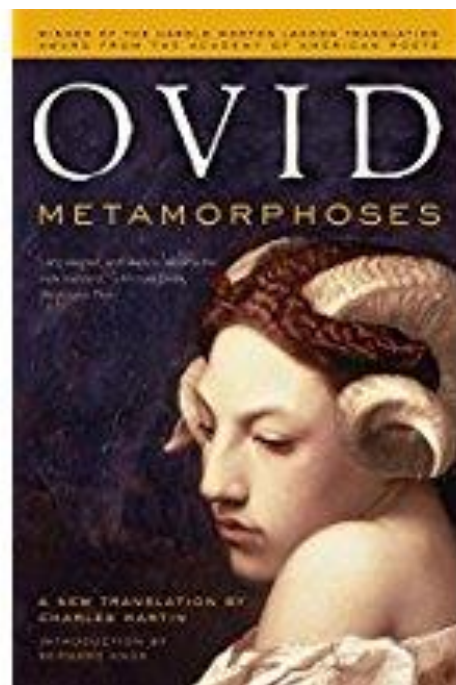


# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## Teaching Note The #MeToo Movement and Ovid's Philomela

By Justin L. Barker



This spring I'll teach Ovid's "Tereus, Procne, and Philomela" in my World Literature survey at Louisiana School for Math, Science, and the Arts, a public residential high school for high-achieving students. To be honest, I selected this text for selfish reasons—Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Legend of Philomela" from his *Legend of Good Women* is one of my favorite texts (I'm a Chaucerian after all). In fact, when I added Ovid's "Philomela," I wasn't thinking (consciously, anyway) of the text's current cultural resonance. But it's hard to overlook. Ovid's "Philomela" is about women's voices and men's need to silence those voices. It's about the literal and metaphorical violence women endure because of a man's bad behavior.

If you aren't familiar with Ovid's tale, it's located in his *Metamorphoses*, originally written in Latin and dating from 8 CE. Here's a brief synopsis: Tereus, married to Procne, rapes Procne's sister Philomela. When Philomela threatens to expose him, he cuts out her tongue and locks her away. She can't speak, but she learns to weave, and so weaves a tapestry detailing her ordeal, which she smuggles out to her sister. The tale doesn't end happily, though. In fact, to exact their revenge, Procne and Philomela murder Procne's only son and feed him to Tereus. The women then flee, and as they flee, they transform into birds.

The violence against Philomela is first against her body, and then against her voice. Philomela's voice poses a most serious threat to Tereus. After Tereus rapes Philomela, she exclaims,

I'll shed my shame  
And shout what you have done. If I've the chance,  
I'll walk among the crowds: or, if I'm held  
Locked in the woods, my voice shall fill the woods  
And move the rocks to pit. This bright sky  
Shall hear, and any god that dwells on high!<sup>1</sup>

There is no mistaking Philomela's power here. Her power is her voice—her refusal to be silenced. Philomela's voice isn't simply the words she strings together, but her capacity to speak up, to speak out, and to expose Tereus for the vile man he is. Her voice will be so powerful that even the gods will hear. She'll use her voice to "shed [her] shame." Shame that Tereus' sexual violence has forced upon her. The same shame that all sexually assaulted and harassed women experience. The shame that many of these women push down, deep down, to that place between the belly and the ribcage where it sits, festers, gnaws. But Philomela will shed that shame because, at that moment, she has her voice. Tereus will not get away with what he's done: he won't shame her. He won't control her.

But Tereus—the Ovidian equivalent of Harvey Weinstein or Donald Trump—can't allow Philomela to hold on to her power, and thereby, her voice. So, he does what all men in his position do: he strips away her power; he silences her. To silence Philomela, Tereus doesn't gag her; he doesn't wall her up behind thick stone. No, Tereus silences Philomela in a brutal act of aggression: he "seized / Her tongue with tongs and, with his brutal sword, Cut it

away."<sup>2</sup> Tereus literally cuts out Philomela's tongue. This egregious act of violence is a literalized metaphor for the violence done to women's voices over the centuries, and especially, as we're seeing, today. Harvey Weinstein's eighty-four accusers had their tongues cut out. Donald Trump cut out the tongues of his nineteen accusers. So did Charlie Rose, Matt Laurer, Roy Moore, Louis C.K., John Conyers, Trent Franks, and so on and so on. Since October 5, according to *The New York Times*, fifty high profile men have been accused of sexual assault and harassment.<sup>3</sup> Fifty men have cut out the tongues of hundreds of women.

These women, though, like Philomela, have begun to reclaim their voices, reclaim their power. In Ovid, Philomela, "wove a clever fabric, working words / In red on a white ground to tell the tale / Of wickedness."<sup>4</sup> Though, Philomela can't physically speak, she can tell of Tereus' "wickedness." So, she weaves the red words into a narrative—her narrative. Philomela now controls her story—a heartbreaking and violent story—and one that Philomela alone can tell. Through her narrative, Philomela regains her voice. Her power. Her agency.

Like Philomela, the thousands of women who have come forward to recount the shame and violence men have inflicted on them are weaving their own narrative tapestry. This tapestry spans cities, states, and continents. The #MeToo Movement is this tapestry. It's a tapestry woven together from the fabric of women's voices—Tweets, Facebook and blog posts, essays, and interviews. Women's voices are loud, powerful, especially as a collective. Men recognize this power, which accounts for their desire to silence us. But, like Philomela, we will no longer be silent.

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In her essay, "A Short History of Silence," Rebecca Solnit discusses the ways men have silenced women for... well...ever. "Silence," she writes, "is what allowed predators to rampage through the decades, unchecked. It's as though the voices of these prominent public men devoured the voices of others into nothingness, a narrative cannibalism."<sup>5</sup> Solnit's image of men devouring voices, of "narrative cannibalism," is fitting for the ending of Ovid's "Philomela." To exact their revenge, Procne and Philomela murder Procne's only son and feed him to Tereus. Procne uses Tereus' narrative cannibalism against him by rendering it a literal cannibalism. Elissa Marder claims that "Procne thus uses her own child as a substitute for a tongue."<sup>6</sup> Procne and Philomela speak through Procne's son; they render his body into language, and they force Tereus to devour this language. The sacrifice and consumption of Procne's son is heartbreaking, but

necessary. It's necessary because violence, rage is the only language that Procne and Philomela have; it's the only language that Tereus understands.

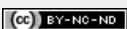
The final lines of the poem are marked by transformation. The sisters transform into birds and escape Tereus and his wrath. But this final image is one that I struggle with the most. I want desperately to view it as the sisters' transcendence of earthly masculine oppression. I want to interpret their language, metamorphosed into birdsong, as undefined by gender, power, oppression. But their transformation is marred by rage—by violence. I don't fault them. I understand. Tereus finally hears them, doesn't he? He finally understands because they speak his language. I'm reminded of a line from the 2015 movie *Suffragette*: "We break windows, we burn things, because war's the only language men listen to."<sup>7</sup>

As I prepare to teach this text in the coming weeks, I've been reflecting on how to approach this timely, though emotionally challenging, text. My students, though highly gifted and intellectually sophisticated, are still high school juniors and seniors. It'll be a delicate balance. I want them to understand the importance of women's voices and the desire (often violent desire) of men to silence and control these voices. I want them to understand power, and the various forms power takes. I want them to be critical and sympathetic readers of this text, but also of culture—Ovid's culture, our culture—and the power dynamics at play. I plan to frame discussion in much the same way I've discussed here, using the #MeToo Movement as a way to engage the interrelationship between masculine violence

and female silence—a relationship that has existed for 2,000 plus years. I intend to ask my students difficult questions that invite them to confront violence and power and how these issues are intertwined with gender and a long history of female silence and oppression. My hope is for my students to engage empathetically with ideas and views different from their own, and maybe undergo their own metamorphosis about how they understand gender, power, violence, and silence.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. Tr. A.D. Melville. The World's Classics. Oxford: Oxford UP. 134-42 (Book 6, lines 422-674), ll. 542-47.
- <sup>2</sup> Ovid, ll. 555-57.
- <sup>3</sup> Sarah Alkukhtar, Michael Gold, and Larry Buchanan, "After Weinstein: 45 Men Accused of Sexual Misconduct and Their Fall from Power," *The New York Times*, 22 Dec. 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/11/10/us/men-accused-sexual-misconduct-weinstein.html>. Accessed on 3 Jan. 2018.
- <sup>4</sup> Ovid, ll. 575-77.
- <sup>5</sup> Rebecca Solnit, "A Short History of Silence," *The Mother of All Questions* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 17-66 (22).
- <sup>6</sup> Elissa Marder, "Disarticulated Voices: Feminism and Philomela," *Hypatia* 7.2 (1992) 148-66 (161).
- <sup>7</sup> *Suffragette*, directed by Sarah Gavron (2015; Chatham, Kent, England: Ruby Films), DVD.



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