

Violence or Poetry:
Philomela's Weaving in Ovid and Chaucer

Extensive scholarship has examined Chaucer's reception of classical material, especially of Ovid (Shannon 1929, Fyler 1979, Reid 2014, Gillespie 2019). While Chaucer's classical reception is often influenced by Italian and French intermediary sources such as Chrétien de Troyes's *Ovide Moralisé*, he also had access to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in Latin (Gillespie 2019).

Classical reception studies, in the process of interpreting later works, also illuminate classical texts themselves (Hardwick 2003). This article offers related readings of Ovid's account of the myth of Philomela in the *Metamorphoses* and Chaucer's account of the same myth in *The Legend of Good Women*. Comparison reveals two distinct depictions of how Philomela, as a victim, reasserts agency. Where Ovid presents violent physical retaliation as the antidote to victimhood, Chaucer insinuates literary composition as the means to reclaiming agency. Each of these emphases reveals the respective author's central concerns in his rendition of the myth; Ovid represents the power of violence to silence and surpass words, while Chaucer is concerned with the power of writing to influence reputation, especially that of women.

The paper's first section begins with the Ovid's lines in which Philomela creates the tapestry to send to her sister (*Met.* 6..576-8). I argue that her weaving reflects her situation; her interwoven purple and white threads communicate Philomela's plight to her sister in the simplest symbolic terms. The adjective *barbarica* ascribed to her *tela* connects her act of weaving to Tereus, who is described as *barbarus* (*Met.* 6.515, 533). On a linguistic level, it connotes the absence of (at least Roman) literary language. Ovid suggests that Philomela's reaction of weaving symbolically mirrors Tereus's violence against her. Rather than an act of literary composition, the tapestry works precisely as a means to overcome the loss of language. Besides

the literal sense in which Philomela has lost language, Ovid suggests later through Procne that the horror of Tereus's crime exceeds the capacity of language (*Met.* 6..584-5). The unliterary nature, therefore, of the image on the tapestry both reacts to the extreme barbarity of Tereus's treatment of Philomela and foreshadows the same quality in the slaughter of Itys. Philomela's tapestry immediately stimulates Procne to madness and culminates in Tereus's Thyestean feast; all three are turned to birds whose plumage, like the tapestry, bears red as a symbol of the crime (*Met.* VI.669-70). Philomela's tapestry represents the unspeakable crime of her rape; at the same time, it represents the unspeakable crime she and her sister commit in retaliation. As a result, all three end without language.

In the second section, I start with the crucial lines in Chaucer's *Legend* in which the narrator belabors Philomela's literacy. He specifies that she can read and compose, and "letters can she weve to and fro" (*Leg.* 2356-8). After detailing the elements of her narrative, he concludes, "She waf it well, and wrot the storye above" (*Leg.* 2364). In contrast to Ovid, Chaucer depicts Philomela's act of weaving as a distinctly literary act. Nor does he take these details from *Ovide Moralisé*—Chrétien de Troyes describes each scene of her narrative as "portreite," in the tapestry, and leaves it at that (*OM.* 6.1122). To understand why Chaucer introduces this emphatically verbal aspect to Philomela's weaving, I will address the context of the rest of the poem. The narrator presents *The Legend of Good Women* as a whole as a work aimed at redeeming the reputation of women. Within the story of Philomela specifically, the narrator complains that Tereus's name harms male reputation (*Leg.* 2231, 2235-7). Thus, the text manifests Chaucer's interest in the influence of poetry on reputation. He represents Philomela's act as literary to demonstrate that she reclaims agency by regaining power over her reputation through writing. The narrator ends the account of Philomela without mentioning the revenge.

This ironically jarring omission underscores the same theme: the narrator can simply elide Itys's murder to serve his project of improving the female reputation.

In conclusion, this article compares Ovid and Chaucer's accounts of the myth of Philomela. I outline the implications for each text of the literary or non-literary nature of her tapestry.

Bibliography

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