

Tereus, Procne, and Philomela

Neighboring nobles assembled, and nearby cities
 encouraged their kings to pay condolence calls:
 Argos, Sparta, Pelopeidean Mycenae,
 and Calydon (which had not yet acquired

590

the enmity of fierce Diana); fertile
 Orchomenus and Corinth (famed for bronze);
 fearsome Messene and Patrae and low-lying Cleonae;
 and Nelean Pylos and Troezen (not yet ruled
 by Pittheus); and all the other cities
 to the north and south of Corinth
 sent delegates to pay their last respects.

600

Who would believe that only you, Athens,
 did nothing? Warfare kept you from your duty,
 for a barbaric horde from overseas
 had marched its terror right up to your walls.

Tereus of Thrace had raised that siege
 with his auxiliaries, had driven off the foe,
 and now was famous for his victory.
 And since he was a man of wealth and power,
 and a descendant of the god of war,
 King Pandion had bonded with Tereus
 by joining him in marriage to his daughter,
 Procne.

610

But neither Juno, who presides
 at weddings, nor the wedding god himself,
 Hymenaeus, nor the required Graces
 attended theirs. Instead, the Furies shook
 the torches they had snatched from funerals,
 and turned down the coverlet upon their bed;
 and all night long, an evil owl perched
 and brooded on the roof of their bedchamber.

Under these omens, Tereus and Procne
 are wed; and under them, their child is born;
 and naturally all of Thrace is one
 in its felicitations to the parents,
 who offer up their own thanks to the gods.

620

That day is now proclaimed a festival
 on which the king of Athens gave his daughter

to the distinguished ruler, and the day
as well on which Itys, their son, was born.
What does us good is to a great extent
concealed from us.

Five autumns passed, 630
then Procne coaxed her husband with these words:
"If I am at all pleasing in your sight,
then either let me visit with my sister
or let her visit me; you must assure
my father we won't keep her for too long!
The sight of her would be the finest gift
that you could give me!"

So he orders ships
brought down to waterside, then sail and oar
swiftly convey Tereus overseas
to Athens and the harbor at Piraeus. 640
Admitted to the presence of the king
upon arrival, it so happens that
the two men clasp each other's hands and start
their conversation on that lucky omen.

He had just mentioned his young wife's request
to see her sister, and assured the king
that she, if sent, would be sent promptly back,
when look! where Philomela now appears
richly adorned, but richer still in beauty,
one to be spoken of in the same terms 650
as often we hear used of nymphs and dryads
glimpsed in the woods—if only they were dressed
as well as she and were quite as refined.

When he first saw her, Tereus caught fire
as instantly as ripe grain or dry leaves,
or as hay stored in a barn goes up in blazes.
Her beauty surely justified such passion,
but he was driven by an innate lust,

a bent that Thracians have for lechery:
he burned with his and with his nation's heat. 660

What tack to take here? Bribe her attendants?
Make his way to her through her faithful nurse?
Seduce the girl with rare and precious gifts,
even at the cost of his whole kingdom?
Or seize her and defend his theft with warfare?
Nothing at all he would not dare to do
in his unbridled passion, so fierce the flames
that would not be contained within his breast.

And now delay was unendurable:
he eagerly repeated Procne's speech, 670
and raised his own desires under hers.
Love lent him eloquence, and when he seemed
to go beyond the mandate he'd been given,
he said that this was merely Procne's wish,
and added tears, as though they too were part
of his commission. By the gods above,
what utter blindness dwells in human hearts!
Here Tereus achieves a reputation
for piety while plotting wickedness,
and criminal behavior wins him praise! 680

What made it even easier for him
was Philomela's acquiescence: she
wishes the very same thing for herself,
and puts her arms around her father's neck,
and in a captivating manner begs
that she might go and visit with her sister,
for all the good—none!—that will come of this.

Pricked on by lust, by sights that feed his madness,
Tereus looks at her and sees himself
with her already, doing it to her! 690
He watches as she flings her arms around
her father's neck and chastely kisses him,

and as he watches them in their embrace,
he yearns to take the father's part, although
his motives would be no less impious.

The father is won over by the prayers
of both his daughters. The nearer one rejoices,
and thanks him, for she thinks, unhappy child,
that what must turn out ill will turn out well
for both the daughters. Little labor now
remained for Phoebus, whose straining horses fly
on pounding hooves across the western sky.

A regal banquet is provided next,
and Bacchus too, in golden chalices.
Then sated bodies seek untroubled sleep.
But even though the Thracian has retired,
he burns for her, recalling now her face,
her gestures, and the way her body moved,
imagining what he has not yet seen,
and feeding the fires burning in his heart,
sleep driven off by his anxiety.

Light came, and with tears welling in his eyes,
King Pandion embraces Tereus,
committing his daughter to the Thracian's care:
"Compelled, dear son-in-law, by your desires,
as well as by the urgings of my daughters,
I give her to you; by faith and by the ties
between us, by the gods above, I beg
that you protect her with a father's love,
and send back home, as soon as possible
(for any delay will be unbearable),
the sweet alleviation of my years.

"You also, Philomela, must return
as soon as possible, if you would be
dutiful in your relationship with me:
one daughter's absence is enough to bear."

With these commands, he kisses her good-bye,
the ripe tears falling even as he speaks,
and makes the two of them join hands together
in pledge of faith, and begs them to remember
him to his absent daughter and her son,
and with abundant sobs bids them farewell,
a grim foreboding troubling his mind.

Once Philomela had been brought aboard
the painted ship, they rowed out of the harbor
into the channel and lost sight of land.
"My victory!" he cried. "At last the prize
that I have wished for is aboard this boat!"

And scarcely able to defer his lust,
the barbarian exults, and keeps his eyes
fixed firmly on his now defenseless prize,
exactly as when Jove's great bird of prey,
the eagle, drops into his lofty nest
the hare gripped in his talons, and the prey
and captor both know there is no escape.

Their journey done, the ship is brought to shore:
Tereus drags the daughter of the king
to an upland hut, deep in those ancient woods,
where pallid, trembling, utterly in terror,
she tearfully asks where her sister is;
he locks her in and openly admits
his shameful passion and his wicked plan,
then overwhelms the virgin all alone.
In vain she cries repeatedly for help
from father, sister, from the gods above.

And after he was done with her, she shuddered
like a young lamb, broken by an old grey wolf
and flung aside, who cannot yet believe
that she is safe; or like a wounded dove,
her plumage brightly stained with her own blood,

who trembles with her dread that the sharp claws
which have embraced and raked her will return.

When she recovered from her shock, she tore
her unbound hair and scratched and beat her arms
like one bereft. With hands turned out, she cried,
"Oh, what a dreadful thing you've done to me,
barbarian! You bloody-minded rogue!
Neither the charge my father laid on you,
nor his loving tears, nor my sister's care,
nor my virginity, nor your wedding vows—
none of these things meant anything to you!

770

"And now the very order of our lives,
our relationships, are all confused!
I have been made the rival of my sister,
and you a bigamist! Procne my enemy!
O treacherous man! Why don't you kill me now,
and leave no heinous crime still uncommitted!
Would you had done so before bedding me
so shamefully, for then I would have gone,
an innocent shade, down to the world below.

780

"Nevertheless, if the gods are watching this,
if heavenly power means anything at all,
if, with my honor, all has not been lost,
somehow or other I will punish you;
I'll cast aside my modesty and speak
of what you've done; if I escape this place,
I'll go among the people with my tale;
imprisoned here, my voice will fill the trees
and wring great sobs of grief from senseless rocks!
Heaven will hear me, and what gods there are,
if there are any gods in all of heaven!"

790

Such words provoke the savage tyrant's wrath
and fear in equal measure; spurred by both,
he draws the sword he carried from its sheath

and, seizing her by her hair, forces her arms
behind her back and binds her.

Philomela,

for whom the sword had given hope of death,
eagerly offers him her throat, but he,
with a pair of pincers, takes her tongue instead,
which calls (as though protesting this offense)
her father's name out in a garbled voice,
before the tyrant's sword has severed it.

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Its stump throbs in her mouth, while the tongue itself
falls to the black earth trembling and murmuring,
and twitching as it flings itself about,
just as a serpent's severed tail will do;
and with what little life is left it, seeks
its mistress's feet. And even after this—
one scarcely can believe it, but they say
that even after this, the man continued
to violate her mutilated body.

810

And after these outrages, he returned
to Procne, who at sight of him inquired
about her sister. Tereus replied
with practiced sobs and a convincing tale
of how she died—a story that his tears
made altogether credible. His wife
rips from her back the golden-bordered robe
and puts on black for mourning, and constructs
a needless sepulcher; and with the hands
that his lies have deceived, she offers gifts
in expiation of her sister's death,
and prematurely mourns her sister's fate.

820

And now the Sun has journeyed through one year;
what can poor Philomela do? A guard
is set upon her to prevent escape,
a wall of solid stone surrounds her hut;

her speechless lips cannot address the wrongs
that have been done her.

And yet from suffering
comes native wit, and often cleverness
is born of misery. Upon her loom,
she hangs a Thracian web and starts to weave
threads of deep purple on a white background,
depicting the crime.

And when her work is done,
she rolls it up and hands it to the slave
attending her; and by mute gestures asks
the slave to bring this package to her mistress;
and so she does, not knowing what it holds.

The wife of the cruel tyrant opens it
and in it reads her sister's wretched fate,
and (it is quite amazing that she can)
keeps silent, for her grief restrains her speech;
her questing tongue cannot produce the words
sufficient to her outrage: no tears now,
for good and evil are all heaped together,
and her imagination wholly bent
on one and only one course: punishment.

Every third year the Thracian women join
in a great throng to celebrate the rites
of Bacchus: now that time has come again.
Night is aware of what is happening;
by night Mount Rhodope is resonant
with the disturbing sound of clashing cymbals;
by night the queen emerges from her palace,
outfits and arms herself as for the frenzy:
she wraps her head in vines and drapes a deerskin
over her left shoulder—in her left hand
a staff the Bacchantes carry, called the thyrsus.

Now through the woods she hastens with a crowd

of her attendants; roused to madness by
her grief, O Bacchus, she pretends your frenzy:
comes to that hut far from the beaten path
and crying out, "Ulula!" and "Euhoy!"
breaks the door down, snatches up her sister
and outfits her as one of the Bacchantes,
conceals her ravaged face with ivy leaves,
and brings the stunned girl back into her palace.

As soon as Philomela understood
she was inside *his* unspeakable abode,
the poor girl shuddered and turned pale with dread;
but Procne brought her to a hiding place,
where she removed her ritual adornments,
showing the face a monstrous crime had shamed,
and held her closely in a warm embrace;
but Philomela could not bear to meet
her sister's pleading eyes, for in her own,
the wrong done her had wronged her sister too.

She kept her glance fixed firmly on the ground,
yearning to swear by all the gods in heaven
that her disgrace was brought about by force,
if only hands could speak.

But Procne blazed,
unable to control her anger, and,
sweeping aside her sister's tears, she said,
"No weeping now—it is the time for swords,
or for whatever else surpasses swords:
my sister, there is no abomination
that I am unprepared to undertake,
whether I torch the palace roof and fling
Tereus, the mastermind of all our woes,
into the blazing ruins of this house,
or pluck his tongue out or remove his eyes,
or sever the member which has brought you shame,

or by a thousand wounds minutely given,
 expel the guilty spirit from his body!
 I am prepared for some important work,
 but what it will be, I am still uncertain."

While Procne was still speaking to her sister,
 Itys came to his mother, who at once
 realized what she could do, and said,
 taking him in with her unfeeling eyes,
 "How very like his father the boy is!"
 And that was all she said. Outwardly silent
 yet inwardly ablaze, she planned the crime.

And yet, when he came up and greeted her,
 throwing his little arms around her neck,
 and kissed her with all the innocence of youth,
 she was quite moved by this; her anger broke,
 and her unwilling eyes were suddenly
 full of hot tears that she could not control;
 but as she felt her sense of purpose falter
 out of an excess of maternal love,
 she turned to look upon her sister's face,
 and then turned back and forth between them, wildly:

"And why does this one babble pleasantries,
 while that one's silent? What has got her tongue?
 How can it be that this one calls me mother,
 while that one cannot call me sister? Look!
 Your husband is the answer to this riddle,
 unworthy daughter of royal Pandion!
 The only crime against a man like this
 is to behave with natural affection!"

Now resolute, she carries Itys off,
 just as a tiger on the Ganges' banks
 will drag a nursing fawn through the dense woods,
 until they reach an unfrequented room
 deep within the palace.

He pleads with his hands,
 aware of what is just about to happen,
 and cries out, "Mother!" reaching for her neck,
 as Procne drives the blade into his side
 and does not turn away. That single blow
 sufficed to kill the boy, but Philomela
 severed his windpipe also with the sword.

He was still alive as they dismembered him.
 Gobbets of flesh in the cauldron wildly
 danced as she made a fine broth of the boy,
 while other parts were hissing on the grill.

Now Tereus, all unaware, receives
 an invitation to attend a feast
 which his wife falsely claims to be a rite
 of the Athenians: husbands only may
 partake of it; all slaves are sent away
 and all attendants: Tereus dines alone.

And he, on his ancestral banquet throne
 begins to feed and shortly stuffs his gut
 with flesh and blood that he himself begot,
 and in the blindness of his heart, commands,
 "Bring Itys here!"

Procne is unable
 to hide her savage joy; and eager now
 to be the bearer of misfortune cries,
 "The one that you are seeking is within!"

He looks about and asks, where can he be?
 He calls and asks once more; until, disheveled,
 her long hair matted with the stain of slaughter,
 Philomela leaps up and flings the bloody
 head of young Itys in his father's face,
 and never more than then did she desire
 the faculty of speech, so that she might
 most fittingly express the joy she felt!

With a great cry he overturns the table
and calls upon the Furies to assist him;
and now, if only he were able to,
he'd open up his own breast and remove
the half-digested remnants of that feast;
he weeps and calls himself his own son's tomb;
and with his naked blade pursues the two
daughters of Pandion; you would have thought
that the Athenians were poised on wings:
and so they were! One flies off to the woods,
the other finds her refuge under roofs.

960

And even now, the signs of what they did
are visible in marks upon their breasts
and in the bloody stains upon their plumage.

970

Fast to fly after them, he's given wings
by grief and by desire for revenge—
he turns into a stiffly crested bird
with a huge beak in place of his long sword:
the hoopoe, which seems armed as though for war.



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METAMORPHOSES

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