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MYRRHA'S 'WEDDING' (OV. *MET.* 10. 446–70)

In Book 10 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (398–518), Myrrha conceives an uncontrollable passion for her father, Cinyras. Her observation that foreigners marry their own children (331–3) and her pregnant reply to Cinyras that she wants to marry someone like him (364) suggest that she envisions a romantic relationship with her father that is no brief liaison, but a marriage. Determined to die rather than yield to these illicit feelings, Myrrha decides to hang herself, but is stopped at the last minute by her aged nurse, who promises to help her seduce her father.[1] The nurse goes in search of Cinyras and finds him both inebriated and unencumbered by his wife, who has left the palace to participate in a festival in honour of Ceres. When the nurse tells Cinyras that a girl of Myrrha's age is in love with him, he orders that she be conveyed to his bedroom. Although commentators have detected nothing significant in Ovid's description of Myrrha's journey to her father's room (446–70), a close examination of this passage reveals that it is replete with allusions to elements of the Roman wedding, which serve to reinforce Myrrha's perception of this incestuous act as a marriage. Moreover, the way in which they are presented foreshadows the failure of this relationship.[2]

Roman weddings were public affairs that involved as many guests and as much fanfare as possible. The festivities began in the morning with the arrival of the bridegroom and the guests at the home of the bride, followed by the taking of the auspices and the formalisation of the marriage contract. In the evening, the bride left her parents' house and proceeded to her new home along a route lined by guests bearing torches. She was guided along the way by three boys, one of them holding her left hand and another her right, while the third illuminated her path with a torch. Upon her arrival, attendants carried her over the threshold. Once inside the bridal chamber, the *pronuba* joined the hands of the bride and groom. Thereupon, the marriage was consummated in complete darkness.[3]

Since no complete description of a traditional Roman wedding survives, it must be reconstructed from several sources, many of which describe unions that were anything but traditional.[4] Martial (12.42) speaks of how Callistratus married Afer *hac qua lege viro nubere virgo solet*. The ceremony included torches, a veil, the wedding cry and a

[1] For the Roman attitude toward incestuous unions, see P. Moreau, *Incestus et Prohibitae Nuptiae: Conception romaine de l'inceste et histoire des prohibitions matrimoniales pour cause de parenté dans la Rome antique* (Paris, 2002).

[2] J.K. Anderson, *Ovid's* Metamorphoses*: Books 6–10* (Norman, 1972), 513–14 concentrates on the mythological significance of the constellations and the physical symptoms of Myrrha, while M. Haupt, O. Korn, H.J. Müller, and R. Ehwald (edd.), *Die Metamorphosen des P. Ovidius Naso*, vol. 2 (Berlin, 1903), 123–4, and F. Bömer, *P. Ovidius Naso: Metamorphosen Buch X–XI* (Heidelberg, 1980), 152–8 focus on grammatical and literary parallels. Although D.E. Hill, *Ovid: Metamorphoses IX–XII* (Warminster, 1999), 178–9 is primarily concerned with the astronomical elements of this passage, he does note that *cunctantem* (462) is a characteristic behaviour of brides and that *deducit* (462) is a 'technical term for bringing a bride home'.

[3] For a reconstruction of the ceremony, see J.P.V.D. Balsdon, *Roman Women: Their History and Habits* (Westport, 1974), 181–6, and S. Treggiari, *Roman Marriage* (Oxford, 1991), 161–70.

[4] See S. Treggiari, 'Putting the bride to bed', *EMC/CV* 38 n.s. 13 (1994), 322 for these mock marriages.

dowry. When Nero married the freedman Pythagoras, Tacitus (*Ann*. 15.37.9) says that he *in modum solemnium coniugiorum denupsisset*; the omens were taken, the emperor had a dowry and wore a veil, and the marriage torches and a nuptial bed were present.[5] According to Suetonius (*Nero* 28), Nero married Sporus *per sollemnia nuptiarum*: the boy had a dowry, wore a veil and was taken to his groom in a great procession.[6] Nero's wedding to his freedman Doryphorus (perhaps a mistake for Pythagoras) was similar to his wedding to Sporus, but this time Nero took the female role and imitated the sounds of a bride being deflowered (*Nero* 29).[7] Elements of a traditional wedding also appear in the marriage of Silius and Messalina, who was already married to the emperor Claudius. Tacitus (*Ann*. 11.26–7) speaks of the signing of the marriage contract by witnesses, the omens, the veil, the sacrifice, the banquet and the wedding night, while Juvenal (10.333–6) mentions the veil, the nuptial bed, the dowry, the signing of the contract by witnesses and the omens. Elagabalus was said to have married Zoticus, who had a *pronuba* (SHA, *Heliogabalus* 10.5).

In all of these descriptions, the inclusion of traditional elements of the nuptial rites highlights how far these non-traditional weddings deviate from the norm. Plautus produces the same effect in a slightly different way in *Casina* (815–24), where he incorporates some elements of the Roman wedding ceremony in their traditional form, but inverts others.[8] Here, three women disguise the slave Chalinus as a bride and bring him outside to his unwitting groom after the wedding feast. In doing so, they usurp the role of the three boys who lead the bride to the home of the groom. The women adhere to Roman custom when they tell the transvestite bride to lift his feet over the threshold, but then invert the ritual by advising him to dominate and fleece his new husband, thereby encouraging the bride to be the opposite of the *morigera* wife that a Roman husband expected. These inversions foreshadow the coming disaster when the 'bride' Chalinus perverts the power structure in the household by brutalising and humiliating his new husband.[9]

Virgil incorporates many features of a Roman wedding into his description of what transpired between Dido and Aeneas in the cave (*Aen.* 4.124–7 and 165–72): Juno plays the part of the *pronuba*, lightning substitutes for the fire of the marriage torches, Tellus is the *auspex*, and the event is witnessed by nymphs, whose ululation takes the place of the traditional cry. However, there are significant anomalies. The *pronuba*, the *auspex* and the witnesses are immortal, and the cry of the nymphs was closely associated with lamentation (Serv., *Aen*. 4.168).[10] Moreover, a 'marriage' such as this one would be of questionable legitimacy because it took place in a remote area without human witnesses. As Apuleius (*Met*. 6.9) says, *impares enim nuptiae et praeterea in villa sine testibus et patre non consentiente factae legitimae non possunt videri*. It comes as no surprise, then, that Dido and Aeneas disagree over the true

[5] See also Juv. 2.119–20. For Pythagoras' status, see Dio 62.28.3.

[6] For the wedding of Nero and Sporus, see E. Champlin, *Nero* (Cambridge, 2003), 145–50, who notes the presence of both Greek and Roman elements in the ceremony and suggests that the marriage was a Saturnalian joke.

[7] Champlin (n. 6), 165–8 argues that this wedding was a parody of an initiation into an Eastern cult.

[8] G. Williams, 'Some aspects of Roman marriage ceremonies and idealism', *JRS* 48 (1958), 17–22.

[9] S. O'Bryhim, 'The originality of Plautus' *Casina*', *AJPh* 110 (1989), 100–2.

[10] For the omen, see also Ov., *Her.* 7.93–6, and R.G. Austin, *P. Vergili Maronis Aeneidos Liber Quartus* (Oxford, 1963), 68–70.

nature of what they experienced. She considered it a valid marriage (316), but he did not, for it lacked both his consent and his participation in a *deductio* (338–9).[11]

Ovid too manipulated wedding rituals for literary effect by replacing traditional elements with incongruous substitutes to foreshadow the failure of a marriage. The wedding of Tereus and Procne, for example, is attended neither by Juno nor Hymenaeus nor the Graces. Instead, the Eumenides hold the wedding torches, and an owl that sits above the bedchamber provides an evil omen (6.428–32). Whereas the presence of Venus, Juno and Hymen augur well for the marriage of Iphis and Ianthe (9.796–7), a gloomy Hymen holding a sputtering torch casts a pall over the wedding of Orpheus and Eurydice (10.1–7). Ovid's account of Myrrha's journey to her father's bedroom likewise reflects and inverts traditional elements of the marriage rite, but in a more subtle way that befits such a furtive union.

Whereas Roman weddings were well publicised events with long guest lists (Apul. *Met*. 6.9), the 'marriage' of Myrrha and Cinyras is a clandestine affair with no one in attendance but the 'nuptial couple' and the nurse. Even celestial entities refuse to witness the event: they either hide their faces or flee from the sky (448–51). Ovid's assertion that 'the night lacks its fire' (450) may be a metaphorical reminder that the torches that were traditionally carried by wedding guests during the nocturnal portion of the festivities are absent here.[12] What is about to happen between Cinyras and Myrrha, then, is not an event to be celebrated publicly by a torch-bearing crowd of witnesses, but a shameful act that must take place under the cover of darkness.

Myrrha's procession to her father's bedroom is beset by omens that would surely have caused the *auspex* at a wedding to call a halt to the proceedings. Even though she trips three times on her journey and three times hears the funereal owl, Myrrha does not turn back (452–4).[13] Instead, she holds her aged nurse with her left hand and feels her way along the dark hall with her right until she reaches her father who, like a groom, awaits her in the 'wedding chamber' (*thalamus* 456; cf. 317). By playing the part of Myrrha's guide, the nurse usurps the role of the boys who lead the bride to her new home. Ovid drives this point home through his use of the phrase *manu deducit* (462), which recalls the formula *deductio in domum mariti* commonly used to describe the transferral of the bride to her husband's house by three boys.[14] The nurse is ineligible to play this part not only because of her gender, but also because she is *longaeva* (452), which suggests that her parents are dead. By contrast, the boys who lead the bride to the groom's home must have living parents.[15] Myrrha's use of her left hand to hold on to the nurse in the darkness implies that this transferral is illicit, for the left hand was commonly thought to be used for nefarious

[11] The validity of the 'marriage' is discussed by G. Williams, *Tradition and Originality in Roman Poetry* (Oxford, 1968), 376–86; N. Rudd, *Lines of Inquiry* (Cambridge, 1976), 40–1; R. Monti, *The Dido Episode and the Aeneid* (Leiden, 1981), 45–8; J. Moles, 'Aristotle and Dido's *Hamartia*', *G&R* 31 (1984), 51–4; R. Green, '*Conubium* in the Aeneid', *Latomus* 196 (1986), 393–421; E. Harrison, 'The tragedy of Dido', *ECM/CV* 33 (1989), 1–21; and P. Agrell, 'Wed or unwed?: ambiguity in *Aeneid* 4', *PVS* 25 (2004), 95–110.

[12] Ovid singles out the constellations Bootes and Virgo. Before their catasterism, they were Icarus and Erigone, who epitomised the proper relationship between father and daughter. See Apollod. 3.14.7 and Hyg. 130.

[13] A close parallel occurs at Ov. *Tr.* 1.3.55–6: *ter limen tetigi, ter sum revocatus.* For tripping, see M. Ogle, 'The house-door in Greek and Roman religion and folk-lore', *AJPh* 32 (1911), 252, n. 1, and A. Pease, *M. Tulli Ciceronis de divinatione* (Urbana, 1920–3), 486. Note the presence of the owl at the marriage of Tereus and Procne (6.431–2). The owl as a bird of ill omen also appears at *Met*. 5.550 and 15.791.

[14] Treggiari (n. 3), 166–7.

[15] Treggiari (n. 3), 166.

purposes.[16] Thus, Myrrha makes the journey to her father's bedroom with no witnesses, bad omens, no marriage torches, a single ineligible guide and an illicit objective.

When Myrrha arrives at her destination, 'she now touches the threshold of the wedding chamber' (*thalami iam limina tangit*; 456) and thereby ignores the custom of carrying the bride over the threshold to avoid the possibility that she will trip, a bad omen that had already occurred three times on the way to Cinyras' bedroom.[17] The door opens and the nurse leads Myrrha into the bedroom, where she is met by her father, just as the groom meets the bride at his home. At this point, the nurse adopts yet another role for which she is ineligible: that of the *pronuba*, who was similar to a matron of honour. The *pronuba* was required to be a woman who had been married only once and still had a living husband.[18] Because the aged nurse is a slave, she cannot marry and, therefore, cannot legitimately perform this duty. Nevertheless, she leads Myrrha to the bed, gives her to the 'groom', formalises the union with the phrase 'take her, she is yours, Cinyras', and then *devotaque corpora iunxit* (463–4). While this phrase has sexual connotations that are surely relevant here, the act itself probably took the form of joining the hands of Cinyras and Myrrha.[19] This recalls the *dextrarum iunctio*, the high point of the marriage ceremony when the couple's hands are formally joined.[20] Cinyras and Myrrha then have intercourse in total darkness, according to Roman custom – not because the groom wanted to preserve the honour of his bride (Plut. *Mor.* 279), but because Myrrha wanted to hide her identity from her father so that he would unwittingly perpetrate a shameful act.[21]

While all of these inversions violate Roman tradition, jurists insist that there is only one element of the marriage ceremony that is absolutely indispensable for a valid marriage: the consent of both parties (*nuptias non concubitus sed consensus facit*; Ulp. *Dig.* 31.5.15). The willingness of both Myrrha and Cinyras to enter into this 'marriage' is debatable. Myrrha wants to resist her desire for her father and even tries to commit suicide in order to stop herself from weakening, but the nurse overcomes her resolve.[22] Nevertheless, there are still numerous indications that her acquiescence is half-hearted: her knees buckle and tremble, the blood drains from her face, she is repulsed by what she is doing and wants to turn back (457–66). As far as Cinyras is concerned, he is eager to have intercourse with this young girl, but has no idea that she is his daughter. Both want the union at some level, but Myrrha would have resisted it successfully if left alone and, judging from his reaction when he discovers the identity of his lover, Cinyras would have rejected it if he were in possession of all the facts (472–5). Therefore, the informed consent of the 'groom',

[16] A. Wagener, *Popular Associations of Right and Left in Roman Literature* (Baltimore, 1912), 22–5 and 57–8.

[17] Cf. Plaut. *Cas.* 815: *sensim super attolle limen pedes nova nupta*.

[18] Treggiari (n. 3), 164. On the duties of the *pronuba*, see Treggiari (n. 4) 311–23.

[19] Cf. Ter. *An.* 297; Don. at *Ter. An.* 295; and Williams (n. 8), 21. For the sexual meaning, see J.N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (Baltimore, 1982), 179–80.

[20] Treggiari (n. 3), 164–5. It is possible that the audience recalled the formula *ubi es Gaius, ego Gaia* when Ovid says that Cinyras and Myrrha may have called each other 'daughter' and 'father'. Cf. Ter. *An.* 295: *te isti do, amicum tutorem patrem*. For another interpretation, see M. Lowrie, 'Myrrha's second taboo, Ovid's "Metamorphoses" 10.467–68', *CPh* 88 (1993), 50–2. For the husband's blandishments, see Treggiari (n. 3), 325.

[21] See also Plaut. *Cas.* 882; Quint. 5.11.32; Tac. *Ann.* 15.37.9; *Cod. Iust.* 5.4.22; P. Corbett, *The Roman Law of Marriage* (Oxford, 1969), 53–67; Balsdon (n. 3), 182; and Treggiari (n. 4), 324.

[22] Cf. Eur. *Hipp.* 490–524.

who does not view this liaison as a marriage, is absent and the consent of the 'bride' is half-hearted at best.[23]

An additional clue that the 'marriage' of Cinyras and Myrrha will fail occurs at the beginning of Myrrha's procession to her father's bedroom, where Ovid mentions the positions of certain constellations (446–51). Scholars have interpreted these lines as no more than a poetic way of specifying the time of night at which Myrrha went to her father's room. However, they also serve to place this event at a time of year that was considered unfavourable for weddings.

There has been much controversy over whether this myth takes place during an actual Cypriot festival of Ceres or whether Ovid fabricated it from elements of either the Cerialia or the *sacrum anniversarium Cereris*. Since there is no independent evidence for a Cypriot festival of Ceres, it is generally agreed that Ovid based his description of it upon elements of one of the Roman festivals of Ceres.[24] The constellations specified in lines 446–7 reveal which of these two festivals he utilised. Ovid says that 'it was the time at which everything is quiet and Bootes had turned his wagon between the Oxen'. This description of the positions of the constellations Bootes, Ursa Major, and Ursa Minor fixes the time at midnight.[25] He goes on to say that Icarus and Erigone hid their faces so they would not see what was about to happen. Icarus is the star Arcturus in the constellation Bootes, and Erigone was equated with Virgo.[26] These constellations were visible in the Mediterranean during both the Cerialia and the *sacrum anniversarium Cereris*. The Cerialia took place 12–19 April. Although the date of the *sacrum anniversarium Cereris* is not known with certainty, Livy (22.56.4) says that it was interrupted by the defeat of the Romans at Cannae, which occurred on 2 August (Macrob. 1.16.26). In July and August, Bootes is at the horizon and Virgo is beginning to sink below it. This may be what Ovid means when he says that these constellations were hiding their faces at the time of Myrrha's incest. If this is correct, then he cannot be referring to the Cerialia because these constellations appear overhead at midnight during the month of April. This conclusion is supported by Spaeth's assertion that 'many of the elements of [Ovid's Cypriot] festival suggest its roots in the Roman *sacrum anniversarium*, including the exclusive participation of women, the "pious mothers" (*piae matres*), and the requirement of ritual chastity'.[27] Since it was considered inappropriate for a first-time bride to marry on a festival day, the *sacrum anniversarium Cereris* was an unsuitable occasion for the 'wedding' of Cinyras and Myrrha, especially because of the requirement for chastity.[28]

[23] Note also Apul. (*Met*. 6.9), who says *patre non consentiente factae legitimae non possunt videri*. Not only would Cinyras have objected to this 'marriage' as the groom, but also as the father of the bride.

[24] For a summary of the arguments, see Bömer (n. 2), 147–50. Haupt (n. 2), 122 rejects the idea that Ovid is describing a Cypriot festival and argues that he based it on the *sacrum anniversarium Cereris*. H. Peters, *Symbola ad Ovidii artem epicam cognoscendam* (Diss. Göttingen, 1908), 12 believes that Ovid substituted the Cerialia for whatever festival he found in his source.

[25] Hill (n. 2), 178.

[26] Bömer (n. 2) 154–5 and Anderson (n. 2), 513.

[27] B. Spaeth, *The Roman Goddess Ceres* (Austin, 1956), 110–13. See also H. Le Bonniec, *Le culte de Cérès a Rome des origins à la fin de la République* (Paris, 1958), 404–16 and E. Fantham, *Ovid: Fasti IV* (Cambridge, 1998), 168. E. Simon, *Die Götter der Römer* (Munich, 1990), 49 notes that Ovid recounts a myth of Ceres and Proserpina at *Fast.* 4 that is more appropriate to the *sacrum anniversarium Cereris* than to the *Cerialia*.

[28] Balsdon (n. 3), 183.

The precise day of the festival on which this occurred could have made matters worse. Myrrha's 'wedding' appears to have taken place at midnight on the day after her mother departed for the celebration, that is, at the beginning of the second day of the festival. Although it is impossible to know the exact dates of the *sacrum anniversarium Cereris*, if the festival began on 1 August, then 2 August, the day after the Kalends, would have been a *dies ater* and, therefore, inauspicious.[29] Moreover, 2 August would have recalled the date of the Roman defeat at Cannae, a *dies religiosus* on which festivals could be celebrated, but all public and private business must be avoided.[30] Ovid, then, may have chosen the second day of the *sacrum anniversarium Cereris* for the 'wedding' of Cinyras and Myrrha to emphasise how the timing of this event doubly violated Roman tradition.

Be this as it may, the performance of this inverted wedding ceremony during a festival of Ceres would itself have been inappropriate because of the close link between this goddess and weddings.[31] Ceres is associated with Tellus, the deity who oversees Roman weddings, a connection that is so close that these goddesses are sometimes identified with one another (Cic. *Nat. D.* 3.52). Servius (*Aen*. 4.56–9) says that Ceres joins together the bride and groom, while Festus (s.v. *facem*) notes that torches were carried in her honour during weddings. Given the fact that Myrrha's 'wedding' takes place during a festival in honour of Ceres, that women were to remain celibate during this festival, and that the marriage rites with which Ceres was closely linked were inverted by Myrrha and her nurse, it is reasonable to assume that she would not have looked kindly upon this 'marriage'.

The details of Myrrha's procession to her father's bedroom leave no doubt that her 'marriage' cannot succeed. There are no witnesses, the omens are bad, the roles of the escorts and the *pronuba* are played by an ineligible individual, and there is no informed consent on the part of Cinyras. Moreover, the 'wedding' takes place during a festival, which is contrary to tradition, and possibly on an ill-omened day. Finally, Ceres would not have looked favourably on any wedding that occurred during a festival in her honour that required women to remain chaste, much less a 'wedding' between a father and a daughter.

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[29] Macrob. 1.15.21: *nuptiis copulandis Kalendas Nonas et Idus religiosas, id est devitandas, censuerunt…omnes autem postriduani dies seu post Kalendas sive post Nonas Idusve ex aequo atri sunt*.

[30] A. Michels, *The Calendar of the Roman Republic* (Princeton, 1967), 64.

[31] Spaeth (n. 27), 44–7.