

Scelus est pietas: The Oresteia in Ovid's Metamorphoses

Ovid's story of the raped Philomela and the gruesome revenge of her sister Procne in *Metamorphoses* 6 has long been recognized as bearing a resemblance to the story of Atreus, who fed his brother Thyestes his own children as revenge for the rape of Atreus' wife Aerope, as presented by Aeschylus in his *Agamemnon*. David Larmour has noted that the sequence of events surrounding Tereus' mutilation of Philomela closely follows the pattern surrounding the death of Iphigeneia in the *Agamemnon* (Larmour 1990). Similarly, Akiko Kiso has commented on the parallels between Clytaemnestra, in the same play, and Ovid's Procne (Kiso 1984). Yet the debt Ovid owes to Aeschylus as a source in general, and to the *Oresteia* in particular, has gone largely overlooked, confined to discussions of *Heroides* 14, the letter of Hypermestra to Lynceus (see for instance, Jäkel 1973). In this paper, I will demonstrate that these are not the only intertextual references Ovid has woven into Procne's story and that here in the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid has woven into his text many references to the saga of the House of Atreus.

I aim to show that Ovid has also created concordances between Procne and Orestes, whose act of *pietas* toward his father in the *Choephoroi* requires the commission of a *scelus* against his mother, just as Procne's act of *pietas* toward her sister (and her father's bloodline) requires the commission of a *scelus* against her son. For Procne, who hesitates over murdering her child at the sight of him (*mota quidem est genetrix infractaque constitit ira / invitique oculi lacrimis maduere coactis*, 6.627-28), honoring her father's bloodline and avenging her sister takes priority over her connection to Itys. Ultimately, her *pietas* to her ancestors takes precedence and she resolves on murder. Her final line sums up her dilemma (*degeneras: scelus est pietas in coniuge Tereo*, 6.635). Orestes too falters when his moment comes. Determined for over half of the *Choephoroi* on his mother's murder, he hesitates when he sees her (Πυλάδη, τί

δράσω; μητέρ' αἰδεσθῶ κτανεῖν; 899) before settling on carrying out the matricide in order to honor his father (πατρὸς γὰρ αἴσα τόνδε σοῦρίζει μόρον, 927).

Philomela and Cassandra, the murdered priestess of the *Agamemnon*, also share characteristics, namely a speech pattern that is at times both lyrical and inarticulate. Cassandra, silent for over 1000 lines in the *Agamemnon*, breaks her silence not with ordinary speech, but with song. Similarly, when Philomela finally speaks (100 lines into Ovid's account) she breaks into a lament over her situation (6.533-48) that is more rhetorically skilled than any other figure in the tale. Cassandra's final words cry out for vengeance and prophesy the return of her avenger, Orestes (ἦξει γὰρ ἡμῶν ἄλλος αὖ τιμάορος, 1280) much as Philomela's final words prophesy her own future vengeance upon Tereus (*quandocumque mihi poenas dabis*, 6.544).

Ovid has placed the sisters in a framework of reception in which Procne reflects the role of avenger played out over three generations in Aeschylus (Atreus, Clytaemnestra and Orestes), while Philomela reflects the role of the Aeschylean maiden, whose victimization creates the need for vengeance (Aerope, Iphigeneia and Cassandra). Through this framework, Ovid recreates Aeschylus' account of multi-generational violence in one bloody encounter in Thrace.

Bibliography

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