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Oath Making and Breaking in Euripides' *Medea* KARYN GREENE

The swearing of oaths was an important feature of the Ancient Athenian political system. It was “a political process that could be expressed in ritual language and by means of ritual acts” (Cole, 227). In the *Medea*, Medea uses this political process as a means to both punish Jason for his betrayal and to avenge her dishonor. Euripides’s use of this practice emphasizes the importance of politics to the maintenance and successful continuation of both private and public life within the polis.

Oath making defined Athenian culture. It played such an integral role in society and was employed to determine the citizenship of Athenian males. First, an oath was made by the men who decided which youths were eligible to be honored with citizenship. Then, another oath was made by the men charged with equipping these youths with all the knowledge necessary for them to be successful and productive members of society. Finally, one last oath was made by these youths in which they swore to be honorable citizens and to dedicate their adult lives to the polis. One’s honor was determined by how well his oaths were kept and these oaths formed private and public bonds between citizens that ensured the social and political success of the city-state. “A failure to uphold sworn oaths damaged the political community and produced disaster” (Cole, 234). It also had a negative effect on individual families.

In the opening of the play, the nurse wishes that her mistress Medea had never left Colchis for then Jason would have never had the opportunity to dishonor her by betraying their marriage oath. The oath that Jason made with Medea follows the political conventions of oath making in Athens. When Jason, who had approached her as a suppliant to assist him in his quest to obtain the Golden Fleece, swears the oath to

Medea, he employs the practice of *dexiosis* (swearing by the right hand). *Thusia*, the standard form of sacrifice as described by Cole, is also an important aspect of Jason's oath. This practice emphasizes the bond between the oath giver and the oath receiver as well as the obligation of both parties to honor the gods who govern such practices. In these types of sacrifices, the entire body, after being cut to pieces, could be either burned, buried, or thrown into the sea (230). This description is eerily reminiscent of Medea's slaughter of her brother Absyrtus.

According to the myth, Absyrtus had originally been accompanying Medea and Jason as they fled from Colchis. However, Medea, in an effort to delay her father's pursuit of the Argos, decided to murder her brother, dismember him, and then hurl his severed body parts over the side of the ship and into the sea. Absyrtus, serves as the sacrificial animal that would have been a standard feature in this oath making. "The fate of the sacrificial victim represented the potential destruction of the person swearing the oath and was a visual and tangible sign of human powerlessness in the face of the gods" (Cole, 230). Such an event only solidifies the sanctity of the oath that Jason swore to Medea and provides ample evidence supporting the necessity of the severe punishment that he receives at the end of the play.

Medea employs the practice of *dexiosis* again in her confrontation with Creon. Even though Medea speaks to Creon with soft words, he exiles her and the children from Corinth for fear of his own life and for fear that Medea will bring about the destruction of his house. The decree of a king is not to be taken lightly and Medea knows she must do as ordered. Clinging to him with suppliant hands, she begs for just one more day in Corinth to settle her affairs and make provisions for her children. Creon continues to refuse until Medea summons the gods to witness his refusal of her plea. Creon is a king and so he must conduct himself in an honorable manner and serve as an example of excellence for his subjects. He must accept the plea of a suppliant. However, Creon grants Medea this favor against his better judgment, reasoning that there is no possible way that Medea could do any of the things that he fears she is capable of doing in only one day. Creon pays for this underestimation of Medea with

not only his life but with the life of his daughter as well. Once again Medea proves to the audience just how destructive the rippling effects of one broken oath can be.

In ancient Athens, the families of those found guilty of not upholding their oaths were cursed. Medea delivers a powerful threat to Jason when she says, “καὶ σοῖς ἀραία γ’ οὔσα τυγχάνω δόμοις” (I will bring about a curse on your house too, 608). Although Medea is Jason’s wife, she would not have been considered family in the same way that the concept is understood today. Jason’s sons, who stood in line to inherit his wealth, power, and reputation, also had the task of making sure that Jason was remembered. To the ancient Athenians, Jason’s family was comprised of his offspring, not his spouse.

In ancient Athens, there was a certain criteria for oath making: “an invocation to a god or gods (often three in number) to bear witness; a claim or a promise, and, in solemn or “great” oaths, a self-directed curse if the claim were true or the promise not kept” (233). Medea, in her lamentation, “θεοὺς μαρτύρεται οἷας ἀμοιβῆς ἐξ’ ἰάσονος κυρεῖ” (calls the gods to witness the nature of the requital that she gets from Jason 22-23). There are numerous other instances within the narrative in which both Medea and the chorus invoke Zeus and Themis, the gods who govern oath making and justice, respectively, as well as Helios as witnesses to the making or breaking of an oath.

Athenian men were expected to uphold these values concerning oaths for the preservation of the polis. According to Judith Fletcher, “oaths were divinely ordained and magically protected... and they stood like the primeval pillar that supports the sky” (30). Having acknowledged Jason’s betrayal, the chorus declares that there is no longer faith in oaths, βέβακε δ’ ὄρκων χάρις (439), a sentiment that is echoed by Medea on line 492 when she says “ὄρκων δὲ φρούδη πίστις” (I no longer put any trust in oaths). Medea recognizes that oaths are not serving in the capacity for which they were meant and makes use of the social upheaval to exact her revenge against Jason and to restore her honor. The chorus of Corinthian women also acknowledges that this breaking of an oath exists outside of the normal societal expectations. They say:

ἄνω ποταμῶν ἱερῶν χωροῦσι παγαί,
καὶ δίκαια καὶ πάντα πάλιν στρέφεται:
ἀνδράσι μὲν δόλαι βουλαί, θεῶν δ'
οὐκέτι πίστις ἄραρεν.
τὰν δ' ἐμὰν εὐκλειαν ἔχειν βιοτὰν στρέψουσι φᾶμαι:
ἔρχεται τιμὰ γυναικείῳ γένει:
οὐκέτι δυσκέλαδος
420φάμα γυναικῆς ἔξει.

The streams of the holy rivers flow backwards, and the order of all things is turned about: the thoughts of men have become deceitful and their oaths by the gods are no longer fastened. Rumor will so turn that women will possess a good reputation. Honor is coming to the race of women: no more will women be thought of with ill-repute (410-420).

Medea's decision to exact revenge in this manner is grounded in the ancient law of the polis. Since men can no longer be trusted to act honorably it is easily for Medea to use this warped social institution to manipulate many characters in the tragedy so that she can successfully accomplish her goals.

In this new reality, Medea is able to convince the chorus to keep the nature of her plan a secret even though they strongly disagree with her decision to murder her own children. She is able to convince Jason to persuade his new bride to accept their children into the city. She is able to trick Creon into allowing her another day to plot and plan and she is able to trick Aegeus into granting her refuge. Medea playfully taunts Jason, asking if he thinks that the gods who govern oath-making have changed or if they no longer care. But what she is really asking him is if he thinks he will escape divine punishment for the crime that he has committed against her, and ultimately against the gods as well. She says:

φεῦ δεξιὰ χεῖρ, ἧς σὺ πόλλ' ἐλαμβάνου

καὶ τῶνδε γονάτων,
ὡς μάτην κεχρώσμεθα
κακοῦ πρὸς ἀνδρός, ἐλπίδων δ' ἡμάρτομεν.

Oh right hand, which many times you held
And these knees too,
All in vain, was I touched by a base man,
How I have been deprived of my hopes (496-498).

Just as Jason has deprived Medea of her hopes, she will deprive him of his. It is clear by the nature of Medea's complaint that Jason promised to marry her if she helped him in his quest. While it is unknown exactly what self-directed curse Jason made when swearing this oath to Medea, it can be assumed that the curse in some way involved his progeny, as "the tradition of self-directed curses recognized the anxiety associated with paternity... and the necessity of the preservation of the family as the unit of the city" (235). Jason seems to be very much attached to the idea of raising his sons with Medea along with his unborn sons by the princess, increasing the glory of his house, and winning renowned for his family. However, this desire may have only been voiced to placate Medea's rage over the circumstances of his betrayal. In this way, Medea's actions against Jason are justified by political and social traditions of Athenian law.

The passage above also marks the first time in the tragedy in which Medea addresses her own hand. The hand with which she made the oath with Jason is the same hand that she will employ in her plot to extract her revenge from him for the breaking of it. This scene also foreshadows her future conversation with Creon, in which she approaches him as a suppliant and he, in vain, grants her request to remain in Corinth for just one more day. "The symbol of friendship and sacred trust thus becomes the instrument of violence" (Flory, 70). Medea, who has previously honored her oaths, now uses them to manipulate those around her into unconsciously participating in her revenge plot.

There are many scholars who argue, as Jason and Creon do, that Medea is angry because she has been romantically rejected by her husband. However, her anger stems instead from the way in which she has been dishonored. Medea is not heartbroken because Jason has left her for another woman. If anything, Jason appears to be the one who is utterly consumed by his love, love for the new princess. Medea laments all that she has sacrificed for Jason, her brother's life, her father's love, and her country just to be dishonored by a man who himself is so dishonorable that he does not uphold his oaths. Medea reproaches Jason for his betrayal of their agreement. She has held up her end of the bargain, she reasons. She tells Jason that perhaps she could have understood his treatment of her if she had never borne him children, which she would be obligated as his wife to do. As Elizabeth Bongie states, "if 'love' were the issue in Medea's mind, whether or not she had produced children would be quite irrelevant" (42). Since Medea has given much to Jason and he has not returned the favor, she aims to take away all of the gifts that she gave, starting with the two children that she bore him.

When Jason offers the ἀφθόνω . . . χερὶ (willing hand, 612) to Medea to help her and the children in their exile, Medea refuses to accept it because she knows that promises made by that hand are not to be trusted. She tells him:

οὐτ' ἂν ξένοισι τοῖσι σοῖς χρησαίμεθ' ἂν
οὐτ' ἂν τι δεξαίμεσθα, μηδ' ἡμῖν δίδου:
κακοῦ γὰρ ἀνδρὸς δῶρ' ὄνησιν οὐκ ἔχει.

I want nothing to do with your friends nor will I will not accept them,
Offer me nothing;
For a base man's gifts hold no blessing (617-618).

Medea has learned that nothing good comes from the promises made by Jason and she knows that he can offer her no benefit. When she calls for

a truce on line 899, Medea instructs the children to “λάβεσθε χειρὸς δεξιᾶς” (take the right hand) of their father. In this passage she considers her recent decision to murder the children and appears to struggle with following through with her plan. However, upon hearing Jason’s wish that they reach manhood; Medea knows that the murder of the children is a crime she must commit. By no means does Medea ever really consider a truce with Jason. Instead, Medea uses this ‘truce,’ secured by the children’s embrace of their father’s right hand, to trick Jason into believing that she is repentant for her earlier indiscretions, specifically the speeches that she made against him and the royal family. Medea is fully aware that Creon may not be persuaded to allow her children refuge. Her plan is dependent instead of Jason’s ability to woo his new bride. The only way for Medea’s plan to work is if Jason can convince the princess to accept the children but Medea is confident that Jason will be successful because she knows all too well how capable Jason is of bending women to his will.

According to Cole, “oath giving and oath taking were forms of exchange” (237). Medea gives Jason safe passage from Colchis, helps him obtain the fleece, and gives him two children, among many other things. In return, all Jason was required to provide was an equal partnership in their marriage. However, he falls short of the expectations of this agreement. Medea can never regain all that she has given up for Jason. She cannot bring her brother back to life, she cannot win back her father’s love, and she cannot return home to her fatherland. She can neither restore the life of Pelias nor remove the guilt from his daughter’s bloodstained hands. By murdering the children that she had with Jason, Medea inflicts the strictest form of punishment against him for the severe crime of breaking his oath and takes from him just as he has taken from her.

Not only does Medea’s quest to avenge her honor destroy Jason’s house, but it destroys the royal house as well. Creon is king of Corinth and, as mentioned earlier, the nature of his office requires him to perform specific duties and uphold certain standards. Creon, as monarch, serves as the embodiment of all laws and traditions of his people. He is a

living representation of the city-state. Although it is Medea who provides the poison, it is ultimately Jason's betrayal that causes the death of both Creon and the princess. Jason literally destroys the city of Corinth with the breaking of the oath made before he even arrived in the polis. Medea also engages in an oath with Aegeus, king of Athens. She approaches him as a suppliant; much like how Jason first approached her. In this encounter, Medea manages to secure for herself refuge once she escapes Corinth and arrives in Athens by promising to help Aegeus beget children of his own by use of her magical powers. Medea is certain to make secure this oath. While murdering her children is the only way to properly avenge her dishonor, it will all be for naught if Jason or the Corinthians are able to hold her accountable for her crimes. The exchange between Medea and Aegeus in the passage below follows the traditional conventions for oath making (745-755):

Αἰγεύς: . . . ἐξηγοῦ θεοῦς.

Μήδεια: ὄμνυ πέδον Γῆς
πατέρα θ' Ἥλιον πατρός τοῦμοῦ
θεῶν τε συντιθεῖς ἅπαν γένος.

Αἰγεύς: τί χρῆμα δράσειν ἢ τί
μὴ δράσειν; λέγε.

Μήδεια: μήτ' αὐτὸς ἐκ γῆς σῆς
ἔμ' ἐκβαλεῖν ποτε, μήτ', ἄλλος
ἦν τις τῶν ἐμῶν ἐχθρῶν ἀγειν
χρήζη, μεθήσειν ζῶν ἐκουσίῳ
τρόπῳ.

Αἰγεύς: ὄμνυμι Γαῖαν Ἥλιου θ'
ἀγνὸν σέλας
θεοῦς τε πάντας ἐμμενεῖν ἅ σου
κλύω.

Μήδεια: ἀρκεῖ: τί δ' ὄρκῳ τῷδε
μὴ ἴμμένων πάθοις;

Αἰγεύς: ἅ τοῖσι δυσσεβοῦσι
γίγνεται βροτῶν

Aegeus: By what gods should I swear?

Medea: Swear by the ground of Earth, by Helios, my grandfather, and by the whole race of gods added up all together.

Aegeus: What should and what shouldn't I do, speak.

Medea: That you yourself will never throw me out of your land and that, if any of my enemies ask to take me, and that you, while living, will never willingly set me loose as long as you live.

Aegeus: I swear by Earth, by the holy light of Helios, and by all the gods that I will do as I have heard from you.

Medea: That's sufficient. And what should you suffer if you don't abide in the oath?

Aegeus: That which becomes of ungodly mortals.

Aegeus makes his promise to protect Medea from her enemies, swearing by all of the gods. He does not hesitate to make the self-directed curse.

Aegeus is the king of Athens and would be expected, much like Creon is, to honor the oaths he makes. His last words are particularly significant to the understanding of the passage. He says that he accepts whatever punishment befalls mortals who break their oaths.

“Punishment for contempt of public as well as private oaths was expressed... by the loss of descendants, as symbolized in oath ritual by images of mutilation (Cole, 255). Euripides’ audience would have been familiar with the next episode in the myth in which Medea arrives in Athens after leaving Corinth and begets two children to Aegeus. Medea then tries unsuccessfully to assassinate Theseus, the long lost son of Aegeus; for fear that he would usurp her sons’ birthright. Medea promised Aegeus that he would have children if he harbored her and because he acted honorably she is able to do as she desires. The Athenian king appears to be the only character in the tragedy who is rewarded for upholding his end of an oath. Still, Aegeus is just another character manipulated by Medea in her plot for revenge.

According to Anne Burnett, Medea is “a figure only narrowly distinguished from the secular criminal... fearfully effective in [her] worldly strength, [her] intelligence, and [her] final victory” (3). The audience is able to sympathize with Medea because she is both a woman and foreign to the city of Athens. Countless times throughout the narrative the audience is reminded that Medea’s situation is one unique to women and that there is no possible way for her to return home to her own people. Another way in which the guilt shifts from Medea elsewhere is that she alone is not responsible for all the destruction, although she does play a hand in it. If Jason had never broken his oath then Creon, the princess, and the children would still be alive. Medea would have had no reason to supplicate Creon, or trick Jason or Aegeus. She would have had no reason to kill the children. Medea uses the children themselves as instruments in her plot. First she employs them as messengers of death

as it is they who deliver the poisonous wedding gifts to the princess. Then Medea takes their lives in her final act of punishment to their father.

Not only does Medea use oaths to punish Jason for everything that he has done against her, she also uses them to undo everything that she has done for him. While Jason may claim that he has never broken his oaths, it is clear that his punishments are justified because the gods, who play such an active role in the process, do not stop Medea from exacting her revenge. Medea systematically manipulates nearly every single character within the narrative to punish Jason for his betrayal and she is successful in doing so. Medea strips Jason of his reputation but she also takes so much more. By killing both her children and the princess, Medea makes it impossible for Jason's line to continue. Never will Jason be able to increase the glory of his house, in fact, he will die a pathetic death by being hit over the head with piece of wood fallen from his own ship.

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Catullus 51
RACHEL MAZZARA

*In idle hours, your thoughts and cares unwind.
My ears are ringing, singing their own song.
The poet's danger is an idle mind.*

Your husband's somewhere close to the divine—
Or better, though ideas like that are wrong.
In idle hours, your thoughts and cares unwind.

If you're the sun, his skin's tan from the shine.
(Poor senseless thing, that haunts me all night long.)
The poet's danger is an idle mind.

And when you catch my eye, I always find
My tongue's too numb, mouth's empty as a yawn.
In idle hours, your thoughts and cares unwind.

These melting flames could burn, if they combined,
My hazy vision clear, like fog at dawn.
The poet's danger is an idle mind.

Remember kings and cities undermined
By rest that stretched out days and years too long?
*In idle hours, your thoughts and cares unwind:
The poet's danger is an idle mind.*

Shakespeare and Ovid
PAUL FILIPPELLI

Shakespeare's play *Titus Andronicus* is based largely upon the story of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In Ovid's story the antagonist Tereus is persuaded by his spouse Procne to take a trip to Athens to pick up Philomela, Procne's sibling, to visit their home in Thrace. When Tereus sees Philomela, he immediately feels a deep and passionate lust for her. After he waves goodbye to his parents-in-law and assures them of their child's safety, he rapes her and cuts out her tongue. When he arrives in Thrace, he imprisons Philomela in a cabin in the woods and has a female servant visit the cabin periodically to take care of her. Philomela sews a tapestry with a secret message to Procne and uses sign language to tell her caretaker to take the tapestry back to Procne. When Procne gets the message, she goes to the cabin to rescue Philomela and then returns home; while she is at home she decides to kill her child Itys and feed him to Tereus in order to get revenge. In *Titus Andronicus*, Lavinia Andronica is given the same role as Ovid's Philomela, being raped and having her tongue cut out; Lavinia additionally has her hands cut off by Demetrius and Chiron so that she cannot mimic Philomela's use of knitting to free herself. Despite the similarities between Ovid's story and *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare replaces the impious female Procne with the virtuous male Titus and turns the character of Tereus into three characters – Tamora, Demetrius, and Chiron. Also, the role of the gods in *Metamorphoses* as the agents of the bad events is filled by the Moor Aaron. These notable changes which Shakespeare makes to the story raise questions about gender roles and contradict Ovid's bleak views about the nature of evil.

Shakespeare uses Titus to play the role of Ovid's Procne, turning a strong and cold female character into a male character with similar strength and coldness. Procne displays her strength and bravery once she finds out about the imprisonment of Philomela. She concocts a clever

plan to travel masked through the woods during the festival of Bacchus, when an all-female crowd of revelers is wildly worshipping the god of wine in the woods. She then sneaks Philomela to her house to await the arrival of Tereus. Titus Andronicus shows a more masculine strength of character when he unflinchingly has Aaron cut off his hand to save two of his children: "With all my heart, I'll send the emperor / My hand: Good Aaron, wilt thou help to chop it off?" (III.I.161-162). Shakespeare's decision to show this more masculine form of bravery gives Titus a more heroic role than Procne, who is considered by the gods to be just as guilty as Tereus.

The gender difference also contributes to a difference between their levels of coldness. Titus demonstrates a noble militaristic nature when he never hesitates at all before killing his Gothic enemies. When ordering the execution of Alarbus, Titus ignores the pleas of Tamora and declares that Alarbus must die "To appease their groaning shadows that are gone" (I.I.121-126). He later shows a complete lack of a second thought when he plots the deaths of Demetrius and Chiron:

Hark, villains! I will grind your bones to dust
And with your blood and it I'll make a paste,
And of the paste a coffin I will rear
And make two pasties of your shameful heads,
And bid that strumpet, your unhallow'd dam,
Like to the earth swallow her own increase. (V.II.183-192)

Procne, on the other hand, rejects her prescribed gender roles. Supposed to have a nurturing, motherly nature, Procne looks into the face of her own child and sees only his resemblance to the wicked Tereus:

Peragit dum talia Procne,
ad matrem veniebat Itys. Quid possit, ab illo
admonita est: oculisque tuens inmitibus "a quam
es similis patri" dixit. Nec plura locuta

triste parat facinus tacitaque exaestuat ira. (*Metamorphoses*
VI.619-623)

While Procne was doing such things, Itys was coming to his mother. She was warned by him what she would be able to do: And while she was looking with her pitiless eyes, she said, "Oh, you are so like your father." And saying no more, she prepares the sad deed and burns up with silent anger.

This rejection of the feminine gender role gives the reader a sense that Procne has a more vicious persona than her male counterpart Titus. However, this perception is not necessarily objectively true. The reader is wont to forget her temporary desire for mercy because she is supposed to have a maternal affection which Titus is never expected to possess; despite the horror of killing her own child, Procne is much more reluctant than Titus to commit murder:

Ut tamen accessit natus matrique salutem
attulit et parvis adduxit colla lacertis
mixtaque blanditiis puerilibus oscula iunxit,
mota quidem est genetrix infractaque constitit ira
invitique oculi lacrimis maduere coactis:
sed simul ex nimia mentem pietate labare
sensit, ab hoc iterum est ad vultus versa sororis
inque vicem spectans ambos... (*Metamorphoses* VI.624-631)

However, as the child came and greeted his mother and reached out to her neck with his little arms and gave her kisses mixed with childish charms, the mother was indeed moved and stopped her unbroken anger, and her eyes unwillingly became wet with forced tears: But at the same time she sensed that her mind was failing from excessive piety, and she again turned her head away from him and to the face of her sister, looking at both of them in turn.

Shakespeare's changing of Procne's role to a male part raises questions about the expectations which society places upon people based upon gender. Even though Titus is more unflinchingly blood-thirsty than Procne, the former is clearly intended to be considered more heroic than the latter solely because killing is considered to be an acceptable masculine act in circumstances of war. This major difference in the perception of the two characters exists largely because Titus's family is wronged by outsiders, as opposed to Procne's intra-family conflict. Titus's Lavinia is raped by external enemies, meaning that his prescribed gender role is to use martial force against the Gothic rapists. Procne, however, has a socially tougher choice to make: choosing to side with her spouse Tereus or her sibling Philomela. In choosing Philomela, she violates the marital expectation to be loyal to Tereus; furthermore, her form of revenge involves one of the most serious violations of maternal expectations: killing her own child. Even though Procne is notably less blood-thirsty than Titus, her actions are considered much worse because they are directed against her own family.

Shakespeare eliminates the character of Tereus and fills his role with the three characters of Demetrius, Chiron, and Tamora. This change makes Titus even more heroic of a protagonist since he is fighting against all of these enemies simultaneously. Procne and Philomela in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are able to gang up against their lone antagonist Tereus:

Circumspicit ille
atque ubi sit quaerit. Quaerenti iterumque vocanti,
sicut erat sparsis furiali caede capillis,
prosiluit Ityosque caput Philomela cruentum
misit in ora patris. (*Metamorphoses* VI.655-659)

[Tereus] looks around and asks where [Itys] is. While he was seeking him and calling again, Philomela jumped out with her hair disheveled from the vicious murder and threw the bloody head of Itys into the father's face.

This two-on-one plot seems unfair when compared to Titus's brave and heroic single-handed killing of Demetrius and Chiron in order to feed them to Tamora in front of the emperor and a train of Senators and others. The use of two characters in the rape of Lavinia also makes it viler than the rape of Philomela since the former is even more helpless as she is assaulted by two villains at once. All of this makes Titus's acts heroic even though Procne is considered just as guilty as Tereus in the Ovidian story.

Shakespeare makes changes which alter the reader's evaluation of the nature of the evil described in the story. Ovid clearly states in *Metamorphoses* that the terrible actions by Tereus and Procne are caused by the gods and fate:

Quem sibi Pandion opibusque virisque potentem
et genus a magno ducentem forte Gradivo
conubio Procnes iunxit. Non pronuba luno,
non Hymenaeus adest, non illi Gratia lecto.
Eumenides tenuere faces de funere raptas,
Eumenides stravere torum, tectoque profanus
incubuit bubo thalamique in culmine sedit.
Hac ave coniuncti Procne Tereusque, parentes
hac ave sunt facti. (426-434)

Pandion joined the powerful [Tereus] and his people to himself, to his wealth, and to his men by a great martial wedding between the leader and Procne. Juno was not present as the bridesmaid, Hymen was not present, and Grace was not at their bed. The Furies held torches stolen from a funeral, The Furies laid the wedding mattress, and a profane owl loomed over their bed and sat on the roof of their bedroom. Procne and Tereus were joined beneath this bird, and they became parents beneath this bird.

Tereus and Procne are doomed to have a tumultuous marriage, and Itys

is destined to die a horrible death because the gods are offended that their wedding was not conducted with the proper rituals.

Shakespeare, on the other hand, utilizes Aaron as the agent of evil. During the time of Shakespeare there was a great disdain for Moors in England; in fact, Queen Elizabeth thrice ordered the deportation of all of them. The 1601 order to remove them said that they “are fostered and powered here, to the great annoyance of her own liege people that which co[vet?] the relief which these people consume, as also for that the most of them are infidels having no understanding of Christ or his Gospel” (*Tudor Royal Proclamations*). Aaron serves as the source of evil in *Titus Andronicus* as an embodiment of everything bad which the English people believed about the Moor race and has an insatiable lust for blood, plotting the death of Bassianus and the rape of Lavinia for his own enjoyment. Aaron persuades Demetrius and Chiron to rape Lavinia and to kill Bassianus; he tricks Titus to cut off his hand, and he boasts to Lucius Andronicus about being the cause of all of these evil deeds:

And what not done, that thou hast cause to rue,
Wherein I had no stroke of mischief in it?
I play'd the cheater for thy father's hand,
And, when I had it, drew myself apart
And almost broke my heart with extreme laughter. (V.I.111-115)

Ovid believed that individuals are the playthings of the gods and that their actions can all be attributed to fate and to the will of the gods. Shakespeare, by removing the gods from the story and replacing them with Aaron the Moor, penned a story of free will and human agency of evil.

Shakespeare's alterations to the characters in Ovid's story of Procne, Philomela, and Tereus raise questions about gender roles and the nature of good versus evil. Ovid's story paints a view of the world in which humans are playthings of the gods. Procne and Tereus are doomed by the gods to be wicked and are equally guilty of the tragic events which occur; both are punished in the end by being metamorphosed into birds,

and Philomela gets the same punishment solely for being unlucky enough to get caught up in the wickedness of her relatives. Shakespeare, however, turns Procne into the protagonist Titus, whose deeds are considered acceptable because they fit with the personality which is valued in male warriors. Titus is brave enough to stand up to the powerful forces which stand against him and dies a noble death avenging Lavinia and purging injustice from the state. Shakespeare's alterations turn the bleak story of hopelessness from *Metamorphoses* into a humanistic tale of bravery and virtue.

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Channeling Tradition and Self: An Examination of the Allusivity
and Originality of Theognidean Verse
PAUL BISAGNI

Among the ditches and landmines that plague the battle-plain to which David Campbell likens Theognidean scholarship is the occurrence in the corpus of passages ascribed to other writers.¹ Embraced by separatists – those who reject the single authorship of the *Theognidea* – as evidence for the inclusion of imitations by later writers and explained by unitarians as not unusual instances of one poet reproducing or retouching another’s work, the question is all but insoluble. While I do not aim to endorse one camp over the other, for the purposes of this study I shall regard the noted allusions to earlier poets, using Mimnermus as a focal point, as just that – allusions, evocations, not passages misattributed to Theognis.² Rather, as I shall demonstrate, the reiterations of his forbears’ writings are distinctly Theognidean in style, execution, and context. Far from branding him an unoriginal copycat or even nullifying his authorship, these parallelisms evince Theognis’ poetic skill and keen understanding of his particular circumstances and reasons for writing.

In his commentary on Theognis in *Greek Lyric Poetry*, Campbell cites Solon, Tyrtaeus, and Mimnermus as the lyric poets whom Theognis, their successor by roughly a century, imitates.³ The works of these three writers cover an array of themes, ranging from the political self-apology and sage admonitions against excess and hubris of Solon, to the wartime exhortations and discourses on excellence (ἀρετή) of Tyrtaeus, to the plaintive musings on youth and old age of Mimnermus. Upon first glance, one might presume that Theognis’ verse most closely evokes that of Solon and Tyrtaeus, considering Theognis’ preoccupation with the stability of the city and its people, as well as his aristocratic disgust at

¹ David A. Campbell, ed., *Greek Lyric Poetry* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1982), 344-45.

² *Ibid.*, 344.

³ *Ibid.*

growing social mobility and the consequent degradation of the noble (οἱ ἀγαθοί). And yet, the peevish aristocrat engages Mimnermus just as much – if not more so – as his more politically minded predecessors. To begin with, as Campbell notes in his codicil to Theognis 341-50, in which the poet entreats Zeus to avenge the theft of his property, τεθναίην in line 343 recalls τεθναίην in line 2 of Mimnermus 1.⁴ Granted, the verb “to die” is far from unusual in Ancient Greek, and much of Greek literature explores death as a subject. What distinguishes the connection between these words and, as a result, the poems that feature them is their forceful, dramatic primacy, which is supplemented by their shared position in conditional statements. However, these are not the only likenesses between the two poems. The protasis to τεθναίην’s apodosis in Theognis’ poem expresses the longing for “respite from evil worries” (343: κακῶν ἄμπαυμα μεριμνέων), which in Mimnermus 1 “always torment him [the aged man] all around his brain” (7: αἰεὶ μιν φρένας ἀμφὶ κακαὶ τείρουσι μέριμναι). Theognis borrows “evil worries” as well as “respite” (ἄμπαυμα) from Mimnermus, though the latter appears as ἄμπαυσις in a different poem that details the Sun’s toils (fragment 10, line 2), and just as Mimnermus frames his meditation on the woes of old age with Ἀφροδίτης (1) and θεός (10), so Theognis begins his plea with Ζεῦ (341) and ends it with δαίμων (350). Initially signaled by the repetition of the startling first-position τεθναίην, the similarities between the two poems branch out to other recurring words and the very framework of the pieces.

And yet, Mimnermus 1 and Theognis 341-50 are substantially different. At the elementary level, the poems broach two independent matters. Whereas Theognis is inveighing against the theft of his property (345-47: τίσις δ' οὐ φαίνεται ἡμῖν / ἀνδρῶν, οἳ τὰ μὰ χρέματ' ἔχουσι βίην / συλήσαντες), evidently not the first injustice he has suffered of late (343-44), Mimnermus bemoans the vicissitudes of old age (5-10) and the evanescence of life’s pleasures (1-4). In addition to content, the poems differ markedly in context. The nature of Mimnermus 1 is wholly

⁴ Ibid., 343n, 364.

contemplative. Although Mimnermus delineates the sorrows of aging with great poignancy – he twice emphasizes the detrimental effects of growing old on the individual (6: γῆρας, ὃ τ' αἰσχρὸν ὁμῶς καὶ κακὸν ἄνδρα τιθεῖ; 9: ἀλλ' ἐχθρὸς μὲν παισίν, ἀτίμαστος δὲ γυναιξίν) and interposes a fleeting whiff of what the old man was once able to enjoy (8: οὐδ' αὐγὰς προσορῶν τέρπεται ἠελίου) – this is attributable to his panache as a poet, not his experiences as an old man. Indeed, he wishes to die “when the joys of life no longer matter to him” (2: ὅτε μοι μηκέτι ταῦτα μέλοι), that is, “when painful old age arrives” (5-6: ἐπεὶ δ' ὀδυνηρὸν ἐπέλθη / γῆρας). As the moods of the verbs indicate, the infelicities that Mimnermus lists have not yet seized him, which lends the poem a gnomic air and makes the poet a distant contemplator. Theognis, on the other hand, is reeling from a real-time calamity. He delivers his supplication with urgent aorist imperatives (341: τέλεισον, 342: δός) and makes ample mention of the bad things that have befallen him (342, 343, 344, 346). Moreover, he accentuates the direness of the situation and his indignation with a jarring simile, absent of a softening ὥστε, that likens him to a dog (347: ἐγὼ δὲ κύων), and he proceeds from there with a trenchant wish to drink the blood of the wrongdoers (349). Juxtaposed with such glaring divergences, the aforementioned similarities seem to dwindle in significance.

Why, though, would a conscientious poet such as Theognis link his prayer to Mimnermus' meditation? What light does the connection shed on 341-50? Perhaps the simplest explanation is the desire for poetic glory while incanting in the symposium. By channeling Mimnermus' piece and, in a sense, incorporating it into his own, Theognis showcases not only his familiarity with an older, esteemed poet but also his own dexterity and skill. But, why Mimnermus 1 in particular? In addition to his use of aorist imperatives, a starkly unexpected metaphor, and a bloodthirsty vow, Theognis vivifies and enhances the urgency of his plea in evoking Mimnermus 1, which is by contrast calm and restrained. Though its subject matter is bleak, though Mimnermus does not equivocate about the pains of growing old, the poem is nonetheless modulated by a smooth thematic flow and, as Campbell highlights in his citation of C.M.

Bowra, an artfully crafted rhythmic scheme. Indeed, Mimnermus guides the reader through a pleasant but swift account of youth and progressively slows the verbs, shortens the sentences, and accentuates the stops, concluding the poem with a stark declaration of the god-given difficulties of aging.⁵ Theognis, on the other hand, bounds from urgent imperative (341, 342) to stern wish (343) and to the more caustic wish (344) already cited, and he intersperses these terse utterances with an abrupt remark about his fate (345: αἴσα γὰρ οὕτως ἐστί) and the aforementioned metaphor. Such effects add an element of dissonance to the poem that reflects and reinforces the rage Theognis is experiencing. Although, as Bowra astutely points out, Mimnermus truncates his sentences and amplifies the stops to a dramatic end, the amount of short sentences is greater, and the sentences themselves are shorter, in Theognis 341-50. Furthermore, in ending the poem with yet another pained plea (349-50: ἐπί τ' ἐσθλὸς ὄροιο / δαίμων, ὃς κατ' ἐμὸν νοῦν τελέσειε τάδε) whose fulfillment, of course, is entirely dependent on the will of the gods, Theognis denies the reader the sense of concrete finality afforded by Mimnermus (10: οὕτως ἀργαλέον γῆρας ἔθηκε θεός).

Considering the direct connection between Mimnermus 1 and Theognis 341-50 through τεθναίνην and the presumed learnedness of the fellow-aristocrats to whom Theognis would be incanting, as well as the simple fact that Campbell highlights the connection in his commentary note, one may reasonably conjecture that the audience would have picked up on the allusion upon hearing line 343. Even if τεθναίνην did not trigger the association in the minds of the listeners, the following phrase (κακῶν μερικνέων), which occurs two lines after τεθναίνην in Mimnermus 1, would have likely alerted the audience to the connection being drawn. In thus evoking his predecessor's graceful poem, which Campbell posits is "one of the short poems *admired for their sweetness* by Callimachus," Theognis sets the audience up to hear a similarly graceful recitation, only to confront them with the harsh lines delineated above.⁶ This ingenious

⁵ Ibid., citing Bowra, 224.

⁶ Ibid., 224 (emphasis mine).

confrontation, this swift contradiction of the listeners' expectations, magnifies the already jolting elements of the vengeance-prayer and, consequently, the urgency and incensement that Theognis is trying to convey through the jolts.

The relationship between Mimnermus 1 and Theognis 341-50, however, need not be interpreted as entirely adversative. While the contents and contexts diverge on the whole, there are subtle similarities beyond the verbal ties that enrich this connection. In addition to emphasizing the woes of old age, Mimnermus touches on the transience of youth and of youth's delights. Although men and women in their prime enjoy "clandestine love and kind gifts and the bed" (3: κρυπταδίη θιλότης καὶ μείλιχα δῶρα καὶ εὐνή) in abundance, time inexorably eats away at them and thus renders them unfit for past pleasures. Mimnermus singles out the man, whom old age makes "ugly" (αἰσχρὸν) and "base" (κακὸν) and, consequently, "hateful to boys" (ἐχθρὸς μὲν παισίην) and "dishonorable to women" (ἀτίμαστος δὲ γυναίξην). Underlying this sobering account of life's progression is the notion of the inevitability of this progression. While the poet never explicitly mentions this, and while he himself, as was noted before, still basks in life's pleasures, the exposition proper of "painful old age" (ὀδυνηρὸν γῆρας) employs bare present-tense indicative verbs that allow for no exceptions or escape – old age *makes* (6: τιθεῖ) man base; worries *oppress* (7: τείρουσι) him; he *does not enjoy* (8: οὐδ' τέρπεται) the sun's rays. As if the reader were not assured by now of the ineluctability of aging, Mimnermus cements it by recalling its divine source – θεός emphatically concludes the last line of the poem, and Mimnermus strikingly renders the god's act in the aorist tense (10: ἔθηκε). To amplify at once the connection and contrast between youth and old age, the poet gives them nearly identical adjectives – alas, ἦβης ἄνθεα...ἀρπαλέα (4) will ultimately give way to ἀργαλέον γῆρας (10). Indeed, the transience of youth, the impermanence of its delights, is immanent in Mimnermus' musing.

How, then, does this underlying notion in Mimnermus 1 affect our interpretation of Theognis 341-50? What, if anything, does it illuminate about the plea for revenge? Interestingly enough, amidst the jarring

language, abrupt stops, and ardent invocations of the gods that define the poem, Theognis briefly comments on his lot in life: ἀἴσα γὰρ οὕτως ἐστὶ (345). As Campbell rightly points out, his “lot” is the offenses he has suffered and the resultant “evil worries” that plague him.⁷ Amidst his indignation, therefore, he acknowledges with startling equanimity that bad things are bound to befall mortals. Such a gnomic admission recalls Mimnermus’ emphasis on inescapable, troublous old age. Indeed, just as youth is fated to flee and old age is fated to beleaguer men and women, so Theognis is fated, as he has just realized, to lose his property. The affronted aristocrat must accept what transpired, as he seems to be doing rather tersely in line 345, and humans ought to be aware, if they are not already, of what awaits them. In this sense, therefore, the relationship between Mimnermus 1 and Theognis 341-50 is not adversative but complementary, for by channeling the former Theognis adds an intriguing subtext to his prayer. Though his desire for vengeance is manifest, he retains his rationality and, one might add, his piety – he does not imprecate the gods for enabling his misfortunes but accepts his fate and begs the gods’ favor. Concomitant with Theognis’ acknowledgement of his ἀἴσα may be a recognition of the ephemerality of things – of property, of status and respect in one’s state. So, too, did Mimnermus intimate the transience of the things he prizes – secret loves, presents, bedroom exploits – in poem 1. Having plucked Mimnermus’ thematically grave yet formally graceful and winsome piece from the pool of his poetic predecessors and integrated it into his own poem, Theognis not only showcases his knowledge of older poets and their verse but also masterfully enhances 341-50.

The dialogue that Theognis thus initiates with Mimnermus is not confined to the poems discussed. Although Mimnermus 1 and Theognis 341-50, when taken as a pair, provide a sterling example of Theognis’ proclivity for replicating others’ verses and incorporating them into his own, many other poems in the Theognidea conjure up Mimnermus in subject matter and tone if not through borrowed words. One such poem

⁷ Ibid., 345n, 364.

is 567-70, which Campbell aptly deems “reminiscent of Mimnermus.”⁸ And yet, no words or phrases employed by the older poet reappear, certainly none as striking as τεθναίην. Granted, ἦβη τερπόμενος in line 567 parallels ἄνθεσιν ἦβης / τερπόμεθα in lines 3-4 of Mimnermus 2. However, the phrase is not especially distinctive, though the connection between the two poems may have very well materialized in the minds of Theognis’ audience. What solidifies the influence of Mimnermus 2 on Theognis 567-70 is the latter’s subtler elements. Just as Mimnermus conceives of the light of the sun as an embodiment of life – and of youth in particular – so Theognis directly contrasts it with death (569: λείψω δ’ ἐρατὸν φάος ἡελίοιο). Furthermore, in restricting his introductory joyous thought about youth to one pithy sentence that occupies half of the line (567: ἦβη τερπόμενος παίζω) and devoting the rest of the poem to nonexistence, dramatically concluding it with the hopeless ὄψομαι οὐδὲν ἔτι (570), Theognis channels the brilliantly unbalanced structure of Mimnermus 1. He is clearly indebted to, and arguably admiring of, his forerunner in the elegiac tradition.

The simple meditation on youth’s all-too-quick concession to death gleams with Theognidean flourishes. The most elementary diversion from Mimnermus lies in line 569, where Theognis supplants the characteristic Mimnerman phrase “rays of the sun” (e.g. poem 1, line 8: αὐγὰς...ἡελίοιο) with “lovely light of the sun” (ἐρατὸν φάος ἡελίοιο). Though the change is slight and the effect stays the same, it represents Theognis’ distinctive reconfiguration of another poet’s verse. Theognis further distinguishes himself and his poetry through the use of ἄφθογος, “voiceless,” in line 569. The connection to Mimnermus is patent: he describes old age as rendering man ἀτίμαστος (1.9) and ἄτιμον (5.4), both of which mean “dishonorable,” as well as ἄγνωστον (5.4), which one may interpret as “unrecognizable” due to age’s enervation of the face and body or as “unknown,” forgotten, denuded of whatever notoriety he once had. While Theognis also employs a negated adjective – though in 567-70 it illustrates the result not of aging but of death – the effect is

⁸ Ibid., 368.

arguably more chilling. Aside from its arresting primacy in line 567, ἄφθογγος is striking because it would have likely been said aloud during a recitation. Regardless of the identity of the speaker – Theognis himself in the midst of a symposium, a later classical admirer aloud to himself, or even a modern student aloud in class – the act of vocalizing the word “voiceless” generates a jarring existential disconnect. In addition, the word resonates especially with Theognis not only because he is a poet, a man whose voice serves as his creative outlet, but also because he is deeply conscious of his poet status. Indeed, in 237-54 Theognis reminds Kyrnus, his perfidious confidant, that he has conferred immortality upon him by mentioning him in his poems, and in the famously mystifying σφρήγις poem (19-26), he is adamant about marking his work as his own and safeguarding it against forgery or adulteration. For such a self-referential, self-aware poet to liken himself to a “voiceless stone” (568-69: ὥστε λίθος / ἄφθογγος) when dead is remarkably poignant and jolting. In using ἄφθογγος in this brief musing on life and death, therefore, Theognis at once hearkens back to Mimnermus and forges his own path forward.

Following his summary of the fractious nature of Theognidean scholarship and the separatist skepticism concerning repetition in the corpus, Campbell asserts that the disgruntled aristocrat “worked unadventurously within the elegiac tradition.”⁹ While it is true that he works exclusively in elegiacs, one cannot accuse him of being unadventurous. As his artful incorporation of Mimnermus 1 into his vengeance-plea and his other adaptations of Mimnerman verse indicate, Theognis does not shy away from experimentation, nor does he stifle his own thoughts and creative impulses in favor of reproducing the work of his predecessors. Rather, he engages others’ poetry and grafts it dramatically, if not always harmoniously, onto his own, simultaneously honoring his influential forebears and leaving his seal in the annals of Greek elegiac poetry.

⁹ Ibid., 346.

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Phoebus
DALTON TRACEY

I saw the spiteful cherub's barb, a shaft
Of reed with tip of lead, hanging loose
Inside your chest. I do not think you saw
It there. I only meant to let you know.
You ran from me, and in my haste to speak
I chased you over hill and barren earth,
Your feet were bloodied from rocks and thorns
But you ran on. Daphne, you were a foolish girl
Who'd rather flee than face her fears. Your leaves
Still quiver in the air; there is no wind.

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