INCEST, CANNIBALISM, FILICIDE: ELEMENTS OF THE THYESTES MYTH IN OVID’S
STORIES OF TEREUS AND MYRRHA

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ABSTRACT

Hannah Sorscher: Incest, Cannibalism, Filicide: Elements of the Thyestes Myth in Ovid’s Stories of Tereus and Myrrha
(Under the direction of Sharon L. James)

This thesis analyzes key stories in Books 6–10 of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* through a focus on the pair of stories that bookend the central section of the poem, the narratives of Tereus and Myrrha. These two stories exemplify the mythic types of the family-centered stories in Books 6–10: Tereus’ is a tale of filicide (specifically, filial cannibalism), while Myrrha’s features incest. Ovid links these stories through themes and plot elements that are shared with the tragedy of Thyestes, a paradigmatic tragic myth encompassing both filial cannibalism and incest, otherwise untold in the *Metamorphoses*. Through allusions to Thyestes’ myth, Ovid binds together the sequence of human dramas in the poem, beginning and ending with the Tereus and Myrrha stories. Furthermore, the poet reinforces and signals the connections between the stories through textual echoes, lexical formulations, and shared narrative elements.
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Introduction

In the central books of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, six episodes share a dark but very Ovidian theme: the destruction of human families. In contrast to the majority of stories in the first five books, which focus on the lust and wrath of the gods, these tales are primarily concerned with the harm caused by human emotions.\(^1\) Overwhelmingly, these emotions can be identified as the lust and anger of women, but men’s lust and anger are powerful forces as well. One such episode is prominent in each book of *Metamorphoses* 6–10: Tereus, Procne, and Philomela (6); Medea (7); Scylla as well as Althaed and Meleager (8); Byblis and Caunus (9); and Myrrha and Cinyras (10). These narratives boil down to two major types: filicide animates the stories in Books 6, 7, and 8, while incest is the major theme of the last two. The stories share many features, from overarching themes to detailed verbal correspondences, but perhaps the most striking similarities are those between the first and last episodes in the sequence—the stories of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela in Book 6, and of Myrrha and Cinyras in Book 10.\(^2\) This pair bookends the central section of the poem, and each represents one of these two myth types: the first features filicide, and the second, incest. The taboos violated in all these stories, but especially in the Tereus and Myrrha episodes, have a common model in the myth of Thyestes, a man cursed to eat his own children and commit incest with his own daughter.

Thyestes is thus perfectly suited to the themes of Books 6–10, yet Ovid does not narrate his story, perhaps because it features no metamorphosis. But Thyestes is not entirely absent. I argue that the tragedy of Thyestes runs as an undercurrent through the filicidal and incestuous

\(^1\)Anderson 1972, ad 6.412–674.

\(^2\)Hereafter referred to as the “Tereus” and “Myrrha” episodes.
narratives of *Metamorphoses* 6-10. Narrative elements of Thyestes’ myth are found in all the stories in Books 6–10, but the Tereus episode, as I will argue, inevitably evokes him, and features of Myrrha’s story do so, surprisingly, as well. Through a pattern of allusions to the Thyestes myth, Ovid takes advantage of one of the consummate myths of human tragedy in the ancient tradition to bind together his series of family dramas, from beginning to end. He reinforces the connections between these stories through textual echoes, lexical formulations, and shared narrative elements.

**Thyestes**

The house of Tantalus provides the subject matter for numerous tragedies both Greek and Roman. This family is perhaps the ultimate example of a tragically doomed genealogy. In his *re cusatio* to Agrippa, Horace uses the house of Pelops to denote the genre of tragedy in the same way that Achilles and Ulysses stand in for the genre of epic (*Odes* 1.6.5–9). Within this cursed family tree, Thyestes’ complex story contains the worst features, as his myth encompasses an array of tragic themes: sibling conflict, lust, adultery, revenge, murder, rape, incest, and, most horribly, child cannibalism. Thyestes, his brother Atreus, their ancestors, their descendants, and their wives are all choice tragic subjects.³

Thyestes’ relevance is also attested by the sheer number of ancient tragedies known to have treated his myth, though only Seneca’s *Thyestes* survives. Sophocles wrote an *Atreus* as

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³For instance, in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Thyestes appears, paired with Oedipus as an ideal tragic hero (1453a), and reappears soon after in a list of the families who provide the best subjects for tragedy, along with his grand-nephew Orestes and others. In context, Aristotle probably has in mind the story of Thyestes committing incest with his daughter (Janko 1987, ad 53a11). Horace, by contrast, uses Thyestes’ banquet as a paradigmatic tragic theme in his *Ars Poetica* (91).
well as two or three *Thyestes* plays; Euripides wrote a *Thyestes* as well as a *Plisthenes* and *Cres-\_

4\) Plays entitled either *Thyestes* or *Atreus* are attributed to six other Greek tragedians.\(^5\) In addition, plentiful references to the story of Thyestes occur in extant Greek tragedy, such as Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* and Euripides’ *Orestes* and *Electra*, among others.\(^6\) In Republican Rome, an *Atreus* or *Thyestes* was attributed to Ennius, Accius, and Cassius of Parma, who all wrote before Ovid.\(^7\) Throughout their production in Republican Rome, these plays were distinguished by anti-tyrannical political resonances.\(^8\) In fact, in Ovid’s own day, Augustus commissioned Varius Rufus to write a *Thyestes*, with an unprecedented production value of a million sesterces, to be performed on the occasion of his triple triumph in 29 BCE after the defeat of Antony and Cleopatra.\(^9\)


\(^4\)Boyle 2006, 79.

\(^5\)Agathon, Chaeremon, Carcinus, Cleophon, Diogenes of Sinope and Apollodorus of Tarsus (Boyle 2006, 79). See Tarrant (1985, 40) for another list of these and other Thyestes plays.

\(^6\)See Gantz 1993, 546.

\(^7\)Boyle 2006, 79.

\(^8\)See Boyle 2006, 158–159.

\(^9\)See Boyle 2006, 161. Ovid was certainly aware of this play, and may refer to these political resonances in Varius and Sempronius Gracchus, who wrote a *Thyestes* shortly afterwards (*Pont.* 4.16.31). The fact that Cicero compared Antony to Atreus in the *Philippics* may have influenced Augustus’ choice of this play (Boyle 2006, 162). After Ovid, tragedians credited with an *Atreus* or *Thyestes* include Aemilius Scaurus, Pomponius Secundus, Curiatius Maternus, Rubrenus Lappa, and of course, Seneca (Boyle 2006, 79).
members, followed by references to the stories of Medea and Tereus, among others (2.623–630). Finally, Ovid’s discussion of the genre of tragedy in *Tristia* 2.1 includes a list of examples of love stories within tragedy, in which the sequence Pelops, Medea, Tereus, Thyestes, and Scylia occurs (381–408). With the exception of Thyestes, these figures strongly evoke the central books of the *Metamorphoses*, where thematic similarities, as well as deliberate cues from the poet, work in tandem to recall even an unmentioned Thyestes.

Given the prominence of Thyestes’ story in tragedy, at Rome, and in his other works, Ovid could expect his Roman readers to recognize allusions to his myth in the *Metamorphoses*. Scholarship of recent decades has shown that his target readers were educated, widely read, and had comprehensive knowledge of Greek and Roman mythology. They would also have been highly intertextual readers and re-readers, primed to notice connections through multiple readings over his entire corpus. This reading practice would have equipped them to pick up on the elements of the Thyestes myth dispersed throughout these stories. They would also have returned to the *Metamorphoses*, as they read newly published books and poems, to re-read it in light of the poet’s newer works, for instance, understanding a detail in the Myrrha episode in light of a passage in the *Ibis*. My analysis presumes this model of reader.\(^\text{11}\)

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\(^\text{10}\)Even the order of the figures in the *Tristia* parallels their order in the *Metamorphoses*. In addition, other lists that include Thyestes among myths that Ovid narrates in the *Metamorphoses* occur in the *Ibis*. In one instance, Thyestes appears in a catalogue of cannibalistic crimes which also includes Lycaon, Tantalus, Teleus (whose name and myth is evocative of Tereus: see the story of Harpalyce as told by Parthenius of Nicaea, *Sufferings in Love*, 13), and Medea (428–436). In two other passages (359–360, 545–546), Thyestes appears next to Tereus and Myrrha along with thematically-related figures from the *Metamorphoses* (Byblis, Pentheus, Nyctimene).

\(^\text{11}\)It is also likely that non-erudite readers, who received the *Metamorphoses* by hearing it read aloud, would have made many of the same connections, as they would know the Thyestes myth and would have seen revivals of Republican tragedies and Varius’ play. An aural reference would have been as effective for these listeners as a literary one: for example, Plautus could expect his audience to understand a spoken connection between Thyestes and Tereus in his *Rudens* (discussed below).
To begin, an outline of the major plot points of the Thyestes myth. Amidst a conflict over the throne of Mycenae, Thyestes sleeps with Aerope, the wife of his brother Atreus. In revenge, Atreus kills Thyestes’ children and feeds them to his brother, under the pretext of a religious ritual. In at least one influential version of the story, this cannibalistic banquet was considered so obscene that the Sun changed his course, either permanently or for that day only. Cursing his brother, Thyestes departs from Mycenae in exile and eventually, in various circumstances, unwittingly or not, has sex with his own daughter Pelopia. Ultimately, the son that results from this union, Aegisthus, avenges his father by murdering his uncle Atreus.

The marked resemblances between the stories of Thyestes and Tereus did not go unnoticed in antiquity. Two centuries before Ovid’s, Plautus could expect his audience to understand their similarity, even in a passing reference: scelestiorem cenam cenavi tuam / quam quae Thyestae quondam aut posita est Tereo (Rudens, 508–509, “I have dined on your feast more wicked than that which was once placed before Thyestes and Tereus”). And no wonder: both are fathers deceived under the pretext of a religious ritual into consuming their own children as revenge for committing adultery with their sisters-in-law. Ovid himself links the myths five times elsewhere in his oeuvre.

In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid capitalizes on this connection by alluding to prominent tragic treatments of Thyestes in his Tereus episode, most notably Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* and the

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12 For a more detailed exposition of this complicated myth, see Gantz (1993, 545–552).
13 The sun’s revulsion certainly featured in one of Sophocles’ versions, and is also mentioned in Byzantine scholia to Euripides’ *Orestes*, as well as featured in Seneca’s *Thyestes*, Hyginus *Fabula* 88, and Ovid’s *Ibis* (429). See Gantz (1993, 548) for a full discussion.
14 This observation is made in Baier 2010, 227.
more recent Accius of Atreus. The Metamorphoses includes at least two verbal echoes of passages in Accius’ Atreus. First, the description of a child being cooked in the Atreus echoes the description of Procne cooking Itys: the phrase concoquit / partem vapore flammae, veribus in foco / lacerta tribuit (“He boils / a part in the flame’s heat, he puts the arms / on spits in the hearth”) is echoed at Metamorphoses 6.645–646 with pars inde cavis exultat aenis, / pars veribus stridunt; manant penetralia tabo (“Then part boils in the hollow bronze, part hisses on spits; the chambers drip with gore”). Likewise, the father’s exclamation that he has become his offspring’s tomb in the Atreus is reflected in Tereus’ reaction to consuming Itys: the phrase natis sepulcro ipse es parens (“You, father, are your children’s tomb”) is echoed at Metamorphoses 6.665 with flet modo seque vocat bustum miserabile nati (“Then he weeps and he calls himself the miserable tomb of his son”). As Baier (2010, 223–228) has shown, Ovid combines these references to the Atreus with allusions to Accius’ Tereus, underscoring the similarity of the two figures.

Moreover, Ovid’s narrative contains a further allusion, evidently unnoticed in scholarship, to Aeschylus’ summary of the Thyestes myth in his Agamemnon. In that play, Aegisthus

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16 The Atreus may have been written around the late 130s BCE, although the dating is disputed (Boyle 2006, 111).
17 Boyle 2006, fr. 12, 131. Text and translation of Accius are Boyle’s here and below.
18 Text of the Metamorphoses is taken from Anderson 1977; translations are my own. Boyle mentions that the attention to the cooking process in the Atreus here could show that the act is a perverted religious ritual, just as later in Seneca’s Thyestes (2006, 131). This is relevant for the Metamorphoses as well, since Procne uses the pretense of ritual to fool Tereus into consuming his son just a few lines later, at lines 6.648–649 (Baier 2010, 226–227).
20 This tomb comparison is also echoed in Seneca (Boyle 2006, 132–133). Both these verbal parallels are noted in Baier’s 2010 article on Accius’ Tereus (226–227), where of course, he also discusses parallels between this play and the Metamorphoses.
tells how his father Thyestes reacted violently when he learned the contents of his grotesque meal:

21

καπειτ’ ἐπιγνοὺς ἐργον οὐ καταίσιον
ζώμεξεν, ἀμπίπτει δ’ ἀπὸ σφαγάς ἐρῶν,
μόρον δ’ ἀφερτον Πελοπίδαις ἐπεύχεται,
λάκτισμα δείπνου ξυνδίκως τιθεὶς ἀρὰ·
οὔτως ὀλέσθαι πάν το Πλεισθένους γένος

Then, when he recognized the unrighteous deed, he howled aloud, fell backwards while vomiting out the slaughtered remains, and called down an unendurable fate on the house of Pelops, kicking over the table to chime with his curse: “So perish all the race of Pleisthenes!” (1598–1602)

This reaction is comparable in many respects to Tereus’ in Ovid’s narrative (6.661–664). When Philomela throws Itys’ bloody head at his father, Tereus responds by pushing his table with a great shout (Thracus ingenti mensas clamore repellit, 6.661). He does not vomit, but he does wish that he could expel his son’s flesh from his chest (reserato pectore diras / egerere inde dapes inmersaque viscera gestit, 6.663–664). Tereus calls upon the Furies (vipereasque ciet Stygia de valle sorores, 6.662), an invocation that parallels Thyestes’ curse of the house of Pelops and signals a desire for the sort of blood vengeance that is carried out in the next play of the Oresteia.

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22Interestingly, there is a revealing textual problem in this line. Anderson writes, of his reading inmersaque, “This is the text of one of the oldest MSS. Other old ones have emersaque, and some newer ones favored by Heinsius offer semesaque. It is plain that emersaque is wrong, for the flesh has been consumed, not vomited up. Either of the other two makes sense” (1972, ad 663–664). In light of the multiple other references to Aeschylus in these lines, however, emersaque becomes a tempting, and even likely, reading. Although Anderson is correct that logically, Tereus would not wish to take already-vomited innards out of his chest, the sense of emersaque could be proleptic, in that Tereus wishes to take the innards that are currently in his chest out of it, by means of vomiting. In addition, emergere does not necessarily connote vomiting: it can more generally mean “come forth, emerge” (OLD s.v. emergo). In this sense, emersaque could be part of an impossible, yet Aeschylean, proleptic image: Tereus wants, somehow, to experience the result, the emergence, of opening his chest and bringing forth of the viscera within. Finally, even if emersaque was not the original reading of the text, its addition in MSS could be further explained by a scribe or corrector’s knowledge that this passage contains a reference to the Agamemnon.
Finally, Ovid hints at the connection to the Thyestes myth through his placement of the Tereus episode within the structure of the Metamorphoses, namely after the stories of Niobe and, most importantly, of Pelops. Three times within Niobe’s story, reference is made to the fact that she is the daughter of Tantalus. In one of these (6.172–173), she boasts that her father shared a meal with the gods, alluding (with a very positive spin indeed) to Tantalus’ famous transgression of cooking his son Pelops and serving him to the gods. This crime foreshadows that of his grandson Atreus, inaugurating the motif of cannibalism and the curse on his house. Although Tantalus and his punishment in the underworld appear elsewhere in the Metamorphoses, the crime that landed him there is mentioned only in Book 6, a premonition of the filial cannibalism to come in Tereus’ story.

The subsequent story of Pelops himself forms the bridge between the Niobe and Tereus episodes, and his brief appearance represents an even more pointed hint at the Thyestes myth. As Anderson notes, the end of Niobe’s story marks an important change in the poem’s focus, from the wrath of the gods, to conflict among humans, beginning in the Tereus episode (ad 6.412–674). But between these two stories, Ovid includes Pelops, Niobe’s brother, as a transitional figure. Pelops is well-suited to this role, because he is served by his father to the gods, who punish Tantalus, but Pelops also engenders a pair of sons destined to replay this crime on a purely hu-

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23 One of Niobe’s sons, Tantalus, is named after his grandfather (6.240). Latona alludes to Tantalus’ crime of sharing the secrets of the gods when discussing Niobe at 6.211–213. I discuss the third reference to Tantalus below (6.172–173).

24 mihi Tantalus auctor / cui licuit soli superorum tangere mensas (6.172–173, “Tantalus was my father, who alone was allowed to reach the tables of the gods”).

25 Tantalus in the underworld is mentioned at 4.458 and 10.41. In addition, Agamemnon is called Tantalides at 12.626.
man level. Pelops’ cameo, grieving for Niobe and her children, also affords Ovid the opportunity to remind his readers how Pelops acquired an ivory shoulder, with an explicit reference to his father’s butchering him (*manibus mox caesa paternis / membran*, 6.407–408). Thus the reader receives another reminder of filial cannibalism just before the Tereus story begins, from a myth concerning none other than Thyestes’ own father. From this point forward, Ovid abandons the narrative thread of the house of Tantalus, stopping short of an explicit account of the succeeding generation, Atreus and Thyestes. But given the evocations of the Thyestes myth in the Tereus episode, placed immediately after the contracted account of Pelops, the reader nevertheless encounters a virtual version of the missing Thyestes in the analogous figure of Tereus.

In fact, the mythic undercurrent of Thyestes’ story extends well beyond the child-cannibalism of the Tereus episode. The reader, by now primed to recognize elements of Thyestes’ myth encoded in the poem, can find occurrences of many of his story’s themes running throughout the family dramas of Books 6–10, particularly child-killing and incest. Medea kills her children to achieve vengeance against Jason (7.394–397); Scylla’s story contains an implied father-daughter incest narrative (8.1–151); Althaea kills her son Meleager as revenge for murdering her siblings (8.445–525); and Byblis has incestuous feelings for her brother Caunus (9.450–665).

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26 Rosati (2013, ad 401–411) notes that the cannibalism Pelops experiences foreshadows Tereus’ cannibalism of Itys in Book 6. On Pelops as a transitional figure, see Morgan 2003, 86–89.

27 Later in the poem, Thyestes will be either mentioned only briefly, in Pythagoras’ speech, as an example of the potential dangers of eating meat (15.462), or skipped over, as Ovid moves directly to Agamemnon’s generation in the story of the sacrifice of Iphigenia (12.24–38).

28 See Oliensis 2009, 97–110. In fact, father-daughter incest is also implied between Tereus and Philomela, as I will discuss later, also treated by Oliensis (2009, 78–79).
But the sequence culminates as distinct allusions to the Thyestes myth resurface in the story of Myrrha.\textsuperscript{29}

The primary theme of Myrrha’s story, father-daughter incest, matches that of the second part of the Thyestes cycle, namely the conception of Aegisthus at the union of Thyestes and his own daughter, Pelopia.\textsuperscript{30} For modern readers, the name “Thyestes” strongly evokes the horror of child cannibalism, and perhaps little else. In antiquity, however, Thyestes’ incest with his daughter was also a major part of his myth. This episode was likely the subject of one or two lost plays of Sophocles (Gantz 1993, 550–551) as well as of Ennius’ sole Thyestes play (Jocelyn 1967, 412–414).\textsuperscript{31} When Aristotle pairs Thyestes with Oedipus as ideal tragic heroes, it is probably the incestuous plot of Sophocles’ \textit{Thyestes at Sicyon} that he has in mind, not the sordid earlier chapter of his myth.\textsuperscript{32}

The exact contours of this episode are unclear because of the fragmentary nature of the evidence, so it is difficult to discern whether particular plot points in Ovid point to particular plot points in, or versions of, Thyestes’ story. In particular, Cinyras’ initial ignorance of the girl in his bed may evoke at least Ennius’ \textit{Thyestes}. In Jocelyn’s reconstruction of that play, Thyestes rapes

\begin{footnotes}
\item[29] In the \textit{Metamorphoses}, just as in the plot of the Thyestes myth, the father-daughter incest portion occurs subsequently to the child-cannibalism portion (found in the Tereus episode in Book 6).
\item[30] Thyestes’ incest with his daughter Pelopia, the female form of the name Pelops, replays Tantalus’ crime of cannibalism against his son Pelops, Pelopia’s grandfather. Already in the Thyestes myth, a connection is forming between child-cannibalism and incest.
\item[31] Furthermore, Accius’ \textit{Pelopidae} may have ended with Aegisthus’ recognition that he is the product of incest (Boyle 2006, 119).
\item[32] For Aristotle, the ideal tragic hero must commit an error, but not through intentional badness (\textit{Poetics} 1453a). As Janko comments (ad 1453a), the adulterous Thyestes who is punished with the infamous feast does not fit this description, but a Thyestes unwittingly committing incest with a woman who turns out to be his daughter would fit it well. Gantz, however, speculates that Thyestes could have knowingly raped his daughter (1993, 551).
\end{footnotes}
his daughter unaware of who she is, reacting with horror when he learns the truth (1967, 413). The conceit may go back to Sophocles, though the matter is debated.33

Although precise homologies between Thyestes’ and Myrrha’s stories are impossible to pin down, Myrrha’s union with her father results in a son, an element Ovid stresses through repeated focus on conception (10.469–470) and the gruesome account of Adonis’ birth (10.503–513). A reference to these stories in Ovid’s Ibis proves that he saw a connection between the tales: he wishes father-daughter incest upon his enemy with reference to a brief catalogue of such myths: *filia si fuerit, sit quod Pelopea Thyestae, / Myrrha suo patri, Nyctimeneque suo* (359–360, “If you have a daughter, let her be what Pelopia was to Thyestes, Myrrha to her father, and Nyctimene to hers”). In this passage, Ovid directly parallels Thyestes with the two father-daughter incest narratives explicitly recounted in the *Metamorphoses.*34

Another element of Myrrha’s story distinctively ties her to Thyestes. As Myrrha journeys to her father’s bedchamber, the moon and the constellations of the night sky turn away from her imminent crime:35

> ad facinus venit illa suum. fugit aurea caelo

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33See Gantz 1993, 550–552, Jocelyn 1967, 412–419 for their full discussions of this portion of the Thyestes myth.

34On Nyctimene, see below.

35These constellations are often cited as providing a contrast to impious Myrrha and Cinyras, as Erigone hanged herself at her father Icarus’ death out of filial duty, *pio parentis amore,* and both were transformed into constellations as a reward (Anderson 1972, ad 448–451; Reed 2013, ad 450–451). A possible double and darker meaning jumps out here, however, if Myrrha’s story is taken in connection with Thyestes’ incest with his daughter. In the *Metamorphoses,* Erigone is the daughter of Icarus, but a different Erigone happened to be the daughter of Aegisthus. This Erigone was well-known, probably the subject of *Erigone* plays by Accius and Sophocles (Lloyd-Jones 1996, 100–101), and the two were often confused in antiquity (Gantz 1993, 685). Since the major theme of Myrrha’s story is father-daughter incest, this Erigone is even more likely to come to mind, whose father was the product of such incest. The phrase *pio parentis amore* is deliberately ambiguous: it could indicate Erigone’s filial piety as the daughter of Icarus, or it could indicate, ironically, the *pio amore* that produced her alternate *parens* Aegisthus, just as the word *amor* is used in a double filial and incestuous sense elsewhere in Tereus and Myrrha’s stories. The double meaning here undermines this portrayal of Erigone’s chastity, and calls into question Orpheus’ use of her example.
luna, tegunt nigrae latitantia sidera nubes,  
nox caret igne suo; primus tegis, Icare, vultus  
Erigoneque pio sacrata parentis amore. (10.448–451)

She comes to her crime. The golden moon flees from the sky, black clouds cover the hiding constellations, night lacks its fire; first you cover your face, Icarus, and Erigone, revered from the pious love of a parent.

The revulsion of these heavenly bodies at a human crime recalls a standard element of Thyestes’ tale from at least Sophocles’ time. In one of his Thyestes plays, the Sun turned backward out of disgust at the act of child cannibalism (Gantz 1993, 548). In Euripides’ Electra and Plato’s Politikos, however, an alternate version emerges in which Zeus causes the sun to change direction permanently as a result of Atreus’ and Thyestes’ conflict (Gantz, 547–548).36 For Ovid, it was Sophocles’ version that really resonated. In the six other passages in Ovid’s corpus in which he employs the motif of heavenly revulsion outside of Metamorphoses 10, he refers to the sun turning away from Thyestes’ unwitting act of child-cannibalism.37 By applying this motif, recast in a suitably nocturnal mode, to the story of Myrrha, Ovid ties her crime to both sections of the Thyestes myth.

In fact, the account of Tereus’ meal in Book 6 would have been the more straightforward place to employ this motif, and certain verbal echoes do connect some of Ovid’s passages describing the Sun turning away from Thyestes’ feast to the description of Tereus’ child-cannibalism.38 By transposing the detail of the heavenly bodies’ revulsion from the act of child-cannibalism to the act of father-daughter incest in Myrrha’s story, Ovid links the two separate phases of the Thyestes myth: the banquet and the rape at Sicyon. He thereby implies an equiva-

36This version of the myth provides an etiology for the east-to-west pattern of the sun we know today.


38For example, mensis furialibus Atrei at Amores 3.12.39 recalls Tereus’ mensas at 6.661, his invocation of the Furies one line later, and the description of Philomela disheveled from furiali caede in 6.657.
rence between these two crimes, as parent-child incest mixes flesh in a way analogous to filial cannibalism. The symmetry in these crimes of flesh further binds these two stories that bracket the cycle of family dramas in the poem, the Tereus and Myrrha episodes.

**Lexical Connections**

So far, I have examined the connections to the Thyestes myth in Books 6–10, particularly in the stories of Tereus and Myrrha. In what follows, I will show how the pattern of allusion to the Thyestes myth participates in a larger network of intratexts that connect these episodes in *Metamorphoses* 6–10. This network helps to distinguish the group of family-drama episodes in the central section of the poem.

To begin, the most distinctive intratexts connecting the Tereus and Myrrha episodes are the references, within each story, to the climactic transgression that occurs in the other. The climax of the Tereus story is his filial cannibalism: *ipse sedens solio Tereus sublimis avito / vescitur inque suam sua viscera congerit alvum* (6.650–651; “Tereus himself, sitting high on his ancestral throne, eats and piles his own flesh into his own belly”). Among the striking features of these lines is the word *viscera* used to refer to Tereus’ son, a use of the word invented by Ovid (Reed 2013, ad 10.465). This usage emphasizes that Tereus is consuming his own flesh and blood. The juxtaposition of *suam* and *sua* also calls attention to Tereus’ violation in eating part of himself (Anderson 1972, ad 6.651), especially through the alliteration of *s*-sounds in both lines. Furthermore, the adjective *avito* heightens the irony of the scene, by highlighting Tereus’ own distinguished patrilineage just as he is in the act of unwittingly and horrifically halting its progress (Rosati 2013, ad 6.650). Finally, even more provocative is the line’s word order: just as
Tereus sublimis is placed between solio and avito, sua viscera is placed between suam and al-vum. As Tereus sits on his throne, Itys’s flesh sits within his belly. 39

Ovid uses viscera to refer to offspring four times in the Metamorphoses, 40 but of these uses, the phrase sua viscera occurs only twice, here in the Tereus episode and in the description of the climactic transgression found in Myrrha’s story, father-daughter incest. 41 Like Tereus, Cinyras is unaware of the crime he commits, as he cannot see Myrrha in the dark. He takes his daughter into his bed: accipit obsceno genitor sua viscera lecto (10.465, “The father accepts his own flesh into his defiled bed”). Once again, significant word order emphasizes the shocking violation taking place in this passage: sua viscera is set next to genitor, highlighting the unnatural closeness of father and daughter, father and his own flesh. In addition, genitor and sua viscera are both placed between obsceno and lecto: father and daughter are together inside the bed (Anderson 1972, ad 10.465).

The repetition of sua viscera, used in this rare sense to refer to progeny, strongly evokes its earlier usage to describe Tereus’ crime at 6.651. The verb accipio too ties into this connection, as it is often used of eating, and thus further likens Cinyras’ intake of his viscera to Tereus’. 42 This echo was not inevitable: Ovid goes to some trouble to relate the crimes of Cinyras and

39 sublimis may even be taken as focalizing Tereus’ thoughts (Peek 2003, 42).

40 Reed 2013, ad 10.465. Besides the use in the Tereus episode and the use discussed below in the Myrrha story, three other instances occur in Books 5 and 8. In line 8.478, during Althaea’s monologue about her decision to kill her son Meleager, Althaea, like Procne, is a mother killing her own child to avenge a member of her natal family. In addition, she refers to Meleager as mea viscera as she kills him, just as Tereus kills his own son (Anderson 1972, ad 10.465). Meleager’s viscera are burnt up as he dies (8.516). The mea viscera in Book 8 reinforces the ring composition of the sua viscera in both the Tereus and Myrrha stories. At 5.18, Cepheus confronts his brother Phineus about Andromeda, to whom he refers as meis visceribus when he describes the risk of her being eaten by the sea monster.

41 The phrase sua viscera is also found once referring to literal entrails (not offspring) at 12.390; notably, viscera is also used in the literal sense joined with a reference to Thyestes in Pythagoras’ speech (15.462).

42 TLL s.v. accipio, 2.
Tereus, given that Cinyras does not literally take his daughter’s flesh inside himself. On the contrary, she takes him and his seed inside herself, a fact emphasized three times in rapid succession in lines 10.469–470, *plena patris thalamis excedit et inpia diro / semina fert utero conceptaque crimina portat* (“She leaves the bed full of her father and she bears the perverse seed in her cursed womb and she carries a conceived crime”), and, more metaphorically, in line 10.475, *pendenti nitidum vagina deripit ensem* (“He snatched his shining sword from the hanging sheath”), a line to which I will return.\(^\text{43}\) By describing Cinyras’ transgression in terms of a father’s own *viscera*, Ovid constructs and even forces a decisive link with Tereus’ crime, despite the considerable differences between the acts of penetrating a female and consuming a child. Once again, the two crimes against children committed by Thyestes, incest and filial cannibalism, are equated.

For the reader who notices the conspicuous echo of *sua viscera* from the Tereus story in the Myrrha episode, a connection in the other direction may become evident on a second reading. A suggestion of father-daughter incest, foreshadowing Myrrha and Cinyras, materializes when Tereus is first seized with desire for Philomela:

\[
\text{omnia pro stimulis facibusque ciboque furoris accipit et, quotiens amplexit illa parentem, esse parens vellet: neque enim minus impius esset (6.480–482)}
\]

He took in all these things as goads and torches and food of his passion, and, as often as she embraced her father, he wished that he were her father: nor indeed would he be less impious.

The contrafactual wish in 6.482 reveals the incestuous implication of Tereus’ desire.\(^\text{44}\) The comment that Tereus would be “no less impious” implies that he is already impious, if not (yet) in an

\(^43\)Cf. Anderson 1972, ad 469–470.

\(^44\)In fact, his desire already borders on incest, since Philomela is his sister-in-law.
incestuous way.\textsuperscript{45} Tereus’ wish to commit adultery with his sister-in-law shows his depravity,\textsuperscript{46} but the narrator evidently feels the need to point out that father-daughter incest would be even more impious. The first-time reader might gloss over this minor redundancy, but for a second-time reader, another parallel to Myrrha’s story presents itself.

The suggestion of virtual incest continues in Pandion’s parting commands. As Tereus is leaving Athens, the king makes an impassioned speech in which he begs Tereus to watch over his daughter like a surrogate father: \textit{do tibi perque fide\textit{m} cognataque pectora supplex, / per su-peros oro, patrio ut tuearis amore} (6.498–499, “I give her to you and I beg you, as a supplicant, by faith and our bonds of kin, by the gods above, that you guard her with a father’s love”). Given “Tereus’ tranquil disposition towards incest” revealed in his wish at 6.482 (Rosati 2013, ad 6.499),\textsuperscript{47} this plea is highly ironic and imparts incestuous undertones to Philomela’s eventual rape. In a dark twist, the “father’s love” that Tereus shows to Philomela is not at all what Pandion envisions.\textsuperscript{48}

The specter of incest emerges one final time in the story, as Philomela cries out for her father both when Tereus rapes her (6.525, \textit{clamato saepe parente}), and as he is cutting out her tongue (6.555, \textit{nomen patris usque vocantem}). This detail not only recalls Pandion’s parting words to Tereus, but also, to a second-time reader, anticipates Myrrha’s union with her father, when she calls him \textit{pater} in the act of incest (10.466–467). Just as virtual cannibalism hovers

\textsuperscript{45}Anderson 1972, ad 6.480–482.

\textsuperscript{46}Anderson 1972, ad 6.480–482; Rosati 2013, ad 482.

\textsuperscript{47}“La tranquilla disponibilità di Tereo all’incesto,” in Rosati’s words.

\textsuperscript{48}In parallel, the same pun on \textit{amor} in a double filial and incestuous sense can be found in Myrrha’s speech about her feelings for her father, \textit{pietas geminato crescit amore} (10.333, “Piety grows with twinned love”). Interestingly, the verb \textit{geminino} is used again in the Myrrha episode to describe the continuation of her and Cinyras’ crime (10.471).
over the crime of incest in the Myrrha episode, so incest creeps into the background of a story that ends with the act of cannibalism.\footnote{Oliensis also discusses these instances of virtual incest in the Tereus episode (2009, 78–79).}

Besides the mutual transference of the child-cannibalism and incest motifs, a number of other motifs provide further links. One is particularly appropriate to the midsection of the \textit{Metamorphoses} and its focus on the downfalls of human families: that of cursed marriage.\footnote{Newlands identifies a related “marriage group” of stories in Books 6–8 of the poem (1997, 180).} In both episodes, the union of the couple is doomed from the start by a perversion of Roman marriage rites. In Book 6, the dire portents attending Tereus and Procne’s wedding are foregrounded for the reader, if not for the participants. First, none of the expected marriage gods are present at the wedding: Juno \textit{pronuba}, Hymenaeus, and the Graces are all absent (6.428–429). In their place are the Furies, whose presence is stressed by anaphora in lines 6.431–32 (\textit{Eumenides}... \textit{Eumenides}). The anaphora is doubled by the repetition of \textit{hac ave}... \textit{hac ave} (6.433–434), and even tripled with \textit{quaque}... \textit{quaque} (6.436–37).\footnote{The relative pronouns are modifying an understood \textit{die} here.} The emphasis on the Furies and the omens draws attention to their incongruity with the seemingly joyous marriage and childbirth to which they are juxtaposed (Anderson 1972, ad 6.436–438).

Among these portents is an ominous owl that lends a funereal overtone to the ceremonies: \textit{tectoque profanus / incubuit bubo thalamique in culmine sedit} (6.431–432, “An ill-omened owl brooded on their roof and sat atop their bedchamber”). The owl, like the Furies, has associations with death, night, and the Underworld.\footnote{Cf. the Underworld etiology for the owl when Persephone transforms Ascalaphus in 5.538–550, discussed later in this paper. Ascalaphus, and his link to Tereus and Procne as a human metamorphosed into a bird, is considered by Kaufhold as well (1997, 67). The Furies are another important recurring theme in the Tereus and Myrrha episodes, as well as in Books 6–10. In the Myrrha episode, the Furies appear at 10.313–314, 349–351; in the Tereus episode 6.430–431 (above), 6.662.} The owl has not only installed himself as a sedentary
presence above the couple’s bedroom, but he also seems to have taken a sinister role in the consummation of the marriage: although the verb *incubuit* (6.432) is regularly used to describe roosting birds, the root *-cub-* has unmistakable sexual connotations, especially in the context of a marriage-bed (*thalami*). The unseen omens of the entire passage (6.428–438) together determine that Tereus and Procne’s union is horribly doomed, a fact signaled even more strongly by the narrator’s interjection at 4.38: *usque adeo latet utilitas* (“so far is self-interest hidden”).

There is not an actual wedding in Myrrha’s story, but Shawn O’Bryhim has detailed the elements of Myrrha’s sojourn to Cinyras’ bedchamber that add up to the deduction (*deducit*, 10.462) of a bride to her bridegroom’s house in a perverted Roman wedding. O’Bryhim notes that from the start, Myrrha considers a potential liaison with her father in terms of marriage: she mentions tribes whose children marry parents (10.333, *iungitur*) and when Cinyras, befuddled by her aversion to her suitors, asks whom she would like to marry, she replies, “Someone like you” (10.364, *similem tibi*). The description of her passage to her father’s bedroom further represents her perverted perception of the act as a “marriage:” the liaison is clandestine, no crowd attends, there are no torches, repeated bad omens do not halt the proceedings, and Myrrha touches the taboo threshold of the bedroom as she passes—all in direct contradiction of the proper rituals for

53 *OLD* s.v. *incubo, incumbo, cubo*, etc.

54 Peek 2003, 40.

55 O’Bryhim 2008, 190. Myrrha also uses marriage language in an examples of animal incest, discussed more carefully later in this paper: *fit equo sua filia coniunx* (10.326; “The horse’s own daughter becomes his wife”).

56 O’Bryhim 2008, 190. A second part of O’Bryhim’s claim is that the perverse way the marriage is presented foreshadows its doom, although I would argue that no one is likely to question the doom of a father-daughter union in any case.

57 O’Bryhim (2008, 192) mentions that the lack of torches is noted metaphorically in the phrase “night lacked its usual fire” (10.450, *nox caret igne suo*).
a Roman wedding.\textsuperscript{58} Finally, even the most important element of a Roman marriage is perverted: informed consent, which neither party exhibits satisfactorily.\textsuperscript{59}

The two stories share the general motif of cursed marriage, but they also have in common one specific component: the owl.\textsuperscript{60} It appears in Myrrha’s story at line 10.453: \textit{ter omen / funer-us bubo letali carmine fecit} (“Three times the funereal owl makes an omen with its deathly song”). The presence of the ill-omened owl, by linking back to the cursed marriage of Tereus and Procne, confirms the subtler signs of a perverted wedding ritual delineated by O’Bryhim in Myrrha’s story. But within the \textit{Metamorphoses}, owls have a symbolic significance particularly relevant to Myrrha’s story.

In Book 2, the story of a certain Nyctimene is briefly told: she commits incest with her father and is turned into an owl as a result. Her enduring shame provides an etiology for the nocturnal habits of owls: she is too ashamed to present herself in the light of day and is shunned by the heavens (2.590–595).\textsuperscript{61} This plot is very similar to Myrrha’s,\textsuperscript{62} especially because both girls are presented as the instigators of the incest, in both cases contrary to other versions in the myth-

\textsuperscript{58}In addition, O’Bryhim notes that Myrrha’s nurse, who holds her by the ill-omened left hand, assumes roles in the marriage ceremony for which she is unqualified, since three young boys whose parents were living traditionally transferred the bride to her husband (2008, 192). Myrrha and Cinyras’ union also takes place during a possible \textit{dies religiosus}, and certainly during a festival of Ceres that required celibacy, a transgression discussed later in this paper (2008, 194).

\textsuperscript{59}O’Bryhim 2008, 192–195.

\textsuperscript{60}O’Bryhim also mentions that the owl is an omen in both Tereus and Procne’s wedding scene and in Myrrha’s (2008, 192).

\textsuperscript{61}In this version of an owl transformation, that is. The other, at 5.538–550, seems to give an etiology for the owl, when Persephone transforms the informer Ascalaphus for revealing she ate the pomegranate seed, making him a bad omen for mortals: \textit{venturi nuntia luctus / ignavus bubo, dirum mortalibus omen} (5.548–550, “An announcer of coming grief, the cowardly owl, a terrible omen for men”). Ascalaphus, despite coming closer to Books 6 and 10 than Nyctimene, is punished for being an informer, and thus does not have the same significance for the Tereus and Myrrha episodes that Nyctimene does.

\textsuperscript{62}Although, as Anderson cautions in his commentary on the episode, Nyctimene’s story is told by a biased narrator (1997, ad 2.589–590), connections between the two women emerge nevertheless.
ic tradition (2.592–593). Both women feel guilty about their crime (conscia 2.593, 10.367), and Nyctimene’s expulsion from heaven into darkness is even reminiscent of the constellations’ reaction to Myrrha’s crime, which, as argued above, evokes the story of Thyestes, another tale of father-daughter incest. The owl omen thus anticipates the father-daughter incest that transpires literally in the Myrrha episode and figuratively in the Tereus episode.

A cursed wedding is a potent symbol for the breakdown of social norms and family relationships, since a wedding is a public ceremony creating a kinship bond. In both Tereus and Myrrha’s stories, the cursed wedding participates in a larger series of perversions of familial roles. Most obviously, the violation of taboos (filicide, cannibalism, incest) represents a transgression of familial norms. But the Tereus and Myrrha stories also feature a complete appropriation of one family member’s role by another, underscoring the upheaval of family and marriage that animates these episodes.

Tereus’ rape of Philomela shatters his marriage bond with Procne; this violation begets another in turn, as she rejects her own roles of mother and wife to revert to her natal family and

63Cf. Anderson 1997, ad 2.589–590 for Nyctimene—in Hyginus 204, Nyctimene’s father pursues her. Similarly, in Myrrha’s mythic tradition, Aphrodite is usually blamed for causing Myrrha’s lust as a punishment (Gantz 1993, 729), a detail de-emphasized in the Metamorphoses (cf. 10.311, but also 10.524).

64The reaction of heaven in Nyctimene’s story at 2.594–595, conspectum lucemque fugit tenebrisque pudorem / celat et a cunctis expellitur aethere toto (“She flees sight and light and she hides her shame in the shadows and she is expelled by all from the whole heavens”) parallels that in Myrrha’s at 10.448–450, fugit aurea caelo / luna, tegunt nigrae latitantia sidera nubes, / nox caret igne suo (“The gold moon flees from the sky, the black clouds cover the hiding constellations, night lacks its fire”).

65In the stories of Medea, Scylla, Althaea, and Byblis, women commit similar crimes to the characters in the Tereus and Myrrha episodes: Medea kills her children, and Althaea kills her son Meleager, like Procne; Byblis desires her brother, like Myrrha. Scylla and Medea both overturn their families by betraying their fathers for a foreigner. Yet Scylla, Medea, Althaea, and Byblis do not ever actually take over another family member’s role, even though they may completely violate their own.
her identity of sister. Philomela underlines the disorder of their family in her condemnation of Tereus’ attack:


“Oh cruel one!” she says, “neither the tearful commands of a pious parent moved you, nor care for my sister nor my virginity nor marriage laws! You have confused everything: I have been made a rival of my sister, you a double husband!”

Within this catalogue of familial disruption, the term paelex is especially provocative, as it specifically denotes the sexual rivalry between an extra-familial mistress (the paelex) and the legitimate wife. The very existence of a paelex means that the role of wife is being both doubled (cf. geminus coniunx) and diminished. The juxtaposition of this word with the kinship term sororis highlights the depravity of Tereus’ actions towards the family.

Tereus’ violation of social and familial conventions finds an echo in Myrrha’s actions and desires. When Myrrha tries to justify her feelings for her father, she decries the institutions that forbid incest: humana malignas / cura dedit leges, et quod natura remittit, / invida iura negant (10.329–331, “Human concern gave malevolent laws, and what nature allows, envious laws deny”). Cura (6.535) and iura (6.536) are the same institutions that Philomela claims Tereus vio-

66 As a result of this violation, Procne views her marriage as null, her vows broken. She no longer feels conjugal duty towards Tereus and is thus able to go through with her revenge of killing their son Ilys and feeding him to Tereus: cui sis nupta, vide, Pandione nata, marito! / degeneras! scelus est pietas in coniuge Tereo (6.634–635, “See to which husband you are married, daughter of Pandion! You depart from your family! Crime is piety in the wife of Tereus”). Procne’s identification as the “daughter of Pandion” shows that she has reverted to her natal family, just as she was before the consummation of her marriage (cf. Pandione nata, 6.436).

67 The word is defined as “a mistress installed as a rival or in addition to a wife” (OLD s.v. paelex).
lated in raping her. Myrrha further argues that “piety grows with doubled love” (10.333, *pietas geminato crescit amore*). This misguided notion recalls Philomela’s accusation that Tereus has become a “double husband” (*geminus coniunx*); in Tereus’ precedent, the reader can see the error in Myrrha’s reasoning, even if she herself denies it.

And yet Myrrha herself acknowledges that her desire is wrong: *et, quot confundas et iura et nomina, sentis? / tune eris et matris paelex et adultera patris?* (10.346–347, “And, do you perceive how many times you confuse laws and names? Will you be both the rival of your mother and the mistress of your father?”). Myrrha’s self-admonishment echoes key themes in Philomela’s rebuke of Tereus: by having sex with her father, she would overturn social conventions (*confundas iura*, cf. *omnia turbasti*, 6.537, *coniugalia iura*, 6.536) and usurp her mother’s role (*matrix paelex, adultera patris*, cf. *paelex...sororis*, 6.537). In fact, Myrrha’s arguments reveal that father-daughter incest leads to even more doubling of family roles: daughters become wives (10.326), mothers conceive babies with their own fathers (10.327), and she would become a sister to her own son and mother to her own brother (*tune soror nati genetrixque vocabere fratris* (10.347, “Will you be called both the sister of your son and the mother of your brother?”)). Indeed, this role-doubling is realized in the event, when her son Adonis is described as born from his sister and his own grandfather (*ille sorore / natus avoque suo*, 10.520–521).

When Myrrha sleeps with her father, she takes her mother’s place in bed both literally and figuratively. Myrrha’s mother Cenchreis is participating in a religious ritual in which sex is

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68Interestingly, the verb *gemino* is used one more time in these episodes, when Myrrha and her father continue to have sex after their first encounter: *postera nox facinus geminat* (10.471, “The next night doubled their crime”).

69These arguments are examples pulled from supposed practices within the animal kingdom: *fit equo sua filia coniunx* (10.326, “A horse’s own daughter becomes his wife”) and *ipsaque, cuius / semine concepta est, ex illo concipit ales* (10.327, “And from whose seed the bird is conceived, she conceives from him”). The word *ales* in the Latin here may be a tiny link to the Tereus episode, given that all three main characters are turned into birds (6.667–674).
forbidden. The ritual honors Ceres, the quintessential mother goddess, and the participants are emphatically marked as “mothers:” *festa piae Ceres celebrabant annua matres* (10.431, “The pious mothers were celebrating the annual festival of Ceres”). A few lines later, Cenchreis is mentioned in connection to her role as Cinyras’ wife: *turba Cenchreis in illa / regis adest coniunx* (10.436, “In that crowd, Cenchreis, the wife of the king, is present”). As the narrator explains, Cenchreis’ participation in the ritual and her abstinence from sex are the reasons Cinyras’ bed is available for Myrrha: *ergo, legitima vacuus dum coniuge lectus* (10.437, “Therefore, while his bed was empty of the legitimate wife”). The passage emphasizes Cenchreis’ familial role, identifying her, redundantly, three times in two lines: once by name, twice as Cinyras’ wife.

The vocabulary and word order in this passage highlight the void (*vacuus*) created by Cenchreis’ absence. The word *Cenchreis* is placed between *in illa* and *turba* in line 10.436, indicating that Cenchreis is indeed at the festival, amidst the crowd; yet *legitima coniuge* is not placed within the phrase describing the bed, *vacuus lectus*. Her absence leaves an empty space into which Myrrha steps a few lines later to commit incest: *accipit obsceno genitor sua viscera lecto* (10.465, “The father takes his own flesh into the defiled bed”). Myrrha and Cinyras (*genitor sua viscera*) are now together inside the bed (*obsceno…lecto*) that should be occupied by his lawful wife.

Finally, Myrrha fully steps into her mother’s role when Cinyras instantly impregnates her. As soon as Myrrha and Cinyras consummate their tryst (10.467–468), Myrrha is described as pregnant: *plena patris thalamis excedit et inpia diro / semina fert utero conceptaque crimina portat* (10.469–470, “She leaves the bed full of her father, and she bears the perverse seed in her

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70Interestingly, this detail recalls the narration of Tereus and Procne’s cursed wedding, when Itys’ birth is mentioned one line after the couple’s marriage: *quaque data est claro Pandione nata tyranno / quaque erat ortus Itys, festum iussere vocari* (6.436–437, “And the day on which the daughter of Pandion was given to the tyrant, and the day on which Itys was born, they ordered to be called holidays”).
cursed womb and she carries a conceived crime"). Myrrha’s pregnancy is emphasized with redundant but vivid images that draw attention to the result of her crime. The description of Adonis as a conception mirrors the Tereus episode: Tereus’ punishment consisted of bringing his son into his body, whereas Myrrha’s punishment will be expelling hers in the painful act of childbirth (10.503–513).

Of a piece with the disruption of familial norms is the abuse of religion in both stories. As noted just above, Myrrha sleeps with her father by taking advantage of her mother’s participation in the rites of Ceres. Indeed, these particular rites forbid sexual relations (10.434–435), and also, as Michèle Lowrie has argued, may have forbidden fathers and daughters to speak each other’s names aloud. Myrrha violates both taboos outrageously (10.467–468). As Lowrie points out, for the knowledgeable reader the religious transgression compounds Myrrha’s crime (1993, 52). Indeed, Myrrha’s actions are out of keeping with the spirit of this ritual in particular also because Ceres is a goddess worshipped for her status as mother and her relationship with her daughter.

Like Myrrha, Procne takes advantage of religious rites to further her personal agenda. At first, her purpose seems sympathetic: she feigns (simulat, 6.596) participation in a Bacchic rite in order to rescue her brutalized sister (6.594–600). Yet just before the Bacchic rites begin, the narrator indicates that Procne is about to lose her sense of right and wrong: sed fasque nefasque / confusura ruit poenaeque in imagine tota est (6.585–586, “But she rushes headlong, about to

71 The verb concipio is a leitmotif in Myrrha’s story. Including the two examples already discussed in this paper, the verb concipio is used nine times overall in book 10, more than in any other book of the Metamorphoses, and seven of these uses occur in Myrrha’s story. Myrrha: 10.328 twice, 352, 403, 470, 502, 503; Pygmalion: 10.249, 290. Interestingly, the only time the verb concipio is used in the Tereus episode is in a context that relates to Myrrha’s story. Philomela wishes she had died before Tereus raped her and again hopes for death before he cuts out her tongue, as Myrrha tries to kill herself rather than commit incest. As Tereus raises his sword, Philomela “conceived a hope of her death at the sight of the sword” (6.554, spemque suae mortis viso conceperat ense). In addition, this line is in the context of another verbal parallel between the Tereus and Myrrha stories: the vagina/ensis metaphor discussed below.

72 Lowrie 1993, 50–52.
confuse right and wrong”). This pre-emptive comment associates Procne’s rescue mission with the same upheaval of norms that attach to Tereus and, later on, Myrrha. Procne’s actions also foreshadow her transgression against her family, when she invents a false ritual in order to get Tereus alone: *et patrii moris sacrum mentita, quod uni / fas sit adire viro, comites famulosque removit* (6.648–649, “And having lied about a rite of ancestral custom, that it was right to go to only one man, she removed his companions and servants”). Her original misappropriation of a Bacchic rite for the purpose of rescue progresses into an invented ritual for the purpose of feeding her husband their son.\(^{73}\)

Procne’s pretense of a Bacchic ritual to rescue Philomela becomes more sinister upon a second reading, because of the similar ritual context of Myrrha’s incest. Procne’s nighttime journey to her sister’s prison mirrors Myrrha’s approach to her father’s bed in some select details. Procne sets out during rites to Bacchus: *tempus erat, quo sacra solent trieterica Bacchi / Sithoni-ae celebrare nurus: nox conscia sacris* (6.587–588, “It was the time when the Sithonian daughters-in-law were accustomed to celebrate the triennial rites of Bacchus: night was conscious of the rites”). The formula *tempus erat, quo* occurs only once elsewhere in the poem, in a line that assonantly echoes line 6.587, at the beginning of Myrrha’s journey to her father’s bedchamber: *tempus erat, quo cuncta silent, interque triones / flexerat obliquo plaustrum temone Bootes* (10.446–447, “It was the time when all is silent, and among the Triones, Bootes had turned his wagon with his slanted pole”). In both lines, the exact formula *tempus erat quo* is followed by a substantive neuter plural nominative adjective and a verb with a similar sound pattern: *sacra solent* and *cuncta silent*; these phrases are metrically identical as well. The ends of the lines also

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\(^{73}\) Although Procne is only pretending to be a maenad, the ritual does foreshadow the transgression she commits against her family, to a mindful or informed reader. As the maenad Agave kills Pentheus at 3.701–733, Procne too will kill her son Itys. Procne is practical in this instance as well: unlike Agave, she is not crazed by divine influence, but remains rational as she commits a premeditated murder of her son.
echo each other: *interque triones* in 10.446 repeats syllables from the word *trieterica* in 6.587. The repetition of sound in these lines points up the mirroring in the scenarios.

The phrase *Sithoniae celebrare nurus* immediately following in 6.588 parallels the beginning of Myrrha’s story, when the pious mothers (*matres*) celebrate (*celebrabant*) the rites of Ceres. The repeated image of a group of married women performing religious rites places both Procne’s and Myrrha’s actions in a religious context that stresses proper family relationships for women.⁷⁴ Further, the shared context between Procne’s journey to rescue Philomela and Myrrha’s incestuous misappropriation of Ceres’ rite points to the beginning of Procne’s moral decline. Finally, the phrase *nox conscia sacris* ending line 6.588, as well the anaphora *nocte...nocte* beginning the next two lines (6.589–590), echo Myrrha’s journey, whose nighttime context is also emphasized through a list of constellations (10.446–451). The idea that night is conscious especially foreshadows the moment in Myrrha’s story when the moon and stars turn away from her crime in revulsion (10.448–451), a key link between her story and Thyestes’, as discussed above.

In what follows, I will survey a few other distinctive links between the Tereus and Myrrha episodes, beginning with the dark and exaggerated irony in both accounts.⁷⁵ A specific situation involving dramatic irony repeats in both Tereus and Myrrha’s stories: that of the unwitting father. The father, as a symbol of family and tradition, is an effective “straight man” character in these tales of extreme family upheaval. As Newlands remarks, “The father is a source of familiar if ineffective values, displaced from which the female suffers tragically” (1997, 205).

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⁷⁴ This image of the crowd of women celebrating a rite reoccurs three other times in the family drama episodes from Books 6–10, at lines 7.50, 7.159, and 9.641.

⁷⁵ For an in-depth narratological study of the black humor and dark irony in the Tereus story, see Peek 2003.
Indeed, one example of dramatic irony in the Tereus story is the episode when Pandion begs Tereus to act as a father to Philomela (Peek 2003, 43). The irony stems from the audience’s knowledge that Tereus wants to be Philomela’s father in order to satisfy his lust for her (6.482, *esse parens vellet*). From this detail, even a first-time reader knows that Tereus would be a sinister father towards Philomela, and a second-time reader has an even deeper perception of the dramatic irony at play. The audience’s knowledge is then juxtaposed with Pandion’s obliviousness, even his severe misjudgment. Not only does he entrust his fatherly duties to Tereus (6.499, *patrio ut tuearis amore*), but he literally joins Tereus and Philomela in a union: *utque fide pignus dextras utriusque poposcit / inter seque datas iunxit natamque nepotemque* (6.506–507, “And as if he had asked for a pledge of faith he joined the right hands of each, given between them, both his daughter and grandson”). This gesture, as well as the verb *iunxit*, recalls a Roman wedding, in which parents blessed the joined right hands of the bride and groom (Anderson 1972, ad 6.490–491). Especially to a second reader, the irony in Pandion’s gesture would even bring to mind the cursed marriage motif at the wedding of Tereus and Procne, and of Myrrha. Pandion makes Tereus and Philomela both father and daughter and husband and wife in one “final goodbye” (10.509, *supremum vale*), a phrase also dripping with irony: Pandion is unaware that these are indeed his final words to his daughter.

Myrrha’s conversation with Cinyras about her own marriage provides a parallel: in both cases, a father’s natural misperception of his daughter’s situation is juxtaposed with the audience’s clearer knowledge. When Myrrha, in tears, refuses all her suitors, Cinyras, trying to comfort her, asks whom she would like to marry: *consultaque, qualem / optet habere virum, ‘similem tibi’ dixit, at ille / non intellectam vocem conlaudat et ‘esto / tam pia semper!’ ait* (10.363–366, “Having been asked what sort of man she wants to marry, she said, ‘Someone like you,’ but he
praises her misinterpreted voice and says, ‘May you always be so pious!’”). The audience knows as well as Myrrha that she is displaying a backwards version of filial piety here—she has already chastised herself in a long soliloquy about her sexual desire for her father (10.320–355). The dramatic irony arises from the fact that Cinyras does not know about her depraved feelings, so he believes the exact opposite to be true: that she is a dutiful daughter. The audience’s participation in the dramatic irony here is not left up to chance. Although Cinyras has misunderstood Myrrha’s response, Ovid makes sure his reader understands by redundantly indicating Myrrha’s “misinterpreted voice” (non intellectam vocem); further, Cinyras does not just approve Myrrha’s answer, but praises her emphatically (conlaudat). Both Pandion and Cinyras act as fathers should, but they have erroneously placed their trust in laws that members of their family do not observe.

Ovid also creates dark irony through a prolific use of kinship terms that are “exaggerated and calculated to be as incongruous as possible” (Peek 2003, 45–46). In both stories, as Peek notes with regard to the Tereus story, “kinship ties and their dissolution play an integral part,” and thus kinship terms are prominent (2003, 46). Kinship words in incongruous contexts show that a character is acting against type (Peek 2003, 43–44), as when Procne is referred to as coniunx (6.647) while cooking dinner—made of their own son—for her husband, or when Tereus is focalized as patris (6.659) through Itys’ dead head as Philomela lobs it at him (Peek 2003, 47). Another example occurs when Procne kills Itys: her decision to kill him is brimming with kinship words and with what Peek calls “evaluative and affective words” that give a value judgment of a character’s actions, such as the choice phrase scelus est pietas in coniuge Tereo (6.635, “Crime is piety in the wife of Tereus”). Peek provides an analysis of the exaggerated juxtapositions:

76 In his article on chaos in the Metamorphoses, Tarrant points out the breakdown of kinship categories in this story (2002, 354).
tion of evaluative words and kinship terms in Procne’s speech, and the black humor that results (2003, 44–45), so I will focus here only on scenes of vocalization that find a parallel in Myrrha’s story.

At several locations in the Tereus story, in which a kinship term is not merely used or focalized incongruously, as in Peek’s examples, but is actually shouted out by the victim of the kin violation, at the moment of violation. When Procne kills Itys, he cries out for his mother: *et ‘mater, mater’ clamantem et colla petentem / ense ferit Procne* (6.639–640, “And while he was crying out “Mother, Mother,” and reaching for her neck, Procne strikes him with the sword”). Itys addresses Procne as a mother at the very moment she fully rejects her motherhood.77

Much the same thing occurs when Tereus rapes Philomela:78 she calls out for help from her father and sister, the very kinship bonds Tereus is violating at the time: *vi superat frustra clamato saepe parente, / saepe sorore sua, magnis super omnia divis* (6.525–526, “He overpowers her by force, with her father often shouted for, often her sister, the great gods above all”). Philomela also cries out for her father as Tereus cuts off her tongue: *nomen patris usque vocantem* (6.555, “While protesting and constantly calling out the name of her father”).79 The kinship

77 Pentheus too calls out to his mother as she kills him (*adspice, mater*! 3.725). Cf. the comparison above of Agave and Procne. Meleager too calls out for his mother Althaea as he dies by her agency at 8.520–522.

78 Other parallels exist between with Itys’ death and Philomela’s rape/tongue cutting. For example: *nec mora* (6.636), compared to Tereus’ sudden rape of Philomela, right off the ship (6.519–520); *traxit Ityn* (6.636) compared to *trahit* (6.521); Procne takes Itys to a remote, “high,” part of the house (*utque domus altae partem tenuere remotam*, 6.638) compared to Tereus’ *stabula alta* (6.521); Procne is compared to a tiger (6.636–637) and Tereus to a wolf (6.528) and eagle (6.517); the series of four accusative participles describing the victim in each case (6.639–640, 522–523, 555–556; cf. Peek 2003, 49); the word *ensis* for sword (*ense ferit Procne*, 6.641; *abstulit ense fero*, 6.557); that Itys’ limbs stay alive (6.644) can be compared to Philomela’s tongue (559–560); Procne’s *gaudia* (6.653) mirrors Tereus’ (6.514).

79 The participle *vocantem* actually modifies Philomela’s tongue, not the girl herself, yet the fact that she is calling out for her father remains.
term cried out by the victim in both these cases, Itys’ and Philomela’s, identifies the violation of the kin relationship being committed and exaggerates the unnaturalness of the act.

Myrrha’s story both recalls and builds on this incongruous vocalization of kinship terms. At the moment she and Cinyras go to bed, they address each other aloud as “father” and “daughter:” *forsitan aetatis quoque nomine ‘filia’ dixit: / dixit et illa ‘pater,’ sceleri ne nomina desint* (10.465–468, “Perhaps also he called her by the name appropriate to her age, “daughter,” and she said, “father,” so that the names were not lacking from the crime”). Both Cinyras and Myrrha vocalize the bond they defile, one knowingly, one unknowingly.\(^80\) The irony highlights the unnaturalness of their liaison: the act’s status as incest is affirmed as it happens, by the parties involved. In contrast, up to this point, Myrrha and her nurse both have not used the word *pater* (Lowrie 1993, 52). In fact, Myrrha’s nurse cannot even bring herself to say the word in a far less sexual situation (10.429). Typical of the dark humor in the *Metamorphoses*, the irony is not merely present but is exaggerated: the comment *sceleri ne nomina desint* (10.468, “So that the names were not lacking for the crime”) spells out the violation of these kinship terms in an incestuous context.

Another link between the stories occurs in the sexual metaphor of sword (*ensis*) and sheath (*vagina*), unique in the *Metamorphoses* to the Tereus and Myrrha episodes.\(^81\) The meta-

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\(^{80}\) Although the word *forsitan* could imply the narrator (Orpheus) is taking a step back from this tale, not vouching for its truth, it could also be read as an explanation for Cinyras’ participation in this loaded dialogue. Since he does not know what is happening and does not desire his daughter, his reference to this unknown bedmate as *filia* could seem unbelievable to the reader, so the narrator suggests a reason (10.467, *forsitan aetatis quoque nomine*). *Filia* seems an age-appropriate name to Cinyras, because he knows his partner is his daughter’s age from the nurse’s advertisement (10.441, *par est Myrhrae*). However, it could be argued that Cinyras on some level does desire his daughter, since he wants to have sex with someone her age (10.441). Cf. Sharrock, 177–178 for a discussion of this possibility. Regardless, the reader is presented with one more example of kinship terms verbalized at the moment of violation.

\(^{81}\) In addition, these are the only two places the word *vagina* is used in the *Metamorphoses*, *ensis* is used elsewhere of swords (1.99, 191, 717, 3.119, 534, 4.147, 727, 5.77, 80, 98, 104, 108, 171, 204, 6.641,
phor is forceful: the word *vagina* in Latin has sexual connotations, and can stand for the vagina or an anus (Adams 1982, 20). Likewise, words for weapons are the most common euphemisms for “penis” in the Latin language (Adams 1982, 89). This metaphor occurs in Book 6 when Tereus draws his sword from its sheath to cut off Philomela’s tongue: *quo fuit accinctus, vagina liberat ensem* (6.551, “From where it was girded, he drew the sword from the sheath”). The sexual image is both grotesque and surprising because of its placement within the episode: Tereus “draws his sword” not in order to violate Philomela, but after he has already committed the rape. This sequence makes logical sense, as it is only after she threatens him that he wants to use a literal sword to cut out her tongue. But the sexual dimensions of the image, all but inevitable in the face of such a loaded line, imply that Tereus has been inside Philomela not only during the rape, but while she was lamenting, accusing him, and threatening him (6.525–550).\(^8\) This interpretation is signaled by the pointed phrase *quo fuit accinctus* (“from where it was girded”), a redundant detail in light of the rest of the line, *vagina liberat ensem* (“he freed his sword from the sheath”). The emphatic position of *quo* at the beginning, as well as the redundancy of the detail, prompts the reader to ask, “Well, where was it girded?”

This reading of the metaphor is supported by the Cinyras and Myrrha story, where Ovid uses the same combination of words in a more obvious double entendre, directly after a sex act, when Cinyras draws his sword to kill Myrrha: *pendenti nitidum vagina deripit ensem* (10.475, “He drew his shining sword from the hanging sheath”). The language and context are more pronounced than in Tereus’ story. The shining quality of the sword suggests wetness in a sexual reading, and Cinyras and Myrrha are still in bed together: *post tot concubitus inlato lumine vidit /

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\(^8\) Based on the later information that Tereus keeps coming back and raping Philomela (6.561–62), the reader might consider Tereus maniacal enough to do so.
et scelus et natam (10.473–474, “After so many liaisons he saw, with a light brought in, both his crime and his daughter”). The reader is invited to imagine Cinyras pulling out from his daughter at the same time as he draws his sword to threaten her.83 Indeed, in this scene, the reader does not even need to imagine a literal sword at all for the image to be effective: the next words are simply “Myrrha flees” (Myrrha fugit, 10.475), which she was likely to do whether or not her father actually threatened her life upon recognizing her. In retrospect, on a second reading, the loaded sexual vocabulary and context in Myrrha’s scene intensify the sexual connotation of Tereus’ sword.

Finally, I’d like to examine the import these parallels have on the elephant in the room, so to speak: an internal narrator, Orpheus, relates Myrrha’s story, while the main narrator of the Metamorphoses tells Tereus, Procne, and Philomela’s.84 I cannot fully consider this issue here, but I suggest that the similarities between the Tereus and Myrrha episodes subtly undermine Orpheus’ credibility as a narrator. As Orpheus begins Myrrha’s story, he congratulates his own Thracian race: gentibus Ismariis et nostro gratulor orbi, / gratulor huic terrae, quod abest regionibus illis, / quae tantum genuere nefas (10.304–307, “I congratulate our world and the Ismarien race, I congratulate this earth, because it is far away from those regions, which generated such a great abomination”).

The alert reader would pick up on the contradiction in Orpheus’ words, even without noticing any other links from Tereus’ story to Myrrha’s, and if a reader has picked up on even one

83 Although it is possible to argue that Cinyras is not still inside his daughter when he draws the sword, the sexual language and context both invite the reader to interpret the image this way. A light coming on does not break the logic here, since it was probably brought in by a slave, not Cinyras, the king. This is supported by the perfect passive participle inlato. At the very least, this language recalls the intercourse.

84 Myrrha’s story, interestingly, is the only one of the stories that fits Orpheus’ chosen program (10.153–154). Orpheus may be the narrator of this tale because of his similarities to the poet Cinna, who also told Myrrha’s story in his lost work, Smyrna. Both poets died the same way: they were ripped to pieces by an angry crowd (Reed 2013, ad 298–502).
or two, the irony in these words is hard to miss. Thrace was the location of the first dark story in Books 6–10 about the destructive effects of human emotions; a Thracian, Tereus, was the instigator of terrible abominations arguably even because of his “Ismarian” race (6.458–460). In this light, Orpheus’ assertion that “this earth” (huic terrae) is far away from “those regions” (regionibus illis) is almost laughably untrue: in terms of the Metamorphoses, the earth on which he is standing is actually home to powerful parallels with the region he is about to describe.

On the second reading, the reader might also pick up on a hint of Orpheus’ warning in the Tereus passage. Orpheus warns his audience away from Myrrha’s story with the line dira can-am; procul hinc natae, procul este parentes (10.300, “I will sing of terrible things; be far from here, daughters, be far, fathers”). Likewise, Pandion pleads for Philomela to return to Athens in the following words: tu quoque quam primum (satis est procul esse sororem), / si pietas ulla est, ad me, Philomela, redito! (6.502–503, “You also, as soon as possible (it is enough that your sister is far), if there is any piety, Philomela, return to me!”). The endings of lines 10.300 and 6.502 are metrically identical as well as parallel in content: both contain, in the context of a command, procul with a form of the verb “to be,” followed by a kinship term finishing the line.85 On a second reading, the phrase in the Tereus story subverts Orpheus’ point: “far” in both his and Pandion’s perspective can be taken in context to mean Thrace, where Philomela and Procne meet their doom. Even this tiny echo is a pointed example of the contradiction between Orpheus’ words and the actual world of the Metamorphoses, where a horrible fate is inescapable no matter

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85 Interesting echoes of this warning occur in Medea’s story at 7.255–256 (Hinc procul Aesoniden, procul hinc iubet ire ministros / et monet arcanis oculos remove re profanos), and in fact, in the Fasti, in the same passage about improper family relationships in which Tereus and Thyestes are mentioned together (innocui veniant: procul hinc, procul impius esto (2.623). A warning also precedes Byblis’ story, although not with the same formula (9.454, Byblis in exemplo est, ut ament concessa puellae / nec qua debebat, amabat).
your geographic location. In these two passages, Orpheus’ narrative authority is undermined by
the techniques and language of the poem in which he is operating.

Conclusion

The list of motifs and narrative techniques shared between the Tereus and Myrrha stories,
and the other family tragedies in Books 6–10 could be further expanded: the motif of night and
darkness, literal and figurative; the role of the Furies; the figures of the conflicted woman or the
helpful slave, and more. I have aimed here to discuss the most significant intratextual connec-
tions between the Tereus and Myrrha episodes, especially their mutual, interdependent allusions
to the Thyestes myth. Through this network, Ovid structures the cycle of family dramas that pre-
dominates in Books 6–10. The sequence of human crimes in these books is permeated by Thyestes’
uniquely relevant story, which unites the center of the poem under the heading of tragedy.
Through the covert insertion of Thyestes into the narratives of Tereus and Myrrha, Ovid pairs
overarching themes of human tragedy with an interplay of language and motifs that hammers
home his take on humanity in the Metamorphoses: emotions and impulses run amok can explode
the most fundamental of human institutions.


