

The Duality of Infanticide: An Analysis of The Portrayals of Procne and Medea in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

In his epic, the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid arranges the myth of Jason and Medea to follow the myth of Procne and Philomela almost immediately. Because both myths end in a mother killing her children to exact revenge on her husband, the positioning of the two stories back-to-back encourages the reader to compare the narratives concerning the two mothers. In the story of Procne and Philomela, Ovid offers the reader cause to sympathize with the actions of the mother, Procne, whose sister is brutally raped and disfigured by her husband. In the story of Medea, however, Ovid portrays Medea in an exclusively callous fashion and contrasts his description of her and her actions with those of Procne. Additionally, Ovid transposes the characterization assigned typically to Medea, most notably in Euripides' *Medea*, onto Procne, thus both demonstrating his command of Greek literature and presenting his version as a deliberate challenge to that of Euripides. Moreover, he actively participates in "othering" Medea, a foreigner, while he treats Procne more generously as a result of her identity as a Greek, and thus a predecessor to the Romans.

Ovid most overtly manipulates the reader's sympathies toward Procne and Medea by narrative means. In the case of Procne, Ovid spends the majority of the section describing the crime committed by Tereus against Philomela. The poet intentionally plays up the brutality of the crime writing,

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"he [Tereus] subdued her [Philomela] with violence,
a virgin and alone, as she repeatedly cried out in vain
for her father,
repeatedly for her sister, to the powerful gods above
all."¹

He also states, *Illa tremit velut agna pavens, quae saucia cani / ore excussa lupi* ... ("She trembled just as a frightened lamb, which has been cast out from the jaws of a grey wolf, wounded").² In describing Philomela's isolation and emphasizing her desperation to be saved by her father and sister, Ovid establishes Tereus as a horrifically cruel villain. Furthermore, in likening Philomela to a lamb, a creature of innocence, and Tereus to a wolf, the poet portrays Tereus as more beast than human, a beast that needs to be hunted in order to protect the lamb. Although Ovid never goes so far as to justify child-killing itself, his vivid description of Tereus' crime predisposes the reader to sympathize with Procne's need to avenge her sister. Tereus is condemned in the same way that Medea will be in her own narrative. This similarity is notable given that both of them are foreigners to the Greek world; for this reason, Ovid, and the Romans themselves, would have viewed them as lesser than Procne and Jason.

With Medea's narrative arc, Ovid spends no time at all discussing Jason's wrongdoings (though even were he to do so, they are significantly less grave than those of Tereus). Rather, Ovid primarily focuses on Medea's use of witchcraft to harm others, villainizing her instead of redeeming her as he does Procne. This choice establishes a clear contrast between Ovid's

¹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 6.524-526: *...virginem et unam/ vi superat frustra clamato saepe parente,/ saepe sorore sua, magnis super omnia divis*. The Latin text is taken from the Loeb Classical Library edition. All English translations of Ovid are my own.

² *Ibid*, 6.527-528.

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own narrative and his source material, Euripides' *Medea*. In his tragedy, Euripides dedicates a significant portion of the play to Medea mourning her husband's betrayal, beginning in her first lines before she has even appeared on stage:

*"Oh, how unhappy I am, how wretched my sufferings —
Oh, woe is me, I wish I could die."*³

In "The Metamorphosis of Ovid's *Medea*," Carole Newlands discusses how Ovid inverts this order in his *Metamorphoses* by excluding mention of Jason's crime and Medea's emotional turmoil: "since Jason plays no part in setting the crime in motion, Medea seemingly acts alone purely for malice's sake."⁴ By choosing to forgo any mention of the events leading up to Medea's infanticide — events that are the primary focus of Euripides' play — Ovid identifies Medea as an unambiguous villainess, just as he does with Tereus. The two are therefore aligned with one another; both being established as savage foreigners. Moreover, Ovid never gives Medea dialogue to discuss her actions, but only presents her to the reader through the eyes of the narrator: "Attention is focused not upon Medea's thoughts but upon her incantatory words and her superhuman actions."⁵ Medea's perception of her own intentions and crimes is thus never shown, as Procne's is. Rather, she is reduced to the role of a scheming witch.

Ovid also manipulates the role of the "mother" differently in the two myths in order to control the reader's perceptions of

³ Euripides, *Medea*, 96-98: "ἰὼ, / δῦστανος ἐγὼ μελέα τε πόνων, / ἰὼ μοι μοι, πῶς ἂν ὀλοίμαν." Translated by James Morwood (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

⁴ Carole Newlands, "The Metamorphosis of Ovid's *Medea*," in *Medea*, Edited by James J. Clauss and Sarah Iles Johnston, 188.

⁵ Newlands, "The Metamorphosis of Ovid's *Medea*," 187.

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each woman. He identifies Procne as the “good” mother, having her hesitate before killing her son, writing that when she looks at him “indeed the mother was moved.”⁶ This moment of pause demonstrates to the reader that Procne loves her son and is experiencing conflict over the notion of murdering him. She only goes through with the brutal act after looking at her mutilated sister, remembering her muteness and crying out to herself,

Why does he call me mother, when she cannot call me sister? Look at the husband to whom you are married, Pandion's daughter. You are unworthy of this; Loyalty to such a spouse as Tereus is a crime!⁷

By motivating Procne's final decision with the sight of her sister, the physical evidence of Tereus' violence, Ovid continues to draw the reader's attention to the women's suffering and Tereus' culpability. Procne's struggle to choose between maternal and sororal bonds further elicits an emotional response from the reader. In “The Metamorphosis of Ovid's Medea,” Newlands writes that,

“The sweet, dutiful wife [Procne] becomes the implacable murderess of her child. But we are at least given an explanation for Procne's empowerment in terms of Tereus' destruction of the marital and familial bonds.”⁸

It is clear that Ovid is attempting to build up sympathy for Procne by frequently reminding the reader of the motivation behind her actions. The same cannot be said for Ovid's Medea.

As a mother, Medea is Procne's opposite. Whereas the sight of her child moved Procne, Ovid says only this about

⁶ Ovid, *Metamorphosis*. 6.627: *mota quidem est genetrix*.

⁷ Ibid, 6.633-635: *'Quam vocat hic matrem, cur non vocat illa sororem?/ Cui sis nupta, vide, Pandione nata, marito./ Degeneras; scelus est pietas in coniuge Tereo.'*

⁸ Newlands, “The Metamorphosis of Ovid's Medea,” 194.

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Medea; “having avenged herself wickedly, the mother fled the sword of Jason.”⁹ The word *mater* is particularly significant here: nowhere else in the text does Ovid describe Medea as a “mother.” Ovid takes care to remind the reader that both women are mothers, but assigns polarizing traits to each one when describing them as such. Procne’s maternal quality is rooted in affection: it causes her to hesitate before killing her son and stirs up painful emotions within her. But Medea’s maternal quality becomes linked to her crime itself — her revenge against Jason through the murder of her sons. Thus Ovid twists the notion of a mother in the move from Procne’s narrative to Medea’s. Newlands points out that Ovid’s Medea “is detached from the family context that in Euripides’ *Medea* plays a crucial role in articulating her moral dilemma.”¹⁰ But more than that, the poet shifts the Euripidean image of motherhood onto Procne instead.

Ovid directly responds to and interacts with Euripides’ *Medea* in a number of places throughout Procne’s and Medea’s metamorphoses. For example, in the following passage from Euripides, the chorus sing of the only other woman — or so they claim — to commit infanticide:

“I have heard of one woman of those of old, one who laid her hands on her dear child, Ino, who was driven mad by the gods when the wife of Zeus sent her wandering from her house.”¹¹

Euripides uses this ode to heighten the horror of Medea’s behavior, emphasizing that in only one other case has a woman

⁹ Ovid, *Metamorphosis* 7.397: *ultraque se male mater Iasonis effugit arma.*

¹⁰ Newlands, “The Metamorphosis of Ovid’s Medea,” 188.

¹¹ Euripides, *Medea*: μίαν δὴ κλύω μίαν τῶν πάρος/ γυναικ’ ἐν φίλοις χέρα βαλεῖν τέκνοις,/ Ἴνώ μανείσαν ἐκ θεῶν, ὄθ’ ἡ Διὸς/ δάμαρ νιν ἐξέπεμψε δωμάτων ἄλαις.

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committed such a foul crime; and even then, it was as a result of divine interference. Ovid, however, refutes this claim of the *Medea* through his telling of the myth of Procne. He places Procne's myth immediately before Medea's in the *Metamorphoses*, not only inviting a parallel reading of the tales, but also clearly showing that there was at least one woman besides Medea who murdered her children without the mitigating excuse of divine frenzy. In this way, he negates these lines from Euripides and legitimizes his own text. Ovid displays his literary prowess through this intertextuality, thereby taking ownership of the mythological source material. In doing so, he is able to alter the narratives to reflect the Roman attitude towards foreigners. While Procne is a Greek, and therefore viewed as a predecessor to the Romans themselves, Medea is a barbarian from Colchis. Procne's crimes are thus treated with forgiveness; Medea's crimes, on the other hand, are shown no such sympathy.

In addition to his response to Euripides choral ode, Ovid shifts certain aspects of Euripides' *Medea* onto his own Procne. For example, Procne's hesitation before killing her son very clearly alludes to Euripides' tragedy. In the *Medea*, after her children return from delivering the poisoned gown to Jason's new bride, Medea looks at them and despairs,

"What is the meaning of your glance at me, children?
Why do you smile at me this last smile of yours? Alas,
what am I to do? My courage is gone, women, ever
since I saw the bright faces of the children. I cannot
do it."¹²

¹² Euripides, *Medea*, 1040-1048 (translated by Morwood): *τί προσδέρκεσθέ μ' ὄμμασιν, τέκνα;/ τί προσγέλατε τὸν πανύστατον γέλων;/ αἰαί: τί δράσω; καρδία γὰρ οἴχεται, / γυναίκες, ὄμμα φαίδρον ὡς εἶδον τέκνων./ οὐκ ἂν δυνάιμην ...*

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While Ovid shows his Medea to experience no such moment, his Procne does:

“Nevertheless as the child approached and greeted her as “mother,” and brought his little arms around her neck, and joined kisses mixed with childish words of endearment, the mother was moved and her rage was broken and stilled.”¹³

Both Euripides’ Medea and Ovid’s Procne endure this painful moment of doubt, when they look into the faces of their children and feel such powerful love towards them that their tempers are momentarily brought under control. Ovid is clearly invoking Euripides’ narrative in his own epic, and in doing so he forces the reader to transfer any redeeming qualities they may associate with Medea, a barbarian, onto the Greek Procne instead, robbing one woman of her atonement and granting it to the other in a distinctly political move.

In placing the myth of Medea directly after the myth of Procne, Ovid prompts the reader to compare the two murderous mothers to each other. His narratological choices firmly direct the reader’s sympathies toward Procne and away from Medea, despite the similarities of their actions. Furthermore, the poet assigns different traits to the two women as mothers, depicting Procne as a good mother and Medea as a cruel and abusive one. He also allows Procne to speak about how she sees herself, giving his audience a chance to identify with and understand her, but denies Medea the same. Finally, he uses sympathetic moments from Euripides’ *Medea* in his telling of Procne’s narrative, thereby reassigning any positive associations readers may have with

¹³ Ovid, *Metamorphosis* 6.624-627: *Ut tamen accessit natus matrique salutem/ attulit et parvis adduxit colla lacertis/ mixtaque blanditis puerilibus oscula iunxit,/ mota quidem est genetrix infractaque constitit ira.*

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Medea onto Procne instead. Ovid does this not only because he seeks to demonstrate his own expertise in the Greek literary tradition, but also because he is politically motivated. The Romans viewed foreigners, such as Tereus and Medea, in a derogatory light. They also saw themselves as the inheritors of Greek culture. Although she and Procne commit the same crimes, Procne is Greek and therefore her identity is linked to the Roman's identity. Because Medea is from Colchis, the Romans would categorize her as a barbarian. Ovid's portrayal of the two women is an attempt to reflect this mindset. Procne, herself a predecessor of the Romans, remains a civilized Greek despite her crime; Medea is an uncivilized foreigner and her actions must be exhibited through this lens.

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