The Myth of Io and Julie Berry's *All the Truth That's in Me*

I read Julie Berry's *All the Truth That's in Me* because I was intrigued by a synopsis of its plot: a young woman in a Puritan-reminiscent setting is abducted and kept as a captive; when she emerges from the woods after a two-year absence, her tongue has been cut out. As a Classicist who spends time with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, I immediately thought of Philomela. Could it be, I wondered, that Berry has reinterpreted this mythological figure?

The tale of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela is told in book 6 of the *Metamorphoses*. Procne and Philomela are sisters, daughters of the king of Athens. Procne marries the Thracian king Tereus and returns north with him. They have a son, Itys. Tereus returns to Athens to bring Philomela to Thrace for a visit, and he is consumed by a passion for her. Upon arriving in Thrace, Tereus takes Philomela to a dwelling in the forest, where he rapes her and cuts out her tongue. Philomela eventually conveys her plight to her sister through a weaving. After rescuing Philomela, Procne takes revenge on Tereus by tricking him into eating a stew containing the slain Itys. Angered upon realizing what he's done, Tereus pursues the sisters. All three are transformed into birds: hoopoe, nightingale, and swallow. When I teach this story in my Classical mythology course, I suggest that it shows the cruelty of which humans are capable, the extreme distress and violence they can work on one another beyond any instigation or interference of the divine. Though the myth provides an uncomfortable mirror for humans, I think it is an important one. I was intrigued at the prospect of a YA novel that resonated with the story, whether directly or indirectly.

It turns out that Philomela is not a model for Judith, the young woman protagonist of Berry's novel. But a different Ovidian figure is: Io. Ovid presents the myth of Io in book 1 of the *Metamorphoses*. Pursued by Jupiter, she is overtaken by him in a mist and raped. When Juno becomes suspicious about the mist and orders it to dissipate, Jupiter transforms Io into a cow. Juno claims Cow-Io as a gift and commands the 100-eyed Argus to stand watch. Cow-Io laments, and with cause: her own reflection frightens her; her cries emerge as moos; she cannot converse with her father, though she traces her name and story in the dirt. Jupiter sends Mercury to kill Argus, but an angry Juno has Cow-Io driven all around the world. When Cow-Io reaches the Nile, Jupiter begs Juno to let go of her fury. Io regains her form, is worshipped as a goddess, and gives birth to a child, Epaphus. Although this story does not contain the vicious cycle of human violence that we find in the tale of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela, it hardly counts as a happy one. It underscores mortal subjection to the various desires and decisions of higher powers at almost every point. Whether she is desired or despised, helped or hurt, Io is at the mercy of the gods. A reader of *All the Truth That's in Me* learns the myth of Io two-thirds through Berry's novel, when the schoolmaster Rupert Gillis tells it to Judith. As we'll see, both the audience and Judith are encouraged to re-view Judith's experience through this mythic lens.

The process of re-viewing and reconsidering events is built into the novel because Judith's story is not presented chronologically. Readers follow Judith's thoughts and actions as they move around in time in space, and we piece together her experience. When she is 14 years old, Judith is abducted by Colonel Whiting, a town hero presumed dead, and he keeps her in his hidden cabin for two years. After mutilating her tongue, he allows her to return to her home in Roswell Station, where she receives a harsh reception from most of the residents and her own mother. Two years after her return, Judith fetches Colonel Whiting when the town is under

attack and the colonel's explosives could aid their defense. While the colonel succeeds in saving the town, and sacrifices himself in the attempt, his reappearance awakens suspicion about his son Lucas and Judith herself. Lucas and Judith are literally pilloried before clearing themselves and marrying. Readers' growing understanding of Judith's biography as the novel proceeds parallels Judith's increasing sense of self and self-worth after trauma.

By the time that Judith and the audience have encountered the myth of Io, Judith has already modelled how a canonical text can be a useful means of processing experience. While practicing her reading skills on the King James Bible, Judith encounters the opening of Psalm 137:

> By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

Reading this passage builds Judith's confidence in her literacy and prompts her to connect it to elements of her own life: a favorite willow tree, songs sung during happier times, her current speechless, songless state and social exile. Returning to the passage during a late-night reading session, Judith "cr[ies] for the captives and their broken hearts" (135); the morning after, she goes to a rock in the woods where she used to sing with her father, and with her "arms open wide" she sings "a new melody" (136). Although she mourns for the psalm's sufferers, she reclaims her own voice and body. Thus the psalm both resonates and contrasts with Judith's own situation.

Something similar happens with the myth of Io. Rupert Gillis, the schoolmaster, tells Judith that it is "something you'll enjoy" (182), and after reading her an English translation of Io's story as told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Gillis remarks, "So, you and Io could understand each other, couldn't you? Yet you might say, if you could, that Io was the lucky one" (184). Judith is offended by Gillis' presumption, and his reading of the sexually charged story to Judith is analogous to other predatory advances—both physical and verbal—that he makes. While Judith repudiates Gillis, the myth of Io stays with her. She realizes that many townspeople see her as an animal (191), but she resists adopting their view of her. Instead, she renames the family cow Io. Just as she distinguishes herself from the captives of the psalm, Judith differentiates herself from Ovid's mythological figure.

Readers of Berry's novel may find further echoes between Judith's story and Io's. Judith describes herself as chewing like a cow (46) and Goody Pruett remarks on her "big cow eyes" (255). Judith is awkward at communicating through speech or writing, just as Cow-Io was. She is repeatedly watched by the townspeople in general, as well as by Goody Pruett, Rupert Gillis, and Abijah Pratt in particular—the residents of Roswell Station thereby become a kind of collective Argus. And Judith's mother serves as a stand-in for Juno: she blames Judith for her spouse's death as Juno punishes Io for Jupiter's infidelity. For a Jupiter figure we have Colonel Whiting, whose disfigurement and silencing of Judith mirrors Jupiter's transformation of Io into a cow. Judith's encounter with Io's story in Gillis' classroom may be a passing moment, but Berry has created multiple implicit contact points between Judith's story and Io's throughout the novel—inviting (but not requiring) readers to see *All the Truth That's in Me* as, in part at least, an adaptation of the Classical myth.

However, just as Judith ultimately sees herself as different from literary analogues, Berry's novel is ultimately different from the Classical tale. Colonel Whiting, though a complicated and unwholesome character, does not follow entirely in the tracks of Jupiter. The colonel fights his desire and does not have sex with Judith, and his abduction of her is prompted by a wish to keep her safe—not from a jealous spouse but from Abijah Pratt, whom Judith accidentally witnessed murdering his own daughter, Lottie. Even the colonel's maiming of Judith's tongue is revealed to be part of this protective strategy, though plenty of room remains for readers' skepticism on this point! As Judith explains to the assembled townspeople, "He said he did it to protectt me. I thought he was madd. But he knew the man who'd killed Lottie would remember me. I think he thoughtt by silencing me, he could save me.... He was rightt" (263). Or rather, he was partly right, for Judith also realizes, "He took away my voice to save me. And now, to save myself, I take it back" (260). The mythological Io suffers; she cannot save herself, and her metamorphosis out of cow form is the result of divine brokering. Judith's restoration is accomplished through her own efforts, aided by some other residents of Roswell Station: she persists in practicing her reading and is supported in that by her brother Darrel; her friend Maria helps her to speak again; the preacher's daughter Elizabeth seconds Judith's claims about Gillis' advances; Goody Pruett summons the town to hear Judith tell her story and is the first to applaud her when she is done. Berry's novel shows humans' capacity for social cruelty and physical violence, but it also demonstrates their ability to exercise solidarity and effect change. Lucas Whiting worries that he might be like his problematic father, but he comes to realize that the past, while shaping the present, need not dictate the course of the future. He and Judith, together with their friends, take agency in determining their path ahead.

All the Truth That's in Me is more hopeful than its Classical touchstone. The *Metamorphoses* almost relentlessly catalogues abuses of power. Io's suffering through the actions of both Jupiter and Juno is one case in point; Philomela's victimization by Tereus is another. It seems to me that the *Metamorphoses* highlights the punishing hierarchies in which people are stuck; the task of moving out of or dismantling those hierarchies could be prompted by Ovid's unflinching delineation of them, but such work is located outside of the poem. Berry's novel depicts the harsh constraints of an inherited social order and the potential heartlessness of individual human actions. While it is left to Berry's readers, like Ovid's, to decide whether or not they want to challenge the powers that be and status quo structures in their daily lives, Berry's novel also depicts characters making that decision and successfully inflecting their lives, their society, their inheritance, with positive difference.

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Bibliography

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Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. Trans. A. S. Kline. poetryintranslation.com