Foreword

This is a book about the myth of Tereus, Procne and Philomela. It is also a book about "assemblage theory", or rather a series of exercises in applying that theory to the body of literary, scholarly and artistic data that constitutes our evidence for that myth. The reader is invited to consider to what extent the theory has produced or suggested insights that would not have been reached without it; I can at any rate say that, for me, some windows of understanding have been opened of whose existence I had not previously been aware. And yet, though before downloading this book I had never heard of assemblage theory, I cannot help feeling that I and all other students of the history of myths, the history of religions, the history of ideas, etc., etc., had been practising it throughout our careers (as the celebrated Monsieur Jourdain had been talking prose all his life) without being aware of the fact; to say this is in no way to deny the value to the researcher of bearing explicitly in mind the principle that every variant of a myth, or at least every variant that has ever attained wide currency, may directly or indirectly exert an influence on subsequent tellings and interpretations of the story, and such indirect influence may be exerted even by a version of the myth that is no longer being told or depicted. For example, Gazis in this volume draws attention to the fact that the earliest traceable version of the myth was set not in Thrace, nor at Daulis, but at Thebes. Sophocles and his contemporaries may well not have known this: the only early piece of evidence for the proposition that the story was originally set at Thebes is that Homer (*Odyssey* 19.523) calls the future nightingale's husband Zethus rather than Tereus. (Even the scholia to this passage, which give a more detailed version of the story of uncertain age and provenance, while they do identify Zethus as son of Zeus and brother of Amphion, make no mention of Thebes.) Nevertheless, argues Gazis, if the story had indeed once been set at Thebes, the unhealthy aroma that often attaches to Theban myths will in some measure have clung to it during its subsequent development, and helped to explain Sophocles' presentation of Tereus as a barbarous Thracian.

If a myth has been current for many generations, the assemblage of cultural knowledge internalized by those familiar with the myth is likely to include some elements that are mutually contradictory. Usually this will not be a serious problem for authors or artists using the myth: they have merely to choose among alternatives, or else create a new variant. But sometimes things become a little more difficult, as happened with the Tereus myth when it came to Rome.

In all archaic and classical Greek versions of the story, so far as we know, the mother and murderer of Itys (at first named Aëdon, and later Procne) was said to have been transformed into a nightingale (whose beautiful, plaintive-sounding song was thought of as a lament for Itys) and her raped, tongueless sister (Chelidon,

later Philomela) into a swallow (which was notorious for its incessant, inarticulate twittering) — each of them, that is, doing, as a bird, what she would have been doing had she remained a human being. But in Latin, from the earliest known reference (Plautus, Rudens 604), it is the other way round: Procne (or Progne) becomes a swallow, and Philomela a nightingale. An incongruity is thus created between the metamorphosis and the events that led to it. Roman poets and mythographers had three strategies for dealing with this incongruity.

One is simply to ignore the paradox, or one might say to pretend it is not a paradox. This is the approach of the mythographer Hyginus (*Fabulae* 45). He tells the story with Procne and Philomela in their usual roles, and then merely adds "Progne was changed into a swallow, Philomela into a nightingale". This can hardly be regarded as satisfactory, since it leaves us wondering why Itys is being mourned by his aunt and not by his mother. Martial (*Epigrams* 14.75) positively embraces the paradox, describing Philomela as lamenting Tereus' crime and saying that from being a "dumb young woman" she has become a "garrulous bird".

Another method is that adopted by Ovid (Metamorphoses 6.424–674). He tells the story in great detail (again with Procne and Philomela in their usual roles), but when he comes to the metamorphosis — which theoretically is the reason why this story is included in Ovid's poem at all — he gets rid of it in four lines (*Met.* 6.667–670) without telling us what birds the sisters were changed into. A brilliant and (typically of Ovid) a slightly cheeky solution.

The third option is boldly to abandon the Greek precedent and change the names all the way through the story. In surviving texts this is first done by Virgil, who never tells the story in full but consistently uses language and nomenclature implying that Philomela, not Procne, was the mother of Itys and took the lead in the revenge-plot, speaking of Philomela lamenting "her lost offspring" (*Georgics* 4.511–512) and of the feast and gifts that she prepared for Tereus (*Eclogue* 6.79; the "gifts" were Itys' head, hands and feet).

It is striking that no ancient source actually tells the story of the marriage, the rape, the infanticide and the cannibalistic feast with the names of the sisters reversed, so strong is the influence of the older parts of the assemblage. But I have detained readers long enough, and I now have much pleasure in handing them over to the editors and contributors of Tereus through the Ages

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