

Updating the classics: Ovid, Emma Tennant's "Philomela" and the Intertextual Link

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Abstract

This paper explores some of the theoretical and practical possibilities of intertextual devices attending specifically to those strategies used when rewriting classical texts. Taking into account the critical explanations that, historically, have tried to decipher the use and abuse of classical sources, this study focuses on one of the endless cases where contemporary authors plunge into a well-known author's work offering serious and committed readings. This article specifically analyses Emma Tennant's achievement in her rewriting of Philomela's myth and her significant departure from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Her work proves to be a clear and direct statement of her rebellious understanding of the myth.

Burning discussions in internet about the use of the classics by Emma Tennant prove that there are current, public and non-academic responses to the term *intertextuality*.¹ Many outraged readers complain about the use and manipulation of masterpieces, and their indignant voices attack the boldness of writers who dare to use the world of the classics in what they deem sacrilegious ways. These spontaneous critics feel the need to offer free advice and serious warnings to contemporary authors, indicating how wrongly they interpret characters belonging to classic works, how poorly they follow the style and tone of the original masterpiece, and how remotely those poor versions resemble the sacred *magnum opus*.

This situation, however, is not new in the history of literary criticism. In the eighteenth century similar responses moved Samuel Johnson to support Pope's version of the *Iliad*. He pointed out in *The Life of the English Poets*:

It has been objected by some, who wish to be numbered among the sons of learning, that Pope's version of Homer is not Homeric; that it exhibits no resemblance of the original and characteristic manner of the father of poetry, as it wants his awful simplicity, his artless grandeur, his unaffected majesty ... Pope wrote for his own age and his own nation: he knew that it was necessary to color the images and point the sentiments of his author.... (Brady and Wimsatt 1977, 552).

Johnson's defence brings up a classic issue concerning two concepts directly related to intertextuality: tradition and originality. His defence points at Pope's eagerness to adapt his work to new times. According to Johnson, Pope was not violating Homer's work, but was creating a new literary product within an existing tradition, contemplating its possibilities and offering the public his own gifted recreation. This type of process could be qualified as 'original', a phenomenon that was also defined by Wellek and Warren as "perfectly compatible with emotional power and artistic value" (1949, 271). However, within the history of criticism, the possibility of blending tradition and originality has been a difficult enterprise. Many debates upon terms (such as *imitatio*, *imitatio cum variatio*, *aemulatio*) and many confrontations (such as the arguments between Ancients and Moderns) have shown the struggle to theorize and define the imprecise boundary between the originality of an author and his debts to other authors or works, a question that still today can be a reason for discrediting the literary value of a text, as Steven Connor discusses with an explicit title in "Rewriting Wrong: On the Ethics of Literary Revision" (1994, 79-97).

In very general terms, those are the ingredients for any current discussion on intertextuality, a term that still provokes endless discussions among scholars, and—what can be more dangerous—brings about confusion among our students when they try to analyse contemporary narrative texts with theoretical tenets. In the academic field, intertextuality has now reached a wide acceptance as a critical term, with different definitions according to the author (Garrigós 2000, 17-34). Intertextuality seems to emerge in the 20th century as a response to many centuries of criticism. Onega, for example, finds the voices of Bakhtin, Barthes, Kristeva or Derrida as responses to previous theoretical reflections such as the Aristotelian concept of mimesis, Mallarmé's symbolist concept of the work of art, or Edmund Wilson's defense of the originality and uniqueness of the author (in Bengoechea and Sola 1997, 18-19). Allen, on the other hand, narrows down the origins to twentieth-century linguistics, specifically to Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (1915), and points at the relevance of Bakhtin's work in literary theory, naming him "the originator, if not of the term 'intertextuality', then at least of the specific view of language which helped others articulate theories of intertextuality" (2000, 10).

Intertextuality acknowledges the dependence of authors on an existing tradition, but proves their ability, skill and original approach. It proves an author's recognition and revision of other texts, and ultimately proves that all texts are intertextual exercises, since writers always write immersed in a tradition. Contemporary authors such as Alasdair Gray, Ted Hughes or Jeannette Winterson, among many others, use, abuse, reject or rely on classic or contemporary texts as a way to offer their own original practice.

There have been many approaches to the definition of the term, Brunel & Chevrel defined intertextuality as a way to legitimise one of the functions of comparative literature, as the presence of some

texts within others (1989). Other critics, such as Steiner, considered it a word belonging to contemporary jargon that represents what for him is an obvious fact: that in Western literature, serious works incorporate, quote, reject or make reference to previous works, establishing with the original work what he calls the “ontological and logical dependence or ‘secondarity’” (1989, 152). Kristeva, reading Bakhtin, conceived the text as a mosaic of quotes and provided an intelligent description, proving that we read traces of previous or synchronic texts (1967). Genette, in *Palimpsestes* (1982), took a formalistic approach offering four different types of interplay between texts (intertextuality, paratextuality, metatextuality, and hypertextuality).

In spite of all these “batteries of scholastic nomenclatures” (Plett 1991, 14) that criticism has offered, intertextuality has enlarged what traditionally was labelled the study of influences, which was usually oriented towards authors and texts. Besides, it has kept an important place for the reader, enhancing the relevance of the response in the reading process (Culler 1976). Ultimately, intertextuality proves that there are no longer innocent readings, since the active reader reads within an ideological, historical, or literary tradition that is reactivated when facing a new text.

For our reading and our teaching, it is essential to take into account that intertextuality can be a very stimulating and sharp tool of analysis that enables the reader to understand the ideological and aesthetic values of the contemporary text, though. This type of analysis should not look for a mere juxtaposition of texts. Its goal is to establish relations of manipulation or relations of contextualization that have been used in the creative process. One common mistake that has to be avoided is the reading of the text merely to search for previous sources. This method is peculiar to those critics that T. S. Eliot sarcastically called “seekers of sources” (1966, 110) and it only provides a partial reading. Although it can be an interesting first step for the analysis of the text, it does not allow readers to grasp the richness and pleasure of the new literary discourse.

Continuing with my discussion on intertextuality, we could turn our attention again to the eighteenth century, a time when the burden of tradition was a relevant part in literary works, but also a time in which the author’s individual genius was being recognised with outstanding force. Johnson defined rules that guided writers in the construction of works that heavily depended on previous texts stating:

This mode of imitation, in which the ancients are familiarised by adapting their sentiments to modern topics ... is a kind of middle composition between a translation and original design, which pleases when the thoughts are unexpectedly applicable and the parallels lucky (Brady and Wimsatt 1977, 540).

This peculiar mode of literary creation did not limit eighteenth-century authors to produce new and original works. While

adapting classic models to modern topics, the process assumed the active role of those readers who could follow two levels of references. For example, in *Tom Jones*, Fielding's erudite narrator expects a learned audience when he describes a battle "which none but the classical Reader can taste" (Fielding 1985, 140).

Intertextuality should be seen then as a recurrent device in contemporary texts for both authors and readers. It allows authors to look for new and original ways of expression, and the whole process marks their originality, their curiosity, their critical position and, ultimately, their own individual talent. Readers learn to decode the intention of the original text by contrasting it with an original revision that normally involves a critical position. For Adrienne Rich, for example, this process provides a vital force in the works of female writers, as she states: "Re-Vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival" (1979, 90).

This specific vindicative trace is found in Emma Tennant's "Philomela", where there are many keys that make the text a successful example of intertextual writing. Tennant has acknowledged publicly her use of classic texts, as shows the list of her novels (such as *Faust*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, or *Tess*, among others), where as a recurrent motif, she takes well-known classic masterpieces as reference. She appropriates many particular characters that are recreated and explored.

Published in *Bananas* (1975), "Philomela" is one of her earlier works, where Tennant was interested in writings by Ovid. With her short story, she makes true the wish expressed by the Latin poet in the last lines of the *Metamorphoses*: "siquid habent ueri uatum praesagia, uiuam" (Ovid XV 879).² Ovid's eagerness to live through his work—expressed in that hopeful "uiuam" (I will live)—becomes a reality with Tennant's episode. It proves Ovid's work as a suitable model to be recreated, changed and transformed with successful results. As a matter of fact, Tennant is another author to add to the long list of those who found inspiration in the *Metamorphoses*. Her short story is one more among the array of literary works by Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Byron, Pound, Cervantes, Baudelaire, Verlaine, or Rilke, who recreated Ovid's imaginary and mythical elements. It also can be listed with other artistic approaches that proved Ovid's trace in works by artists such as Michelangelo, Raphael, Caravaggio, Velázquez or Rembrandt, who, like Rodin, Dalí or Picasso, fell for the scenes of the Latin author's famous poem.³

Tennant constructs a short story departing from a well-known tradition, but her rewriting offers new possibilities adapted to her own original analysis of human experiences. Normally her fiction explores, in Wheeler's words, "issues of identity, violence and desire" (1998, 266). In fact, in this short story she emphasizes the role of strong female characters, revealing a deep study of painful feelings and a story of survival. She concentrates on the characters of Philomela and Procne.

This short narrative is a brief, self-contained and straightforward story. Its success relies on the fact that readers can relate effortlessly to the classical background of the story. In fact, the story of Philomela and Tereus is generally one of the best remembered episodes of the *Metamorphoses*, being one of the most shocking, violent and dramatic ones in the book. Normally, the cultural background of Ovidian readers would allow them to recognize references in the text, and would place them in a privileged position to grasp all the different levels of meaning that Tennant combines. In the case of Spanish readers, the name of Philomela/Filomena can easily be related to sadness and grief, as it is a recurrent element in pastoral poetry of the Spanish Golden Age and Renaissance. The name recalls the melancholic bird that usually echoes the grief of the shepherd, as for example in the well-known *Égloga I* by Garcilaso de la Vega:

Aquí dio fin a su cantar Salicio,
y sospirando en el postrero acento,
soltó de llanto una profunda vena;
queriendo el monte al grave sentimiento
d'aquel dolor en algo ser propicio,
con la pesada voz retumba y suena;
la blanda Filomena,
casi como dolida
y a compasión movida,
dulcemente responde al son lloroso. (Rivers 1980, 127)

Acknowledging Philomela's myth, that is, establishing the "lucky parallels" (Brady and Wimsatt 1977, 540) mentioned by Johnson, allows the reader to have the basis for the intertextual reading, and sets all the clues for a full understanding of Tennant's text. The reader realizes how Tennant has consciously selected a story—Ovid's story—that is maintained in the background and from which the new, contemporary text emerges with independence and a rebellious tone. Obviously, the intertextual reading needs to offer more than a mere comparison between two texts to understand what Tennant proposes.

The title of the short story already marks a significant detachment from Ovid's story, as Tennant chooses just the name of Philomela to be the protagonist. However, the narrative strategies bring further possibilities as the very first lines reveal that Procne, Philomela's sister, is chosen as the narrator who recollects the whole story:

Before I married, when we lived in Athens, the bright emptiness of the long days was made bearable by my sister Philomela, who spoke the thoughts I hardly knew I had.

Why permit yourself to be taken off like a slave? We can leave Athens and go and live in the mountains. We will be free. And if we die, anything better than the life that lies ahead of us.⁴

In fact, this is the only time in which Philomela's words appear in the text, stating the spirit of independence and freedom that Procne admires in her. Her voice, however, will not be heard again. Following, at times, Ovid's plot, in Tennant's story Philomela is taken, forced, and raped by Tereus who, having cut out her tongue, leaves her imprisoned in a castle and tells Procne that she has died. Tennant adopts Ovid's material but rewrites a dramatic story of voiced and voiceless characters, finding a remarkable way to convey Philomela's traumatic experience and Procne's hopelessness.

Procne's words find in the narration the way to express what Philomela's cannot. Her story is marked continuously with incessant references to Philomela's expressions. Philomela's eyes, hands, fingers, and silences frame the events that are retold.

Procne's involvement brings the narration to a private domain, and obviously reduces the epic scope and solemn tone set in Ovid's long poem. Even if the universal *pathos* in Ovid's story is maintained, its contemporary replica by Tennant brings the conflict directly to the contemporary reader through the voice of one of the affected characters. Surprisingly, the story does not fall into emotional undertones. Procne's cold and firm tone enhances the dramatic nature and pathos of the narrated events. She is not a voice that has been transformed into a bird that sings. As a matter of fact, the scene of the metamorphosis, which is the recurrent motif almost in all episodes by Ovid, does never take place in Tennant's "Philomela". Elements of legend and helpful aid from the deities do not have space for the contemporary discourse that Tennant offers to a contemporary reader.

Thus, the horrible revenge that both female protagonists set for Tereus, serving his own son, Itylus, to be eaten, is recalled coldly. Procne's voice keeps an imperturbable and unemotional tone when dealing with that episode, even if it is permanently in her memory, as she solemnly states: "Years and years will pass, and these minutes will still be longer than them all. Every hour will be made up out of them" (412).

In Ovid's poem, conceived as *carmen perpetuum*, that is, as a continuous song, the events take place in chronological order and the poetic voice is explicit when describing all sorts of human attitudes and actions. His narrative encompasses dramatic traces of tragedy, and epic undertones are maintained in scenes of blood, cruelty and murder. Unrestrained human passions, such as Tereus's lust, Procne's thirst for revenge, and Philomela's horror are brought to the limit.

However, whereas Ovid makes the reader see, Tennant makes the reader imagine. One of the most interesting points reading this short story in terms of its intertextual devices is to realise Tennant's careful selection of events from the original story. Awful, dramatic moments are condensed in very few lines, as if Procne wants to avoid the description of painful memories leaving the reader to imagine the worst. In fact, the reader does not get a detailed description of how Tereus forced Philomela, as happens in Ovid's poem. In Tennant's story the reader learns with Procne the horrible truth, revealed in the

figures of a tapestry that has become the vehicle for Philomela's silent communication. In that particular scene, the narrative almost turns into the format of a telegram. Its fragmentary structure somehow reflects the awful torment that Procne undergoes as she realises how Philomela was raped and mutilated by her husband step by step:

I looked closer. In the first scene, Tereus was embracing a woman passionately. Her face was obscured; I smiled. In the second, I saw it. The owner of the face was cringing at Tereus' feet and she was pleading for mercy. Philomela. In the next scene he had advanced on her. He cut out her tongue. In the following scene Philomela, imprisoned in a castle, looked out as Tereus galloped away into the distance. That was all. I looked again. There was no doubt about it. Philomela. (409)

The alteration of the traditional narrative line shows Tennant's real concern to get the reader involved in the story, guessing the sufferings experienced by the female characters. The story, then, is subdued to Tennant's eagerness to expose the power of powerless females. The dramatic moment of Tereus's awful recognition of having eaten his own son—which Ovid recreated so dramatically showing Philomela entering the room with the head of the dead body—is utterly transformed in Tennant's story. Procne, who has been strong over the story, weakens at this crucial point. It is Philomela who makes her recover to find the energy and strength to confess the terrible truth. In Tennant's story, Itylus's head does not appear, but the silence that surrounds Philomela becomes more terrifying. Tennant recreates the pain and revenge of the two women. Both are heard through Philomela's silence and through Procne's voice, none of which are ever heard in Ovid's poem:

Philomela came forward from the back of the tent. Because she was dumb the men were afraid of her, and they fell back easily enough to let her through. I felt Tereus wince. Take that woman away! he muttered. But his voice lacked conviction: like the others, he was afraid of her. She had become, in the camp, like the priestess of an oracle without a voice. She was the unconscious avenger of every sin. If only Tereus knew the barbarity she had suffered, the others guessed at it.

She reached my side and took my hand so I could rise with new strength. Except for distant shouting outside, her silence had spread. The eyes looked at us now with fear and unease. They were waiting: waiting for me to speak.

I turned to Tereus.

It is for you to eat your son Itylus, I said. You destroyed us long ago. (413)

With this final scene, a powerful perlocutionary effect is achieved. Although the story is known, the reader is given a new

angle to discover Procne's behaviour upon the dramatic situation, to get closer to her mixed feelings of fear, revenge and grief. Her final words ("How slow! Tereus' long years of exile and grief. How quickly the years will pass". (413)) enlarge the possibilities of the original story, bring an open end and prove the originality of Tennant's work in her exhaustive analysis of female experiences. Moreover, the story offers new aesthetic and literary possibilities very much connected with the main theme.

Tennant shows the anguish of Philomela's lack of communication through Procne's obsession for sounds, a motif that is constantly recreated in the story, as much as the world of senses. In Ovid's poem, once the protagonists have been metamorphosed, their sounds as birds mark the end of the tragedy. However, in Tennant's story, sounds and birds are the recurrent reminder of women without voices. Procne misses her sister and cries "like the birds my children bring back when they go out for a walk" (407); in her lonely and sad existence without Philomela, the sound of birds seems to be the only sign of life that she is able to appreciate: "It was summer, and birds were singing in the thicket of olives. My eyes were tired from crying: they had changed their shape now and slanted down in the corners instead of being round" (408).

Providing a critical revision of the classic masterpiece, Tennant's story acquires a voice of its own. It offers a significant transformation from Ovid's poem, keeping the classic author's myth and appeal, but transforming and transgressing boundaries to offer an original literary work. Tennant proves that the reading of a classic text is never a closed, rounded one, and her intertextual game recalls other complex readings of the myth by other contemporary writers such as John Crowe Ransom's "Philomela" or Ted Hughes's *Tales from Ovid*.⁵ These authors and their interest in the Latin poet prove that tradition can be taken not only as source of inspiration, but also as a way to explore human issues with critical, revisionist eyes. Intertextuality becomes then a useful element to explain their attempts, and to understand their creative processes as a peculiar, dialectic confrontation with the original source.

NOTES

¹ Among many others see, for example, discussions on Tennant's *Pemberley: or Pride and Prejudice Continued* in <http://www.pipeline.com/~awaldemar/JA/PandP/CmtsPemberley.htm>, or comments about Tennant's *Emma in Love* in <http://www.pemberley.com/kip/emma/tennantel.html>, or impressions on Tennant's *Elinor and Marianne* in <http://www.thenetnet.com/readme/emma.html>

² "... and, through all the ages, in fame, (if there is any truth in the predication of bards) I shall live" (Hill 2000, 123).

³ See also Reid 1993, which contains an entry on “Philomela and Procne” (895-98) with a complete index of authors and artists who have dealt with the story, including among others Chrétien de Troyes, Sidney, Zorrilla, Coleridge, Leopardi, T. S. Eliot or Swinburne. Lyne 2001 is also a valuable study upon Ovid’s reception in the English Renaissance, specifically he deals with the translations by Golding and Sandy, and the imitations by Spenser and Drayton.

⁴ “Philomela” (1975) in *The Penguin Book of Modern British Short Stories*. Ed. M. Bradbury. London: Penguin, 1988, 407. All subsequent quotes from this short story have been taken from this same edition.

⁵ Brown 1999 includes different chapters on other intertextual modernist and postmodernist writings based on Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, such as those by Keats, Browning, Joyce, H. D., Virginia Woolf, David Slavitt, Christopher Ransmayr or Fred D’Aguiar

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