕαρος νέον ἰσταμένοιο,  
δενδρέων ἐν πετάλοισι καθεζομένη πυκνιοῖσιν,  
ἢ τε θαμὰ τρωπῶσα χεεὶ πολυδευκέα φωνήν,  
παῖδ' ὀλοφυρομένη Ἴτυλον φίλον, ὃν ποτε χαλκῶ  
κτεῖνε δι' ἀφραδίας, κοῦρον Ζήθιοιο ἄνακτος·  
ὡς καὶ ἐμοὶ δίχα θυμὸς ὀρώρεται ἔνθα καὶ ἔνθα.

And as when the daughter of Pandareus, the pale-green nightingale, sings a lovely song of the beginning spring, sitting in the dense leaves of the trees, and she pours out an often-varying, much tearful voice, weeping over her dear son Itylus, son of her lord Zethos, whom she once killed with a bronze sword because of madness: thus also my heart, divided in two, leaps here and there.

<sup>1</sup> All translations are my own, except where otherwise noted.

4. Aristophanes, *Birds* 667-674: Peisetairos and Euelpides fantasize about Procne

ΠΕ. ὦ Ζεῦ πολυτίμηθ' ὡς καλὸν τούρνιθιον,  
ὡς δ' ἀπαλόν, ὡς δὲ λευκόν.

ΕΥ. ἀρά γ' οἶσθ' ὅτι  
ἐγὼ διαμηρίζοιμ' ἂν αὐτὴν ἠδέως;  
ΠΕ. ὅσον δ' ἔχει τὸν χρυσόν, ὡσπερ παρθένος.  
ΕΥ. ἐγὼ μὲν αὐτὴν κἂν φιλήσαί μοι δοκῶ.  
ΠΕ. ἀλλ' ὦ κακόδαιμον ῥύγχος ὀβελίσκοιν ἔχει.  
ΕΥ. ἀλλ' ὡσπερ ὦν νῆ Δί' ἀπολέψαντα χρῆ  
ἀπὸ τῆς κεφαλῆς τὸ λέμμα κᾶθ' οὔτω φιλεῖν.

PEISETAIROS: Oh great holy Zeus, how beautiful  
this little bird is, and how soft, and how white.

EUELPIDES: Do you know how sweet it would be  
for me to spread her legs?

PEISETAIROS: And so much gold she has, just like a  
maiden.

EUELPIDES: It seems to me that I should kiss her.

PEISETAIROS: Stupid, she has a beak of skewers!

EUELPIDES: But it is like an egg, by Zeus, and it is  
necessary to lift the shell up from her head and  
kiss her that way!

5. Sophocles, *Tereus* fragment 583: Probably spoken by Procne

νῦν δ' οὐδέν εἰμι χωρίς, ἀλλὰ πολλάκις  
ἔβλεψα ταύτη τὴν γυναικίαν φύσιν,  
ὡς οὐδέν ἐσμεν. αἱ νέαι μὲν ἐν πατρὸς  
ἠδιστον, οἴμαι, ζῶμεν ἀνθρώπων βίον·  
τερπνῶς γὰρ αἰεὶ παῖδας ἀνοία τρέφει.  
ὅταν δ' ἐς ἡβὴν ἐξικώμεθ' ἔμφορες,  
ὠθούμεθ' ἔξω καὶ διεμπολώμεθα  
θεῶν πατρῶων τῶν τε φυσάντων ἄπο,  
αἱ μὲν ξένους πρὸς ἄνδρας, αἱ δὲ βαρβάρους,  
αἱ δ' εἰς ἀγηθῆ δῶμαθ', αἱ δ' ἐπίρροθα.  
καὶ ταῦτ', ἐπειδὴν εὐφρόνη ζεύξη μία,  
χρεῶν ἐπαινεῖν καὶ δοκεῖν καλῶς ἔχειν

But now, away from home, I am nothing. And I  
have often observed that feminine nature is like  
this, that we are nothing. On the one hand, young  
women live the sweetest life among humans in our  
fathers' houses, I think. For ignorance nourishes  
children in constant delight. But when we have  
come into adolescence and are more sensible, we  
are pushed away and we are sold, away from our  
fathers' gods and those who bore us, some of us to  
men in other Greek cities, others to barbarians;  
some to good homes, others to abusive ones. And  
when one night has yoked us, we must be able to  
praise our circumstances, and to think them well.

6. Aristophanes, *Birds* 709-714: The bird chorus explains the seasons

πρῶτα μὲν ὥρας φαίνομεν ἡμεῖς ἦρος, χειμῶνος,  
ὀπώρας·  
σπεῖρειν μὲν, ὅταν γέρανος κρώζοσ' εἰς τὴν Λιβύην  
μεταχωρή·  
καὶ πηδάλιον τότε ναυκλήρω φράζει κρεμάσαντι  
καθεύδειν,  
εἶτα δ' Ὀρέστη χλαῖναν ὑφαίνειν, ἵνα μὴ ῥίγῶν  
ἀποδύη·  
ἰκτίνος δ' αὖ μετὰ ταῦτα φανείς ἐτέραν ὥραν  
ἀποφαίνει,  
ἠνίκα πεκτεῖν ὥρα προβάτων πότον ἠρινόν· εἶτα  
χελιδών,  
ὅτε χρῆ χλαῖναν πωλεῖν ἤδη καὶ ληδάριόν τι  
πρίασθαι.

First of all, we reveal the seasons of spring, winter,  
and summer: it is time to plant when the  
whooping crane migrates to Libya, and tells the  
ship-owner then to hang up his oar and sleep, and  
also tells Orestes to weave his cloak, so that he will  
not be cold as he robs people. And then after this  
the kite's appearance indicates the next season,  
when it is time to shear the flocks' spring wool.  
And then the swallow comes, when it is time to  
sell your cloak and buy some lighter garment.

7. Aristophanes, *Birds* 826-835: a discussion of who will weave Athena's *peplos* in the new city

ΧΟΡΥΦΑΙΟΣ. λιπαρὸν τὸ χρῆμα τῆς πόλεως. τίς δαὶ  
θεὸς  
πολιοῦχος ἔσται; τῷ ξανοῦμεν τὸν πέπλον;  
ΠΕΙΣΕΤΑΙΡΟΣ. τί δ' οὐκ Ἀθηναίαν ἐῶμεν Πολιάδα;  
ΕΥΕΛΠΙΔΕΣ. καὶ πῶς ἂν ἔτι γένοιτ' ἂν εὐτακτος  
πόλις,  
ὅπου θεὸς γυνὴ γεγονυῖα πανοπλίαν  
ἔστηκ' ἔχουσα, Κλεισθένης δὲ κερκίδα;  
ΧΟ. τίς δαὶ καθέξει τῆς πόλεως τὸ Πελαργικόν;  
ΠΕ. ὄρνις ἀφ' ὑμῶν, τοῦ γένους τοῦ Περσικοῦ,  
ὅσπερ λέγεται δεινότατος εἶναι πανταχοῦ  
Ἄρεως νεοττός.

CHORUS LEADER: A shining good thing for a city!  
But what god will be our city-protector? For whom  
shall we toil, carding wool for the *peplos*?  
PEISETAIROS: Why not let Athena Polias do it?  
EUELPIDES: And how would this ever be a well-  
ordered city, where a goddess, born female, stands  
up there holding the panoply, and Cleisthenes  
works the loom?  
CHORUS LEADER: Well then, who will keep watch  
over the Citadel of the city?  
PEISETAIROS: A bird from your land, of the Persian  
race, who is said everywhere to be the most  
fearsome bird, the Chick of Ares.

8. Aristotle, *Poetics* 1454b35 = Sophocles, *Tereus* fragment 596

καὶ ἐν τῷ Σοφοκλέους Τηρεῖ ἡ τῆς κερκίδος φωνή. And there is also “the voice of the shuttle” in  
Sophocles' *Tereus*.

9. Aristophanes, *Birds* 659-667: The birds ask to be allowed to play with Procne

ΚΟΡΥΦΑΙΟΣ. ... τὴν δ' ἠδυμελῆ ξύμφωνον ἀηδόνα  
Μούσαις  
κατάλειψ' ἡμῖν δεῦρ' ἐκβίβασας, ἵνα παίσωμεν μετ'  
ἐκείνης.  
ΠΕΙΣΕΤΑΙΡΟΣ. ὦ τοῦτο μέντοι νῆ Δί' αὐτοῖσιν πιθοῦ.  
ἐκβίβασον ἐκ τοῦ βουτόμου τούρνιθον·  
ΕΥΕΛΠΙΔΗΣ. ἐκβίβασον αὐτοῦ, πρὸς θεῶν, αὐτήν, ἵνα  
καὶ νῶ θεασώμεθα τὴν ἀηδόνα.  
ΤΗΡΕΥΣ. ἀλλ' εἰ δοκεῖ σφῶν, ταῦτα χρὴ δρᾶν. ἢ  
Πρόκνη,  
ἔκβαινε καὶ σαυτὴν ἐπιδείκνυ τοῖς ξένοις.

CHORUS LEADER: ... but the sweet singing  
nightingale who sings with the Muses,  
bring her out here to us and leave her here,  
so that we can play with her.  
PEISETAIROS: Oh yes, by Zeus, definitely  
listen to them. Bring out the bird from the  
bushes.  
EUELPIDES: Bring her out here, by the gods,  
so that we too can look at the nightingale.  
TEREUS: If that seems right to you, then I  
must do this. Procne, come out here and  
show yourself to the guests!

10. Aristophanes, *Birds* 137-142: Euelpides describes his ideal *polis*

ὅπου ξυναντῶν μοι ταδί τις μέμψεται  
ὥσπερ ἀδικηθεὶς παιδὸς ὠραίου πατήρ·  
“καλῶς γέ μου τὸν υἱόν, ὦ Στιλβωνίδη,  
εὐρῶν ἀπιόντ' ἀπὸ γυμνασίου λελουμένον  
οὐκ ἔκυσας, οὐ προσεῖπας, οὐ προσηγάγου,  
οὐκ ὠρχιπέδισας, ὧν ἐμοὶ πατρικὸς φίλος.”

A place where a man who is father to a boy at the prime  
of his youth, when he runs into me on the street, will  
blame me for the following reasons, as though I had  
done him a grave insult: “A fine thing you do to my son,  
my smooth man, that when you found him going out of  
the gymnasium, freshly bathed, you didn't kiss him, you  
didn't speak to him, you didn't hug him, you didn't play  
with his balls, and you such a good friend of my  
father's!”

11. Aristophanes, *Birds* 793-796: The chorus describes the advantages of being a bird

εἴ τε μοιχεύων τις ὑμῶν ἐστὶν ὅστις τυγχάνει,  
καθ' ὄρα τὸν ἄνδρα τῆς γυναικὸς ἐν βουλευτικῶ,  
οὗτος ἂν πάλιν παρ' ὑμῶν πτερυγίσας ἀνέπτατο,  
εἶτα βινήσας ἐκεῖθεν αὐθις αὐτὸ κατέπτατο.

And if there is anyone among you who happens to be an adulterer, who sees the husband of his mistress in the council's seats, this man could flap his wings and fly up, and then fuck her, and then fly right back here among all of you.

12. Aristophanes, *Birds* 755-756: The chorus describes the utopian nature of their society

ὅσα γὰρ ἐνθάδ' ἐστὶν αἰσχρὰ καὶ νόμῳ κρατούμενα  
ταῦτα πάντ' ἐστὶν παρ' ἡμῖν τοῖσιν ὄρνισιν καλὰ

For all things that are shameful here in Athens and controlled by the law, all of these things are considered splendid by us birds.

13. Aristophanes, *Birds* 1088-1092: The chorus explains that birds don't need clothing

εὐδαιμον φῦλον πτηνῶν  
οἰωνῶν, οἳ χειμῶνος μὲν  
χλαίνας οὐκ ἀμπισχνούνται·  
οὐδ' αὐτὸ θερμὴ πνίγους ἡμᾶς  
ἀκτὶς τηλαυγῆς θάλπει·

Blessed is the race of feathered birds, who in winter do not wrap themselves in woolen cloaks, and whom the warm shining rays of the sun do not burn.

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