

Ceyx, Alcyone and Ovidian Wit (Metamorphoses 11, 544–567)

At *Metamorphoses* 11, 478–572 Ovid describes the great seastorm which claimed the life of Ceyx, king of Trachis. The description makes frequent use of motifs which are common features of ancient poetic storm-scenes; and in the short space of five lines (539–543) there is a notable concentration of them: in 539 there is the topos of anguish (*non tenet hic lacrimas*);¹ at 539f. the concept that death would be preferable (*vocat ille beatos/funera quos maneat*);² at 540–542 reference to prayers uttered (*hic votis numen adorat, brachiaque ad caelum, quod non videt, inrita tollens/poscit opem*);³ and finally, memories of previous happiness at 542f. (*subeunt illi fratres parensque, huic cum pignoribus domus, et quodcumque relictum est*).⁴

This note is primarily concerned with Ovid's sophisticated use of another topos common in storms: that of birds and beasts.⁵ He has already compared the violent waves with a battering-ram (*aries*) and with lions at 508–511; but immediately after the "bunched" motifs of 539–543 Ovid represents the drowning Ceyx as calling out the name of his wife, Alcyone,

*Alcyone Ceyca movet, Ceycis in ore
nulla nisi Alcyone est ...*
544f.

The concept recurs at 562f.,

*... sed plurima nantis in ore
Alcyone coniunx ...*

and again at 566f.

*dum natat, absentum, quotiens sinit hiscere fluctus,
nominat Alcyonen, ipsisque immurmurat undis.*

I wish to argue that these three passages contain a sophisticated variation on the motif of birds and beasts, given that the Ceyx myth (including the subsequent transformation of Alcyone into a kingfisher (*alcyon*)) would already have been known to a Roman audience. One variation of the motif

¹ Cf. *Hom. Od.* 5.420; *Virg. Aen.* 1.93.

² Cf. *Hom. Od.* 5.306–10; *A.P.* 7.383.7f.; *Virg. Aen.* 1.94–101.

³ Cf. *Hom. Od.* 5.444–50; *A.P.* 5.11.1; 10.21; 13.12.3f.; *Prop.* 1.17.4; 25–28; *Ov. Tr.* 1.2, 1–3; 15; 18; 35; 59–62; 69f.; 81; 85–91; 99–106; 109f.

⁴ Cf. *A.P.* 7.510.3f.; *Ov. Tr.* 1.2.92; *Ov. Met.* 11.560f.

⁵ Cf. *Hom. Od.* 5.421f.; 473; *A.P.* 7.273.5; 7.276.1f.; 5f.; 7.285.3f.; 7.286.6; 7.288.3; 7.292.1; *Prop.* 1.17.2; *Ov. Tr.* 1.2.56.

involves communication between the shipwrecked sailor and birds of the sea.⁶ Sometimes the seabirds lament the sailor's fortune, but at Propertius 1.17.2, where Propertius is himself a shipwrecked sailor, the poet actually imagines himself speaking to the birds; and in this case, they are halcyons (kingfishers): *nunc ego desertas alloquor alcyonas*. Now apparently in antiquity it was believed that the halcyon cried "Ceyx!" This is the clear implication of Seneca *Agamemnon* 680–682

*... licet alcyones
Ceyca suum fluctu leviter
plangente sonent*

since *Ceyca* must be the object of *sonent*.⁷ This being so, when Ovid in *Metamorphoses* 11 makes Ceyx cry out "Alcyone!" at 544ff. he is probably "reversing" the idea that the halcyon cries "Ceyx!". Thus Ovid employs the same version of the birds and beasts topos as is used by Propertius, but he raises it to an even more complex level of sophistication. The concentration of commonplace themes of storms immediately prior to 544 has been noted: Ovid may thereby be deliberately priming his audience for his sophisticated use of the birds and beasts motif. He also ensures that his wit does not escape notice, by making his point three times (at 544f., 562f., and 566f.). The balance between Ovid's concentration of numerous different topoi in 11.539–543 (brachylogia) and his immediately subsequent elaboration of only one topos over several lines at 11.544–567 (macrologia)⁸ is a further typical piece of Ovidian humour.⁹

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⁶ Cf. *A.P.* 7.285.3f.; 7.652.5f.; 7.654.5f.

⁷ Cf. ps.-Sen. *HO 197 raptum coniunx Ceyca gemit*. N. Doubles *Birds and beasts of the Greek Anthology*, Frome and London, 1928, p. 112 states that in Oppian the kingfisher always ends its song by crying "Ceyx! Ceyx!", but I have not been able to trace this.

⁸ For brachylogia and macrologia as generic devices see F. Cairns *Generic Composition in Greek and Roman Poetry*, Edinburgh, 1972, General Index.

⁹ For the humour of the whole passage and especially 566f., see G. K. Galinsky *Ovid's Metamorphoses*, Oxford, 1975, p. 145f.; but cf. E. Fantham "Ovid's Ceyx and Alcyone: the metamorphosis of a myth", *Phoenix*, 33, 1979, p. 337 n. 32.