Philomela's Ungentlemanly Caller

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* has long been lauded for the "ingenious counterpoint and cross-harmony" (Otis 1970, 311) by which Ovid creates a unified tapestry from hundreds of independent tales. And there are a good number of seemingly unconnected passages in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that upon closer inspection prove to be poetic riffs in the same thematic key, exemplifying what Stephen Wheeler has dubbed the poem's "intertextual strategy" (1999, 104). Two scenes which are surprisingly evocative of one another are Mercury's (gentlemanly but thwarted) elegiac pursuit of Herse (*Met.* 2) and Tereus' (despicable and successful) "seduction" of Philomela (*Met.* 6). (For discussion of Mercury in the guise of an elegiac lover in this scene see Galinsky 1975, 167; Griffin 1977, 62; Knox 1986, 28; Solodow 1988, 93; Wheeler 1999, 238 n.17; and Fantham 2004, 123).

Contrast and inverted allusion are the keys to understanding the connections between the two episodes. All of the characters have their respective analogues: Mercury = Tereus as "lover," Herse = Philomela as "love object," Aglauros = Procne as "involved sister." Mercury and Tereus occupy different points on Ovid's sliding "seducer to rapist" scale: they are consequential males of disparate character who share a similar goal (to get the girl) but whose actions differ in tone, tactics, and intention. Clear evocations of elegy in the *Procne* serve only to stoke the horror by subtly contrasting Tereus' predatory actions (already cloaked to avoid exposure of his violent intentions) with those of a genuine lover such as the one limned by Mercury.

But there is more: of the many episodes in the *Metamorphoses* that can be characterized as some form of "tale of seduction" and that share similar poetic features, these two episodes contain more similar poetic elements than most – and a full range of epic similes – in remarkably parallel presentations: the suitor's arrival in Athens from far away (2.709-10 = 6.444-46); the

lover's initial response to the sight of the virginal, Athenian princess (2.711-36 = 6.447-66); the lover described in simile as a bird-of-prey targeting its victim (2.714-21 = 6.516-18); the beauty of each love object described in a simile comparing her to mythological beings (2.722-25 ≈ 6.451-54); a burning simile describing the lust of the lover (2.726-29 = 6.455-60: the connection is strengthened by the fact that the phrase *non secus exarsit* occurs only twice in the entire *Metamorphoses*, only in these two passages); the specific techniques of persuasion/manipulation used by each suitor, to varying effect (2.730-36 = 6.461-85); how each suitor is compelled to negotiate through a familial intermediary (2.737-51 = 6.467-85); and a final, brilliant simile that uses fire imagery to illustrate the effects of a destructive passion (Aglauros' Envy, Tereus' lust) that nourishes itself but consumes its victims (2.779-94 = 6.478-93: these similes share identical vocabulary and architecture).

As Alison Keith has famously noted, "Almost every episode in the *Metamorphoses* repays analysis in elegiac terms" (Keith 2002, 252) and the *Procne* is no exception. This particular comparison also allows us to see that the many supernatural elements so crucial to the Mercury scene in Met. 2 are missing from Tereus' seduction of Philomela. This underscores the *human* nature of the base motivations, ingenuous choices, abused loyalties, and tragic repercussions perpetrated and suffered by the characters from start to finish in Ovid's *Procne.*

Bibliography

Fantham, E. 2004. *Ovid's Metamorphoses*. Oxford.

Galinsky, K. 1975. *Ovid's Metamorphoses*. Berkeley.

Griffin, A. H. F. 1977. Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. *G&R* 24.1:57-70 or 29.1?.

Keith, A. 2002. "Sources and Genres in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 1-5" in *Brill's Companion to Ovid*, B. W. Boyd, ed., Leiden, 235-70.

Knox, P. E. 1986. *Ovid's <u>Metamorphoses</u> and the Tradition of Augustan Poetry*. Cambridge.

Otis, B. 1970. *Ovid as an Epic Poet*, 2nd ed. Cambridge.

Solodow, J. 1988. *The World of Ovid's <u>Metamorphoses</u>*. Chapel Hill.

Wheeler, S. 1999. *A Discourse of Wonders*. Philadelphia.