

Rescuing or Punishing Procne and Philomela

I taught my first course on Classics and children's literature in spring 2011, and we focused on anthologies of myth. Almost all of the students in the course had also taken the general course on Classical mythology which I teach, and near the end of the semester we talked about which myths hadn't been featured in the anthologies we read. The story of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela was one of them. I then searched on Google Books and found *Favourite Greek Myths* by Lilian Stoughton Hyde, first published in 1905 and containing a chapter entitled "Procne and Philomela." What a curious piece!

Hyde's alterations to the ancient story will make better sense if I first reprise Ovid's rendition, which is Hyde's (and our) fullest Classical source for the myth. As Ovid recounts in book 6 of the *Metamorphoses*, the Thracian Tereus helps Athens in war, and the king of Athens, Pandion, gives one of his daughters, Procne, to Tereus in an ill-omened marriage. Tereus and Procne return to Thrace and have a son, Itys. Five years later, Procne wants to see her sister, Philomela, and Tereus travels to Athens to fetch her. Pandion lets Philomela go, albeit with some misgivings. The misgivings prove founded, for Tereus desires Philomela and, upon arrival in Thrace, takes her to a cabin in the woods where he rapes her and cuts out her tongue. He tells Procne that her sister is dead. A year passes. Philomela weaves an account of her experiences and has the weaving delivered to Procne, who retrieves Philomela one night during a festival of Bacchus. Together they kill and cook the young Itys and serve him to Tereus. When Philomela reveals Itys' severed head, Tereus chases the sisters. All three are transformed into birds: the sisters into a swallow and nightingale, Tereus into a hoopoe. Red feathers on the swallow and nightingale mark the murder of Itys, and the beaked hoopoe retains Tereus' aggressive spirit.

When I teach this story in my myth course, we talk about the vicious cycle of violence in which the victims turn into perpetrators themselves, the focus on human action (the gods do not cause this bloody mess!), and the non-resolution of the ending.

The absence of this story in anthologies geared toward younger audiences is not surprising. Hyde's inclusion of it can be explained in part by her general program, her choice to present stories which "have in some measure exercised a formative influence on literature and the fine arts in many countries" (iii). Philomela is invoked multiple times by Shakespeare (among others), and knowledge of this myth could be considered a matter of cultural literacy. Hyde's story could aim to prepare young audiences for later encounters.

And yet Hyde's rendition also alters the ancient myth in some significant ways. Hyde has Tereus hide Procne away, not Philomela, and Philomela marries Tereus because she believes Tereus when he tells her that her sister is dead. Fearful that word of what he's done may get out, Tereus commands Procne's tongue to be cut out; he uses his royal position to order violence rather than commit it directly himself. After Procne weaves and embroiders to create a tapestry informing her sister of what has happened, Philomela sends for her sister and the two plan to escape with Itys in tow. A creaking palace door betrays them, and Tereus pursues. The gods "in pity" (106) transform the sisters into birds. Tereus is left unchanged and Itys unharmed. Procne-as-swallow is thwarted in her attempt to bond with Itys; Philomela-as-nightingale sings her sorrowful story at night.

Hyde's version could be said to rescue Procne and Philomela. They do not commit violence themselves, and their transformation lifts them out of their imperiled situation. A side-effect of this rescue, however, is a diminishment of their agency. They do not confront Tereus, and the fact that they are saved by an act of the gods underscores their status as victims in need

of rescue. Tereus remains a villain, but Hyde distances him somewhat from violence. Hyde's switch of the sisters makes Tereus into a bigamist who exploits the institutions of marriage and monarchy rather than a rapist who ignores social constraints. The wronged sisters are delivered from this patriarchal malefactor, but the patriarchal structure of human father and son remains intact even as the females of the family are removed from the scene. While Ovid's narrative shows violence's consuming, destructive reach, Hyde's story has violence more narrowly directed at the women in the tale. In a new kind of vicious cycle, Procne and Philomela are rescued by being made more exclusively victims deserving of pity and in need of divine deliverance.

In the preface to *Favourite Greek Myths* Hyde explains that her choice of stories is not solely motivated by a desire to foster cultural literacy. The myths which post-antique artists have revisited are also "the very ones that have the greatest depth of meaning," and as they grow up children will come to "see them as the embodiment of spiritual truths" (iii). Is there not some sleight of hand here? Hyde justifies her inclusion of a story like "Procne and Philomela" by referring to its "depth of meaning" and "embodiment of spiritual truths," but she invests it with a new meaning and makes it embody a "truth" different from its Ovidian predecessor. Hyde's retelling seems to undermine the foundation she provided for undertaking it and crystallize women's need for rescue as a "spiritual truth." Is the perpetuation of women's victim status a rescue at all or itself an uninterrogated perpetration of violence in an ideological register?

As I was thinking about Hyde's story recently, I decided to do another Google search for this myth in children's literature, and I found this entry on the Britannica Kids site:

Philomel (or Philomela), poetic name for nightingale; Philomela, in Greek mythology, was sister of Procne, wife of Tereus, king of Thrace; in revenge for their wrongs the

sisters killed Itys, Tereus' son, and served him as food to his father; the gods punished them by turning Procne into a swallow and Philomela into a nightingale.

I see this encyclopedia entry as having a motivation similar to Hyde's story: giving young people access to or information about a Classical myth which they may encounter in other contexts. However, it takes the opposite tack in its depiction of the sisters, presenting them as worthy of punishment, not pity. Tereus' transformation is not mentioned, his violence unspecified—and hence, to my mind, minimized. Readers don't learn what "wrongs" Procne and Philomela are responding to, and that vagueness makes their treatment of Itys even more striking and extreme. The punishment of the sisters is the point.

In the *Metamorphoses* Ovid does not explicitly attribute this myth's avian transformations to divine intervention, but both Hyde's story and the Britannica Kids entry clearly link the sisters' metamorphoses to the gods. The gods become arbiters who offer a summary judgement of Procne and Philomela. The gods also become avatars for the retellers within the story, providing an unambiguous interpretation of a messy ancient myth whose messiness seems to me to be a crucial ingredient, a crux for meditation. Hyde and Britannica Kids attempt to deal with the tale's disaster through an authoritative imposition of unambivalent meaning, and their attempts cast the women as objects of pity or agents deserving punishment. These presentations of the myth work to make a more straightforward "either/or" out of a challenging Ovidian "both/and."

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