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## Philomel's Silence in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

### ABSTRACT:

The myth of Philomel narrated in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* constitutes one of the most frequent classical references in Renaissance literature and theatre. This study analyzes the effects the myth produces in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to demonstrate how Philomel's disquieting appearance in the text overlaps with a meta-poetic reflection linking the silence of the mutilated heroine to that of the poet oppressed by Elizabethan censorship. Specifically, the study focuses on analyzing the events of Hermia, Titania, and Bottom to clarify their connection to sexual violence, speech loss, and poetic censorship. Finally, the study illustrates how Bottom, portraying a Shakespearean Philomel, becomes a caricature of the poet himself. Considering the valuable contribution of critics, the essay proposes an analysis of the play to reveal its nuances and ambiguities.

Keywords: Philomel; nightingale; imposed silence; poetic censorship; rape.

### 1. Introduction

According to Taylor, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which is “arguably Shakespeare's most Ovidian play”, the influence of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is “pervasive” (Taylor 2004, 51). Nonetheless, among the numerous mythical references, Philomel's presence has always been surrounded by an aura of

doubt. One legitimately wonders why Shakespeare included in his *comedy*<sup>1</sup> a direct reference to one of the most macabre and violent myths in the entire classical tradition.

In early modern culture, Philomel's tale was undoubtedly a favorite; this is also due to the popularity of the new Golding translation of the myths, which encouraged writers to imitate Ovid and create powerfully revolutionary works by exploiting classical symbols in new and unexpected ways. In *'A moving Rhetorick'*, Luckyj closely observes how the mute heroine not only serves early modern male and female authors to express the subversive power of feminine silence, but is also adopted as "a figure for the (male) poet" (Luckyj 2002, 168).

In fact, appearing frequently in Shakespeare, the nightingale always assumes a meta-poetic meaning becoming a metaphor for censored poets. Besides the *Passionate Pilgrim* and sonnet 102, where the Bard explicitly identifies with Philomel, in *Titus Andronicus*, raped and mutilated Lavinia denounces her aggressors by showing her family a copy of Philomel's story; her resorting to the Ovidian text makes her a possible metaphor for poets who exploited classical mythology to fight the silence imposed by censorship (Montironi 2020, 64). In *The Rape of Lucrece*, by duetting with Philomel, the protagonist faces the task of narrating an event so traumatic as to be unspeakable. As Lavinia and the silenced poet, Lucrece exploits someone else's work of art, specifically a painting depicting tragic mythological figures, to elaborate her grief (Bate 1993, 75-79). As in *Titus*, in *Cymbeline*, a copy of the *Metamorphoses* figures as a prop: Imogen reads Ovid's story before being metaphorically violated by Iachimus.

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<sup>1</sup> What early modern spectators anticipated from *Dream* was a representation in line with the characteristics of the Midsummer (or May Day) festive period: illicit love, chaos, and merriment (see Linley 2016). However, referring to *Dream* as a comedy is controversial, since its dark content is now widely acknowledged. Hutton refers to the play as a "tragedy in comic disguise" (Hutton 1985); Lewis questions whether *Dream* is only a "fairy fantasy" or rather an "erotic nightmare" (Lewis 1969); Chaudhuri sees the play as a "comedy of compromise" discussing its ambiguity and polarity (Chaudhuri 2017, 106). Philomel's bittersweet song fits perfectly within all these strands. Here, tragic elements are only hinted at through humorous *reticence* and ambiguity. Ovid's influence plays a crucial role in shaping *Dream's* disturbing content since all Ovidian allusions are somehow of tragic nature. First and foremost, one should mention the story shaping the last act, the "most lamentable comedy" (1.2.11) performed by the mechanicals. The Ovidian tragedy unintentionally turned into a farce mirrors the lovers' comic events, which, as the study will prove, inevitably metamorphose into tragic.

Additionally, the textile elements surrounding Imogen and allowing her to react to the injustices she suffered strongly resonate with Philomel's clever tapestry.

A close reading of these texts reveals how Shakespeare places the myth in contexts where violence has happened or is about to happen, as in *Dream's* case. Nevertheless, Philomel makes her appearance in the play not as a warning but as "a weak talisman" (Hunt 1992, 223) evoked by the fairies to protect the sleep of Queen Titania with her melodious voice:

Philomel, with melody,  
Sing in our sweet lullaby,  
Lulla, lulla, lullaby; lulla, lulla, lullaby.  
Never harm, nor spell, nor charm,  
come our lovely lady nigh.  
So good night, with lullaby.  
(*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 2.2.13-18)<sup>2</sup>

Carroll questions "how appropriate a voice is that of Philomela" in such a context (Carroll 1985, 171); in this regard, "since she herself is a victim", the heroine "may not be the best mythical figure to call upon" (Uman 2001, 75), argues Uman. Admittedly, in a sung lullaby, a reference to the most melodious bird is coherent enough to pass almost unnoticed. "But the nightingale sings melodiously only because Philomel once lost something less musically harmonious but more valuable – her woman's voice" (Hunt 1992, 223). From this standpoint, the presence of Ovid's heroine is a clever clue aimed at unmasking the latent violence concealed behind what appears as a merry comedy. According to Uman, who explored the influence of the Philomel myth in *Dream*, the metamorphosis subtexts underlying the play connect with issues of transformation, rape, and ravishment that, obviously, "must remain hidden from view" (Uman 2001, 74). At the same time, Montironi suggests that in the play Philomel "serves to inspire the expression of outrage against the violation of a person's freedom or body" (Montironi 2020, 64). In *Dream*, the violation of the characters' body could reasonably be a metaphor for the violation of the poet's freedom of expression, a traumatic issue authors could not discuss openly.

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<sup>2</sup> Hereafter, quotations from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* refer to the 2017 Arden edition.

By relying on the contribution of critics, the study attempts to interpret *Dream* to demonstrate how a meta-poetic reflection lies behind this disquieting apparition. The essay conducts a content and textual analysis observing the events of Hermia, Titania and Bottom and their connection to mute Philomel, emphasizing the countless elements that link them to the tropes of violence, language loss and censorship<sup>3</sup>.

## 2. Hermia

Hermia is the first to meet Philomel's fate. Like her Ovidian parallel, the young Athenian is trapped in a patriarchal system where her voice, "more tunable than lark to shepherd's ear" (1.1.184) (the reference to singing birds is obvious), carries no weight against men. Like most of Shakespearean women, Hermia does not reflect the ideal of the *pia filia*. She is neither silent nor measured in her speech; on the contrary, she is so shameless as to ask Theseus the punishment she would face if she refused to marry the man her father considers most worthy. "Either to die the death, or to abjure / For ever the society of men" (1.1.65-66). The alternative to death is a sad life of austerity and seclusion spent singing "faint hymns to the cold fruitless moon" (1.1.73). The moment she refuses to channel her passions into the object her father has chosen for her, these same passions will be permanently suppressed or repressed and confined with her.

In this regard, I agree with Marshall when he suggests that "Hermia and Hippolyta are in effect tongue-tied in the same way: their fate is to have others dictate their sentiments while they are silent or silenced" (Marshall 1982, 551). The play begins with one woman reduced to silence and ends with four (plus Bottom). The voice of the Amazon who speaks in the first scene and then falls silent until Act Four is, in its absence, more significant than it seems. Hippolyta is a prisoner of war forced into marriage with the man who defeated, raped and

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<sup>3</sup> Philomel's tale became a useful device for Shakespeare's predecessors to describe what it meant to produce poetry in a politically oppressive context. It follows that the Bard's reception of the myths was not only Ovidian, but was also influenced by the use that politically engaged poets had made of the myths before him, most notably George Gascoigne (see Maslen 2006). On the functioning of censorship in Elizabethan times, see Clare (1999), Clegg (1997), and Dutton (1991).

threatened her with death. She speaks with restraint, dignity, and diplomacy as is appropriate to her position (*ibid.*, 548), but it is also true that she has no choice. Also, should Hippolyta be so bold as to speak in favor of Hermia, her voice would carry no weight.

Patriarchal power is obviously among the premises directing the story. However, the picture described in the play is not completely valid from a historical viewpoint. Certainly, the idea that children (especially daughters) were property of their fathers was widespread at the time (“as she is mine, I may dispose of her”, 1.1.42) but, as several sources report (Greaves 1981, 160-61; Chaudury 2017, 83; Linley 2016; Tennenhouse 2013 [1986], 73), there were limits to the impositions they exercised.

Thus, one could interpret the oppression that male characters exert on female ones in a metaphorical key: Philomel embodies the parallelism between the violence with which patriarchal/male power crushes defiant women and the violence that censorship exerts on texts it deems immoral. However, if women at the end of the play are made docile and reduced to silence (through marriage), the poet ventriloquizing through Philomel is not.

Back to Hermia, it is interesting to note how Shakespeare presents the two suitors because, in fact, neither of them seems all that worthy. The first to come forward is Demetrius. Although he is initially presented as a respectable party, we learn from his rival, Lysander, that Demetrius has a discredited and inconstant character and that he abandoned Helena in favor of Hermia.

Nonetheless, what the text first reveals about Lysander – the man who Hermia favors – is that, according to her father, he deceived his daughter by offering her “rhymes” and “love-tokens”, singing to her with “faining voice, verses of feigning love” (1.1.28-31). Among the first things a reader learns when approaching Ovid is that never, under any circumstances, should a woman trust a man’s words of love. It seems that Lysander, like many before him, thoroughly studied the *Ars Amatoria*, appearing as an excellent rhetorician. In fact, one of Ovid’s main pieces of advice to conquer a woman is “Make promises! They do no harm, so who can chide us?” (*Ars Amatoria* 1.443).

Nevertheless, Hermia seems strangely ‘cautious’ in promising to attend her appointment with Lysander. One should pay attention to the promises Hermia anaphorically lists. If the former are conventional and in line with the

optimistic tone of the dialogue (1.1.168-71), the following seem in stark contrast to it. The girl is promising on all the oaths that men like Aeneas have broken. Hunt noted how Hermia's speech amounts to a linguistic act that is not only counterproductive and ineffective but "self-defeating" (Hunt 1992, 220). Hermia loses control of her voice as if she herself doubts Lysander's nature.

After Philomel's appearance (2.2.13) the play simply collapses. Like Titania, who in her sleep will be attacked by Oberon, Hermia and Lysander decide to stop and rest. Again, the girl seems circumspect when refusing to sleep next to Lysander, who obviously defends his good intentions: "Then by your side no bed-room me deny; / for lying so, Hermia, I do not lie" (2.2.55-56). The pun "lying"/"deceiving" does not escape Hermia who insists on sleeping apart as befits a virtuous man and a virgin maiden.

Although the play's hilarious tone misleads, the audience is well prepared to grasp the tragic veiling to which these elements allude. Indeed, classical mythology is studded with heroines deceived and abandoned by untrustworthy men, first and foremost Philomel and her sister Procne betrayed by Tereus.

When it comes to broken promises, one thinks immediately of Ovid's *Heroides*. Specifically, the tenth letter tells the story of Ariadne and Theseus, now betrothed to Hippolyta. In later versions of the myth, including Chaucer's, Theseus's promises are hyperbolic, and his tendency to break them is amplified. According to Ovid, after rescuing Ariadne from the Minotaur, Theseus takes her to an island, spends the night with her, and then inexplicably abandons her by setting sail with his ship. Ariadne recounts the moment she woke up and how not finding Theseus by her side in her bed, she shouted his name, but in vain:

And all the while I called your name, and all  
The cliffs around the bay returned my call:  
'Theseus!' the scenery when I  
cried out would sympathetically reply.  
(*Her. X*, vv. 23-26)

These verses obviously remind us of one of the most tragic moments in the whole comedy, that of Hermia's awakening.

*Philomel's Silence*

Help me, Lysander, help me! Do thy best  
To pluck this crawling serpent from my breast!  
Ay me, for pity! What a dream was here!  
Lysander, look how I do quake with fear.  
Methought a serpent eat my heart away,  
And you sate smiling at his cruel prey.  
Lysander! What, remov'd? Lysander! Lord!  
What, out of hearing gone? No sound, no word?  
Alack, where are you? Speak, and if you hear;  
Speak, of all loves! I swoon almost with fear.  
(2.2.149-58)

The most popular analysis of Hermia's dream is undoubtedly the Freudian one, which interprets the vision in a sexual key: the snake clutching her breast would be a sign of the insecurity underlying her love (Holland, 1979). Without excluding this interpretation, Hermia's dream can be read symbolically as a vision representing the pressures that censorship exerted on Elizabethan poets. Like Philomel, albeit in a dream, Hermia suffers a sexual assault followed by a speech loss.

In fact, here the serpent recurs frequently. Not surprisingly, the "spotted snakes with double tongue" (2.2.9) are the first creatures Philomel is supposed to keep away from Titania's bed. However, it is in Puck's final monologue that the nature of the oft-mentioned serpent becomes apparent.

If we have unearned luck  
Now to scape the serpent's tongue,  
We will make amends ere long;  
Else the puck a liar call.  
(5.1.422-25)

The association between the serpent and slander, closely linked to the sin of envy, is common in early modern culture. As Chew notes, Spenser writes that a "hateful snake" lies secretly in Envy's bosom. The poet also says that "Envy hates good works and virtuous deed, and 'backbites' the 'verse of famous Poets witt', spewing poison 'on all that ever writt'" (Chew 1973, 109-10).

Hence Philomel is evoked. Hermia's dream denounces the poet's concerns by appearing tragically prophetic. As Philomel and the poet, Hermia sees her



voice suppressed by the slanders of the other lovers. In 3.2., under the spell of the flower, Lysander insults her with epithets such as “Ethiop”, “vile thing”, “dwarf”, “bead”, and “acorn” (3.2.257-330). Before her mutilation at the hands of Tereus, Philomel has the power to speak and the determination to use that power to publicly recount the truth but, after the violence, the woman is no longer able to produce articulate speech, finding herself isolated, both physically and linguistically. Hermia lives the same condition, by metaphorically dissolving into the most insignificant elements of nature, and losing both her humanity and expressive power.

In his *Politics*, Aristotle explains how language is intrinsically linked to humanity, civilization, and the idea of community (*Politica I*) The moment a member of the community loses his ability to produce verbal messages, it is as if he regresses to a primitive and irrational state much more akin to that of the beasts than that of his fellow humans, who will automatically tend to isolate him. Analyzing the myth in terms of speech loss, Natoli explains that Ovid sets Philomel’s tale in the context of a human community, from which the heroine moves to the animal realm. This transition “results in her entry into a state of ‘wavering identity’ between human and animal schematically associated with the isolation of speech loss” (Natoli 2017, 66). Also in *Dream*, the story moves from a civilized context to a ‘wild’ one (the forest). Hermia perfectly mirrors the consequences of this shift, which is followed by isolation and a state of ‘wavering identity’ closely linked to language loss. Indeed, Hermia, isolated and unheard, begins to doubt her identity: “Am I not Hermia?” (3.2.273). Eventually, she despairs and falls silent: “I am amazed, and know not what to say” (3.2.344). When she wakes up by loudly calling for Lysander, Hermia is as mute because no one can hear her. As Jane Hiles (cited in Lugo 2007, 409) indicates, speaking without being heard –or listened to, in this case– is like not speaking at all.

The stories of both heroines trace the events of Ovid’s exile. It is well known that Augustus condemned Ovid’s poetry as immoral and adulterous and relegated him to the margins of the empire. Like his heroine, he is deprived of his voice and forced to leave his homeland. In Tomis, where no one speaks Latin, Ovid meets the fate of his character suffering a form of mutism and linguistic isolation from which he manages to redeem himself, paradoxically,

only through the very poetic production that condemned him. As a 'weaver of poetry', Philomel becomes an alter ego of the poet who, through her story, denounces the violence of Augustan censorship.

In this context, Philomel's presence in *Dream* is perfectly justified. Hermia is abandoned to the silence of the forest like many other violated Ovidian characters before her, included metaphorically Ovid himself. Nonetheless, the tragic nature of Hermia's awakening is immediately masked by the comic vicissitudes of the mechanicals. After all, *Dream* is a comedy, or so it seems. In truth, it is time to discover the consequences of Oberon's violence on Titania. The queen in turn will subdue Bottom, who will thus lose his voice.

### **3. Titania**

Jealousy, adultery, power abuse, and metamorphosis used as a punishment allow Titania and Oberon to earn their rightful place among the classical divinities. The fairy queen's characterization has always been an object of curiosity for critics who proposed associations with multiple figures. In particular, Barkan sees the meeting of Bottom and Titania as "the fullest example in Renaissance literature of the Diana and Actaeon story" (Barkan 1980, 352). Nonetheless, as Staton argues: "Shakespeare's Titania is actually an amalgam of several classical goddesses: besides Diana, [...] she resembles Juno, and [...] Venus. Thus, the name "Titania" is well chosen: it can stand for any daughter of a titan" (Staton 1963, 167). While not excluding any of the characters that fuse and clash to construct Titania, the analysis justifies the reference to Philomel's song by highlighting the links between the queen and Ovid's nightingale.

As already said, invoking Philomel as protection from the dangers of the forest is highly unusual. However, considering the violent nature of her story, the queen is as much a victim as Philomel. Uman argues that Titania suffers a form of rape by Oberon who violates her intimacy by pouring juice on her eyes at a time when the queen is completely helpless (Uman 2001, 76). Through the potion, Oberon exerts his control over Titania's sexuality by subduing her, humiliating her and making her lose her humanity, just as Tereus did to Philomel.

As already mentioned, in the play, violence is always followed by an imposed silence, which Philomel's appearance confirms and foretells. In Titania's case, language loss is manifested in three ways. Firstly, Titania herself recounts how Oberon's "brawls" (2.1.87) interrupted her propitiatory dances, unleashing natural catastrophes such as floods and famine. The hopeless villages are silenced by hunger and "No night is now with hymn or carol blest" (2.1.102). Secondly, under the effect of the drug, Titania falls in love with Bottom and addresses him words of love so Petrarchan and conventional as to be profoundly empty (Carroll 1985, 34). The result is comical but also reveals the lack of weight Titania's voice has after Oberon's spell. The last form of muteness the queen suffers appears when Oberon silences Titania preventing her to speak: with his brutal "Silence a while" (4.1.79) Oberon is similar to Tereus when he cut Philomel's tongue (Uman 2001, 77).

Finally, reminding readers that the origin of the fairy couple's dispute is the possession of a changeling boy, Marshall argues that the Indian "page" (2.1.185) (note the meta-poetic pun) "represents an impression of Titania's fantasy" (Marshall 1982, 552). In a censorship-like process, the king wants to author Titania's fancies ("I'll make her render up her page to me", 2.1.185) just like Theseus and Egeus when they tell Hermia to "fit her fancies" to her father's will (1.1.118). Here, both Titania and Hermia are mute Philomels playing the part of the disobedient poet who is controlled, punished, and silenced by the government.

#### 4. Bottom

Yet, poor Bottom is the character who most explicitly calls to mind Ovid's heroine. "Nick Bottom, the weaver" (1.2.16). Even his trade refers to Philomel and her tapestry.

The womanly art of weaving has always been a metaphor for poetic production, especially in the Ovidian universe. Semantically, although it has lost its metaphorical charge, the word 'text', from the Latin *textus*, derives precisely from the semantic field of weaving. In this sense, Philomel's tale clarifies the nature of this catachresis that the poet exploits in a meta-poetic key. Several stories in the *Metamorphoses* (prologue included) link to weaving. In each of

these 'textile' *mise en abymes*, the act of weaving mirrors the act of creating poetry, and the work of art, always taking on a subversive perspective, embodies the conflict between victims and oppressors. In the myth, through her weaving, Philomel rebels against her rapist; in the story of Arachne, the weaver incurs the wrath of Minerva by producing a dangerously ironic tapestry; or again, in the tale of the *Minneads* (also present in *Dream* as the inspiration for the last act), the three women tell stories while weaving and spinning.

Reflecting on their semantic and symbolic link, 'weaving' and 'writing' become synonyms. Bottom 'the weaver' could be a humiliating caricature of Shakespeare 'the writer', or rather 'the playwright', or 'the poet'. In fact, just as the artisans prepare the entertainment for the Duke's wedding, the creator of *Dream* has precisely the same task in real life. Admitting this connection, Bottom's story, equally comic and bitter, becomes yet another Shakespearean attempt to denounce the plight of the Elizabethan poet "made tongue-tied by authority" (Sonnet 66, v. 9)<sup>4</sup>.

Bottom is undoubtedly an Ovidian victim and his connection to Philomel is tragically evident. Indeed, he is the only character in Shakespeare's entire oeuvre to perform a physical man-to-beast metamorphosis on stage (Carroll 1985, 148). According to the principle directing all metamorphoses, Bottom becomes an ass on the outside because he was already an ass on the inside – like Philomel, who turns into an animal because revenge and pain consumed her humanity. Bottom's translation is not surprising because, although he changes, he paradoxically remains the same. Now he only has a form, both "liberating and constricting" (*ibid.*, 37), that suits him better and in which he is disturbingly comfortable to the point of getting used to it without even realizing it.

As in Ovid's woods, also in Shakespeare's, metamorphosis is the result of the whims of the gods, but if in Ovid it follows a traumatic event or an unbearable excess of suffering, here in the play, metamorphosis precedes it. Plus, besides linking Titania's violence on Bottom to the rape of Philomel, Starks-Estes argues that "the change of gender roles and the cross-species eroticism [...] also extend beyond it, drawing from other Ovidian erotic narratives involving fantasies of zoophilia or bestiality as well as domination

<sup>4</sup> Edmondson and Wells date Sonnet 66 around 1594 and 1595 (2020, 97). *Dream* was supposedly composed in the same years, between 1594 and 1596 (Chaudhuri 2017, 109).

and submission.” (Starks-Estes 2014, 166). “Shakespeare was a competitive author”, writes Lugo (2007, 405). In fact, Bottom is a more Ovidian victim than those of Ovid himself. At the same time, Shakespeare’s change of gender roles constitutes a form of adaptation of the myth to his specific circumstances. To the Bard, who wrote under the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, government, authority, and censorship were not represented by a male monarch, but by a female one. Therefore, in *Dream*, censorship violating the male poet (Bottom) is embodied by a woman, the Fairy Queen of the play. Hunts contends that the appearance of the second installment of Spencer’s *The Faerie Queene* in 1596 amplifies the idea of a political allegory in the play where Titania is the fairy correspondent of Elizabeth I (Hunt 2000, 425).

The animal component, pointed out by Starks-Estes, also unites the weaver and Philomel’s stories through the image of the nightingale, which Bottom himself mentions along with a significant number of birds. The word ‘nightingale’ appears explicitly in the comedy only once and does so by coming right out of Bottom’s mouth, who declares:

I grant you, friends, if you should fright  
the ladies out of their wits, they would have no more  
discretion but to hang us. But I will aggravate my  
voice so, that I will roar you as gently as any sucking  
dove; I will roar you and ’twere any nightingale.  
(1.2.74-78)

Amid the errors, malapropisms, and terrible puns, we read the determination of a playwright aware of the risks of censorship. As Dent writes, the readers are perhaps more inclined to associate Shakespeare with Quince (and his mechanicals with the Chamberlain’s Men), “yet Bottom by his irrepressible initiative tends to usurp even the authorial role. He is indeed the play’s ‘weaver’” (Dent 1964, 125). Bottom tells the artisans that if their play is not appreciated (either because too violent or immoral) the sentence would be death. Thus, the lion character cannot roar fiercely, as a real lion would, but must do so “gently” (1.2.77) like a “sucking dove” (1.2.77-78). Bottom, who never seems to master his language, confuses and mixes up two harmless creatures, two preys: a ‘sitting dove’ and a ‘suckling lamb’. Nevertheless, Bottom’s malapropism is not random because both animals appear in Ovid's

myth, precisely referring to Philomel. Furthermore, Bottom will also be associated with the dove in 5.1., when the weaver plays the role of Pyramus, dead. The dove and the tropes of violence, death, and silence are all condensed into a few lines:

*Thisbe.* Asleep, my love?  
What, dead, my dove?  
O Pyramus, arise.  
Speak, speak. Quite dumb?  
(5.1.317-20)

These are rather subtle allusions perhaps only spectators or readers with deep knowledge of the Ovidian text could grasp. However, the reference to the nightingale, which one can only interpret as an allusion to Philomel, must have seemed more immediate.

“But I will aggravate my voice so, that [...] I will roar you and ‘twere any nightingale” (1.2.76-78). Here again, what seems a silly malapropism on Bottom’s part is, in truth, very telling: one might think Bottom meant ‘to moderate’ rather than ‘to aggravate’. On the contrary, I argue that Bottom-poet deliberately and consciously chose to say what he said. The verb ‘to aggravate’ juxtaposed with the seemingly oxymoronic image ‘to roar like a nightingale’ renders the devastating consequences that the presence of a figure like Philomel potentially has on the perception of a work and perfectly represents its symbolic power. Considering the violence and pain that move it, it is not inconsistent to state that Philomel’s song, as well as that of the poet, is as expressive and fearsome as the ‘roar’ of any lion.

Yet, through Bottom’s tragic acting skills and the chaotic atmosphere created by his clumsy companions, we strongly perceive the Bard’s skepticism towards his craft. As already mentioned, Bottom is a bitter caricature of Philomel-nightingale on one hand, and of the poet ridiculing himself on the other. Bottom is by no means a nightingale and his musical ear is as fine as that of a donkey.

Believing to be played for a fool, metamorphosed Bottom wants to show that he has not fallen for the joke and that he is not scared at all. Unflustered, he stays at his post and starts singing. He does this to distract the spectators

and fill an otherwise deeply upsetting silence, namely the same silence in which Hermia was imprisoned: “No sound, no word?” (2.2.156). It is the silence of a deserted theatre or an empty stage from which the actors (like the mechanicals) flee in fear.

Braying a meaningful song about birds, he wakes the sleeping Titania. In the song, after a roundup of *songbirds* (3.1.126-30), also appears the cuckoo (3.1.127-29), calling to mind the word cuckold, a man whose wife is unfaithful. Shakespeare plays on the saying: “Do not set your wit against a fool’s” (Dent 1981, 547). The cuckoo song, symbolizing amorous betrayal, imposes a “negative silence” (Hunt 1992, 224) because men do not dare to contradict it, and if they did, by shouting “cuckoo” too, they would look as foolish as the bird. The song thus ends with an essentially enforced silence, but, as Hunt has pointed out, ironically, Titania desires to hear it again (*ibid.*).

Before Titania silences Bottom, the Bard gives a glimpse of the weaver’s voice and its ‘public’ component. Every time he speaks, Bottom acts to be heard by an audience. Just as Philomel threatens to reveal Tereus’s faults publicly, Bottom sings full-throated about the queen’s adulteries, both the past ones and those about to take place. Indeed, the song introduces what will happen shortly afterward.

Ruled by her desire for the donkey, Titania takes him prisoner. Considering Philomel’s story, the verses at the end of the scene become profoundly eloquent. Titania orders her fairies to lead Bottom to her bed and adds: “Tie up my lover’s tongue, bring him silently.” (3.1.192). Uman argues that “with her command, Titania again translates the myth of Philomel, but now it is Bottom the weaver who is silenced [...], and thus he becomes Philomel while Titania occupies the position of Tereus the rapist” (Uman 2001, 77).

Just as Hermia was attacked by the serpent symbolizing slander, somehow Bottom-Philomel-poet also suffers the same fate. Indeed, Rambuss noted how Titania, in her predilection for boys in bondage (Rambuss 2003, 247), resembles the nymph Salmacis from Book Four of the *Metamorphoses*. Ovid recounts that Salmacis violently coils Hermaphroditus like a *snake* in the beak of an eagle. The serpent wraps its tail around the bird’s talons and wings, imprisoning it and switching from prey to predator (like Titania and Philomel). Moreover, Ovid

compares Salmacis to the ivy imprisoning the trunks in its tangle (Met. IV, vv. 449-55), an image retrievable almost identically in *Dream*:

and I will wind thee in my arms.  
Fairies, be gone, and be always away.  
So doth the woodbine the sweet honeysuckle  
Gently entwist; the female ivy so  
Enrings the barked fingers of the elm.  
(4.1.39-43)

Staton compares this passage to the rape of Adonis by Venus in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* (Staton 1963, 175-76). The similarities between the two texts, both inspired by Salmacis's myth, are striking. Venus silences and violently entangles her prey, who is again a *bird*: "Look how a bird lies tangled in a net, / So fasten'd in her arms Adonis lies" (vv. 67-68). In a few short lines, the presence of captured, raped and silenced birds is pervasive. Philomel's presence no longer seems so incoherent. By exploiting the nightingale's song, Shakespeare shows the barbarity of censorship on the poet's voice, which in the play is embodied by Hermia, Titania, and Bottom, *Dream's* most representative victims.

"I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was" (4.1.203-05). Although he is unable to express what he suffered, Bottom remembers, and it is enough to generate a change in him. Seeing Bully Bottom struggle with words is extremely funny, and the part "Man is but an ass if he go about to expound this dream" (4.1.205-06) cannot but elicit a laugh.

Still, Bottom is the only one who truly encountered the fairies. He was their victim and is aware of it (albeit unconsciously). Compared to the others, Bottom was lucid; he was not under the influence of any potion. Yet, he can't tell about his experience because no human words can describe it. In the *Metamorphoses*, "humans who were experiencing high levels of emotion tended to be described as temporarily bereft of the ability to speak" (Natoli 2017, 35). Like Philomel mutilated and later transformed into a nightingale, Bottom is a victim of violence who has lost his voice because any language would be inadequate. It is the surrender of the poet who no longer knows how to express himself.



Miller argues that “by speaking so generally of man and human capacities, Bottom reconfirms himself as a comic mirror for the general human condition” (Miller 1975, 264). In this sense, Bottom represents all those who struggle with dangerous truths they are unable to repeat. It is Philomel’s *fassusque nefas* (Met. VI, v. 524). Calderwood (cited in Hunt 1992, 237) writes that “Bottom lacks Hamlet’s gift of speech, and because he can neither word nor reword it, the ‘matter’ of his fairy experiences fades into incommunicable subjectivity, into a wordless ‘dream’”. The poet, however, possesses this gift. Again, “Man is but an ass if he go about to expound this dream” (4.1.205-06). It is the dream Shakespeare has been telling so far, even at the cost of making a fool out of himself, even at the risk of being silenced.

## 5. Conclusion

Silence is the foundation of *Dream* because what could be said, which would be profoundly destructive, is hushed or cleverly disguised to ensure order between the artist and authority. Nevertheless, as Ovid and Shakespeare knew, silence can prove dangerously eloquent.

*Dream* welcomes Philomel to show how the patriarchal order that drives the story purposefully hints at something else. In a maelstrom of images and sounds, Philomel guides the interpretation by giving meaning to the characters and the silence imposed on them.

Violated in a dream by the serpent of slander, betrayed, and abandoned, Hermia loses herself in the woods to which she entrusts her weeping. Like the poet, Hermia has lost her voice and herself. From a powerful fairy queen, Titania becomes a slave to Oberon, who humiliates her, reduces her to bestiality, and deprives her of her freedom. The queen shifts from prey to predator by violating poor Bottom, whose naive and foolish nature elevates him to the role of the play’s true protagonist.

Repeatedly compared to the nightingale and the field of weaving, Bottom is more than any female character a Shakespearean Philomel. Mimicking both the heroine and the poet, Bottom shares their fate of struggling with language and being ultimately silenced. Becoming the inept spokesperson for oppressed

humanity, the weaver sympathizes with the playwright, allowing him to bring his sorrows on stage.

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