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Rape, Revenge, and Verse: Philomela

Ovid’s story of Philomela, the virginal girl raped by her brother-in-law Tereus and subjected to the removal of her tongue, is perhaps surprising in its popularity with early modern writers. The *Metamorphoses* is bursting both with instances of rape, presented without sentiment and with such matter of fact regularity as to constitute an everyday hazard for the nymphs and women who populate the text, and examples of extreme violence; yet it is clear that there is something in this myth that particularly appealed to the ideology of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English thinkers. Philomela’s rape, mutilation, revenge with her sister Procne/Progne, and her metamorphosis into the nightingale are the subjects of or models for various retellings and allusions, and matched only in reference to rape mythology by the legendary Lucrece (discussed in the following chapter).

The narrative of Philomela, Tereus, and Procne concludes the sixth book of *Metamorphoses*, which opens with the tale of Arachne. The tapestry Arachne weaves in competition with Pallas illustrates the ‘lewdnesse of the Gods’ (6: 164), in their rapes and deceptions of mortal women, while Pallas’ depicts the punishment of impious, proud mortals.¹ The theme of sexual transgression is returned to by Ovid after stories largely concerning human pride and punishment, but the rapist is degraded from a god to a mortal man whose lust results in widespread violation of various familial relationships and social codes. Married to Tereus for five years, Procne begs him to travel to collect her younger sister for a visit. Tereus is overwhelmed with lust at the sight of Philomela, and once they arrive back in Thrace he imprisons her, rapes her repeatedly, and cuts out her tongue to silence her reproachful accusations. Tereus then pretends to Procne that Philomela has died. However, Philomela weaves a tapestry depicting the crime and sends it to her sister, who
rescues her. Together they avenge their injuries by gruesomely murdering and cooking Tereus and Procne's little son and feeding him to his father. When they reveal this horror, the enraged Tereus and the fleeing women are all turned into birds: Philomela into the nightingale, Procne into the swallow, and Tereus, depending on the translation, into a hoopoe or the lapwing.

The early modern Philomela

Several assertions can be made from examining texts that explicitly refer to Philomela concerning how the myth was viewed in the early modern period. Firstly, and unsurprisingly, condemnation of the rape is universal. The term ‘filthy’ or ‘foul king’ is repeated, corresponding to the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century definition of the object being something morally foul, polluted, or obscene. Such condemnation is clearly more forthcoming where the text omits the bloody details of Philomela and Procne's revenge (discussed in further detail below). Concurrently, it is conventional, following Ovid, for Philomela to be described as a lamb and Tereus as a wolf, though for those writers faithfully following Ovid, Procne as a tiger is also common. The concept of defilement is present throughout most early modern versions of the myth. John Studley's translation of The Eighth Tragedy of Seneca, Agamemnon (1581) describes Tereus' aim to 'defile'; Patrick Hannay's The Nightingale (1622) describes Philomela as 'defiled'; and George Pettie emphasises that Philomela is, through repeated rape, 'filthily deflowered' and 'spoiled'. The moralisation of the myth is also a common factor, and authors' sympathies can be perceived in translations and direct rewritings. For example, Pettie addresses A Petite Pallace of Pettie his pleasure (1576) to 'Gentlewomen' and claims an exploration of humanity's fallibility. His tale is entitled 'Tereus and Progne', and presents a myth concerned more with the failure of their marriage than Philomela. The text opens with an expansive courtly setting and long formal speeches, including Progne's lecture to Tereus against acting 'lasciviously' and on the importance of honesty. There is no mention of the Ovidian omens at the marriage, the funeral torches stolen by furies and the screech owl; the only warning is Progne's own. This sets up a sixteenth-century social relationship between the spouses, rather than one supervised by the supernatural, and thereby the tragedy as increasingly domestic. Tereus and Progne marry, and live together 'in love so loyall', but then, moralises Pettie, 'see the frailty of our felicity, mark the misery which mortall men are subject to'. He tells us how this loyal love will turn through