

Winged Words and Wingless Birds: Metamorphosis and Agency in Choral Odes

West notes the gods' ability to transform themselves into birds (2007:152-3), but is there some link between this and the very typical choral ode motif wherein the women want to change into birds and fly away? Is there a common vocabulary between epic sources of gods changing into birds and women wanting to change into birds in tragedy? Clearly I am not the only person to ever have an avian interest in Greek tragedy. Many scholars have discussed the dove (Zanker 2009), the sparrow (Heath 1999a), cranes (Steiner 2011: 312f), and especially the nightingale (Chandler 1934, Suksi 2001, Zanker 2009) in tragedy (and beyond), and this work is so well done, I shall not specifically address those bird species here in this paper. Ruth Padel in 1974 suggested that the bird motif in Greek tragedy is singularly linked to the idea of escape. While this must be true to some extent, I intend to suggest something further, namely that chorus members, despite their gender, desire to be changed into birds and to therefore give up at least their human voices, albeit for birdsong. My paper proposes to analyze several key instances of the agency of the voice in Greek tragic lyric and lament. After all, there is nothing quite so pitiful as Io scratching her name in the sand with her hoof (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.642-667), so why would someone volunteer to become less than human and to lose the ability to use human speech? Is the dichotomy not so much between human and animal (as Heath suggests) as between *being treated* as human or animal? In this case, most of those making comparisons to birds or wishing to become birds have little or no agency left anyway. They may as well fly away as they propose to do.

An example of a woman who has “flown the coop” is Phaedra. She fears that she will become a victim of other people's words, and the prevalence of rumor yields a lack of agency for her, since she appears to have lost her own voice in death...though not without a last word or

two, a parting shot in the form of a posthumous letter to her husband. Though she herself is like a bird that has flown away from Theseus, her words stay behind and advocate falsely for her: ὄρνις γὰρ ὡς τις ἐκ χειρῶν ἄφαντος εἶ, / πῆδημ' ἐς Ἄιδου κραιπνὸν ὀρμήσασά μοι. *Like some bird out of my hand you are now invisible, / having leaped from me rushing into the houses of Hades*, 828-9). Shortly after this, Theseus discovers Phaedra's final words on a δέλτος, wrapped in her dead fingers. It is these words – rumors all – that will ultimately kill Theseus' son, Hippolytus; Phaedra may have flown away, but her words are steadfast and act as the dead woman's agent.

Words can be agents, but without a voice, one cannot act or encourage others to do so...unless through the power of dreams an image appears and acts as an agent. Whether through winged phantoms or words, Phaedra has “flown the coop,” so to speak, and left behind only flitting, shimmering pale shadows of her former self. Her voice is her power, even in her physical absence.

Works Cited

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