

Death by Whirlwind: Ovid's Niobe and the Iliadic Helen

Describing Niobe's petrification in the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid violates the mythological tradition by having Niobe return to her native Phrygia through the intervention of a "whirling wind" (Ov. *Met.* 6.130: *turbine venti*). In all extant earlier versions of the myth, Niobe returns to Phrygia simply by traveling there under her own power before her death (Gantz 1993: 537-9). Previous commentators have failed to explain the whirlwind adequately, merely noting that it is unexpected and serves the dramatic purpose of returning Niobe to Phrygia (Anderson 1972, Bömer 1976, Hill 1992, Rosati 2009).

The whirlwind, however, is an untraditional, marked choice, and it is richer than previously acknowledged. I contend that the key to this storm is a previously unnoticed intertext; namely Ovid's *turbine venti* points to the archaic Greek hexametric formula ἀνέμοιο θύελλα, as mediated through Homeric scholarship. I argue in four steps that this *turbine venti* is in fact an important echo of the Iliadic Helen's counterfactual wish for her own death (*Il.* 6.345-8). First, I make the case for a pointed allusion by showing that the Latin phrase accurately represents the Greek phrase. Second, I argue that Niobe's seizure most closely matches Helen's wish in situation. Third, I suggest that we should read Niobe's end through the intertext as divine punishment. As a conclusion, I connect the Ovidian moment to Niobe's Augustan reception as a locus for dialogues on divine cruelty.

To begin with, I argue that *turbine venti* is a good Latin representation of ἀνέμοιο θύελλα: both phrases, occurring only in line-end position, have a word meaning 'wind' in the genitive dependent on a word meaning 'whirlwind.' Furthermore, *turbo* is a particularly good representation of θύελλα if understood to mean συστροφή, as it is regularly glossed in the

Homeric scholia (e.g. Σ *Il.* 6.346 Z^s: ἡ μετὰ βίας τῶν ἀνέμων συστροφή, ὁ βίαιος ἄνεμος): *turbo* captures συστροφή's primary connotation of turning and its specialized sense of 'whirlwind.'

Next, I show that Ovid's *turbine venti* refers in particular to Helen's curse on herself. Of this phrase's six occurrences in archaic Greek poetry, all but one refers to a storm at sea. That exception -- Helen's wish -- has close parallels to Niobe's situation. In both Homer and Ovid the whirlwind is imagined to a) occur on land, b) carry a person to a mountain, and c) cause that person's demise.

Then, I prove that the intertext strengthens but also resolves the ambiguity of Niobe's petrification as simultaneously a release from grief and divine punishment (Feldherr 2010: 306-7). Like Helen, Niobe desires release from an "emotionally unbearable [situation]" (Boedeker 1979: 51) or at least escape from criticism (Blondell 2010: 8-19). Like Ovid's Hecuba (*Met.* 13.538-541), however, Niobe's petrification only grants her never-ending grief, as "even now the marble weeps tears" (6.312). The whirlwind provides no release for Niobe just as it did not for Helen, who endured the deaths of her brothers (*Il.* 3.343-4) and a city where "all shudder at me" (*Il.* 24.775).

In conclusion, I suggest that this Niobe is a victim of cruelty by gods like the Apollo of Prop. 2.31.5-6. In that passage, an intertext with the Niobe of Call. *Hymn* 2.24 (Heyworth 1994: 56-9) teaches us "how to read Apollo the killer in Apollo the musician, how to listen to imaginary music but also to echoes of suffering and repression" (Barchiesi 2005: 285). The intertextuality in both Propertius and Ovid serves to present Niobe's petrification as an Augustan space for discussions of never-ending grief and divine cruelty.

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