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Shakespeare and Ovid
PAUL FILIPPELLI

Shakespeare's play *Titus Andronicus* is based largely upon the story of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In Ovid's story the antagonist Tereus is persuaded by his spouse Procne to take a trip to Athens to pick up Philomela, Procne's sibling, to visit their home in Thrace. When Tereus sees Philomela, he immediately feels a deep and passionate lust for her. After he waves goodbye to his parents-in-law and assures them of their child's safety, he rapes her and cuts out her tongue. When he arrives in Thrace, he imprisons Philomela in a cabin in the woods and has a female servant visit the cabin periodically to take care of her. Philomela sews a tapestry with a secret message to Procne and uses sign language to tell her caretaker to take the tapestry back to Procne. When Procne gets the message, she goes to the cabin to rescue Philomela and then returns home; while she is at home she decides to kill her child Itys and feed him to Tereus in order to get revenge. In *Titus Andronicus*, Lavinia Andronica is given the same role as Ovid's Philomela, being raped and having her tongue cut out; Lavinia additionally has her hands cut off by Demetrius and Chiron so that she cannot mimic Philomela's use of knitting to free herself. Despite the similarities between Ovid's story and *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare replaces the impious female Procne with the virtuous male Titus and turns the character of Tereus into three characters – Tamora, Demetrius, and Chiron. Also, the role of the gods in *Metamorphoses* as the agents of the bad events is filled by the Moor Aaron. These notable changes which Shakespeare makes to the story raise questions about gender roles and contradict Ovid's bleak views about the nature of evil.

Shakespeare uses Titus to play the role of Ovid's Procne, turning a strong and cold female character into a male character with similar strength and coldness. Procne displays her strength and bravery once she finds out about the imprisonment of Philomela. She concocts a clever

plan to travel masked through the woods during the festival of Bacchus, when an all-female crowd of revelers is wildly worshipping the god of wine in the woods. She then sneaks Philomela to her house to await the arrival of Tereus. Titus Andronicus shows a more masculine strength of character when he unflinchingly has Aaron cut off his hand to save two of his children: "With all my heart, I'll send the emperor / My hand: Good Aaron, wilt thou help to chop it off?" (III.I.161-162). Shakespeare's decision to show this more masculine form of bravery gives Titus a more heroic role than Procne, who is considered by the gods to be just as guilty as Tereus.

The gender difference also contributes to a difference between their levels of coldness. Titus demonstrates a noble militaristic nature when he never hesitates at all before killing his Gothic enemies. When ordering the execution of Alarbus, Titus ignores the pleas of Tamora and declares that Alarbus must die "To appease their groaning shadows that are gone" (I.I.121-126). He later shows a complete lack of a second thought when he plots the deaths of Demetrius and Chiron:

Hark, villains! I will grind your bones to dust
And with your blood and it I'll make a paste,
And of the paste a coffin I will rear
And make two pasties of your shameful heads,
And bid that strumpet, your unhallow'd dam,
Like to the earth swallow her own increase. (V.II.183-192)

Procne, on the other hand, rejects her prescribed gender roles. Supposed to have a nurturing, motherly nature, Procne looks into the face of her own child and sees only his resemblance to the wicked Tereus:

Peragit dum talia Procne,
ad matrem veniebat Itys. Quid possit, ab illo
admonita est: oculisque tuens inmitibus "a quam
es similis patri" dixit. Nec plura locuta

triste parat facinus tacitaque exaestuat ira. (*Metamorphoses*
VI.619-623)

While Procne was doing such things, Itys was coming to his mother. She was warned by him what she would be able to do: And while she was looking with her pitiless eyes, she said, "Oh, you are so like your father." And saying no more, she prepares the sad deed and burns up with silent anger.

This rejection of the feminine gender role gives the reader a sense that Procne has a more vicious persona than her male counterpart Titus. However, this perception is not necessarily objectively true. The reader is wont to forget her temporary desire for mercy because she is supposed to have a maternal affection which Titus is never expected to possess; despite the horror of killing her own child, Procne is much more reluctant than Titus to commit murder:

Ut tamen accessit natus matrique salutem
attulit et parvis adduxit colla lacertis
mixtaque blanditiis puerilibus oscula iunxit,
mota quidem est genetrix infractaque constitit ira
invitique oculi lacrimis maduere coactis:
sed simul ex nimia mentem pietate labare
sensit, ab hoc iterum est ad vultus versa sororis
inque vicem spectans ambos... (*Metamorphoses* VI.624-631)

However, as the child came and greeted his mother and reached out to her neck with his little arms and gave her kisses mixed with childish charms, the mother was indeed moved and stopped her unbroken anger, and her eyes unwillingly became wet with forced tears: But at the same time she sensed that her mind was failing from excessive piety, and she again turned her head away from him and to the face of her sister, looking at both of them in turn.

Shakespeare's changing of Procne's role to a male part raises questions about the expectations which society places upon people based upon gender. Even though Titus is more unflinchingly blood-thirsty than Procne, the former is clearly intended to be considered more heroic than the latter solely because killing is considered to be an acceptable masculine act in circumstances of war. This major difference in the perception of the two characters exists largely because Titus's family is wronged by outsiders, as opposed to Procne's intra-family conflict. Titus's Lavinia is raped by external enemies, meaning that his prescribed gender role is to use martial force against the Gothic rapists. Procne, however, has a socially tougher choice to make: choosing to side with her spouse Tereus or her sibling Philomela. In choosing Philomela, she violates the marital expectation to be loyal to Tereus; furthermore, her form of revenge involves one of the most serious violations of maternal expectations: killing her own child. Even though Procne is notably less blood-thirsty than Titus, her actions are considered much worse because they are directed against her own family.

Shakespeare eliminates the character of Tereus and fills his role with the three characters of Demetrius, Chiron, and Tamora. This change makes Titus even more heroic of a protagonist since he is fighting against all of these enemies simultaneously. Procne and Philomela in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are able to gang up against their lone antagonist Tereus:

Circumspicit ille
atque ubi sit quaerit. Quaerenti iterumque vocanti,
sicut erat sparsis furiali caede capillis,
prosiluit Ityosque caput Philomela cruentum
misit in ora patris. (*Metamorphoses* VI.655-659)

[Tereus] looks around and asks where [Itys] is. While he was seeking him and calling again, Philomela jumped out with her hair disheveled from the vicious murder and threw the bloody head of Itys into the father's face.

This two-on-one plot seems unfair when compared to Titus's brave and heroic single-handed killing of Demetrius and Chiron in order to feed them to Tamora in front of the emperor and a train of Senators and others. The use of two characters in the rape of Lavinia also makes it viler than the rape of Philomela since the former is even more helpless as she is assaulted by two villains at once. All of this makes Titus's acts heroic even though Procne is considered just as guilty as Tereus in the Ovidian story.

Shakespeare makes changes which alter the reader's evaluation of the nature of the evil described in the story. Ovid clearly states in *Metamorphoses* that the terrible actions by Tereus and Procne are caused by the gods and fate:

Quem sibi Pandion opibusque virisque potentem
et genus a magno ducentem forte Gradivo
conubio Procnes iunxit. Non pronuba luno,
non Hymenaeus adest, non illi Gratia lecto.
Eumenides tenuere faces de funere raptas,
Eumenides stravere torum, tectoque profanus
incubuit bubo thalamique in culmine sedit.
Hac ave coniuncti Procne Tereusque, parentes
hac ave sunt facti. (426-434)

Pandion joined the powerful [Tereus] and his people to himself, to his wealth, and to his men by a great martial wedding between the leader and Procne. Juno was not present as the bridesmaid, Hymen was not present, and Grace was not at their bed. The Furies held torches stolen from a funeral, The Furies laid the wedding mattress, and a profane owl loomed over their bed and sat on the roof of their bedroom. Procne and Tereus were joined beneath this bird, and they became parents beneath this bird.

Tereus and Procne are doomed to have a tumultuous marriage, and Itys

is destined to die a horrible death because the gods are offended that their wedding was not conducted with the proper rituals.

Shakespeare, on the other hand, utilizes Aaron as the agent of evil. During the time of Shakespeare there was a great disdain for Moors in England; in fact, Queen Elizabeth thrice ordered the deportation of all of them. The 1601 order to remove them said that they “are fostered and powered here, to the great annoyance of her own liege people that which co[vet?] the relief which these people consume, as also for that the most of them are infidels having no understanding of Christ or his Gospel” (*Tudor Royal Proclamations*). Aaron serves as the source of evil in *Titus Andronicus* as an embodiment of everything bad which the English people believed about the Moor race and has an insatiable lust for blood, plotting the death of Bassianus and the rape of Lavinia for his own enjoyment. Aaron persuades Demetrius and Chiron to rape Lavinia and to kill Bassianus; he tricks Titus to cut off his hand, and he boasts to Lucius Andronicus about being the cause of all of these evil deeds:

And what not done, that thou hast cause to rue,
Wherein I had no stroke of mischief in it?
I play'd the cheater for thy father's hand,
And, when I had it, drew myself apart
And almost broke my heart with extreme laughter. (V.I.111-115)

Ovid believed that individuals are the playthings of the gods and that their actions can all be attributed to fate and to the will of the gods. Shakespeare, by removing the gods from the story and replacing them with Aaron the Moor, penned a story of free will and human agency of evil.

Shakespeare's alterations to the characters in Ovid's story of Procne, Philomela, and Tereus raise questions about gender roles and the nature of good versus evil. Ovid's story paints a view of the world in which humans are playthings of the gods. Procne and Tereus are doomed by the gods to be wicked and are equally guilty of the tragic events which occur; both are punished in the end by being metamorphosed into birds,

and Philomela gets the same punishment solely for being unlucky enough to get caught up in the wickedness of her relatives. Shakespeare, however, turns Procne into the protagonist Titus, whose deeds are considered acceptable because they fit with the personality which is valued in male warriors. Titus is brave enough to stand up to the powerful forces which stand against him and dies a noble death avenging Lavinia and purging injustice from the state. Shakespeare's alterations turn the bleak story of hopelessness from *Metamorphoses* into a humanistic tale of bravery and virtue.

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