

## Article

# Pain's Echo: Lament and Revenge in Ovid's "Procne and Philomela"

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**Abstract:** The article offers a reexamination of Ovid's story of Philomela and Procne, with an emphasis on revenge and lament as two responses to acts of wrongdoing and loss. My analysis begins by exploring philosophical and psychoanalytic perspectives, mainly from Nietzsche and Freud, which are usually thought of as complete opposites: revenge is considered active and violent, whereas lament is passive and paralyzed. However, upon revising Ovid's tale of unimaginable suffering answered by both lament and revenge, I show that in Ovid's story, they appear as interconnected and dependent on each other. Initially, Philomela appears as the passive, lamenting sister, while Procne appears as the angry, vengeful one. Nevertheless, as the narrative unfolds, the roles of the sisters change. Through the characters of Philomela and Procne, Ovid presents a compelling account in which these two responses can be seen as mirror images of the same phenomenon, rather than diametrically opposed binaries.

**Keywords:** revenge; lament; Ovid; Procne; Philomela; echo; Nietzsche; Freud

Ovid's account of the marriage of Tereus and Procne is marked, from its very beginning, by a dark, harrowing atmosphere. The description of their wedding begins with the stark absence of the expected deities (specifically Juno and Hymen), having been replaced by the Furies, who make the new couple's bed and light their way "with torches they stole from a funeral". And if this is not dire enough, Ovid adds a description of an "eerie screeching owl" who sits on the roof of their chamber and broods there during the conception of their only child, Itys (*Met.* 6.490–497 [161]).<sup>1</sup> The deities' absence indicates an interesting shift in the *Metamorphoses*. As the plot of the story unfolds it becomes clear that the supernatural dimension has yielded to human, earthly desires and passions, violence and grievous mischief, evident throughout the story in acts of abduction, sexual violence, mutilation and murder and eliciting in turn an array of responses, anger, mourning and vengeance among them.<sup>2</sup> Although this long, gruesome list contains elements found throughout the *Metamorphoses*, this story is where we are invited to consider them without making (all too quickly) the deities and their cunning intrigues the motivating force behind the violent acts presented in the narrative. We are faced with passionate, human motives, and particularly with the violent, brutal responses these acts provoke.

In what follows, I reconsider the story of Philomela, Procne and Tereus as told by Ovid and place an emphasis on revenge and lament, two forms of responses to the acts of wrongdoing and loss that are pivotal to this story. There is a long, varied tradition that is solidly present in the background of each response, ranging from biblical stories to literature, works of philosophy and psychoanalytic theory, a broad spectrum that is obviously impossible to cover in such a short essay. I will therefore begin with a brief phenomenological description of each response, which will include discussions of the relationship between revenge and lament from philosophical as well as psychoanalytic points of view. I will then return to Ovid's story, which will serve here as a formative example for my argument.



**Citation:** Ferber, Ilit. 2023. Pain's Echo: Lament and Revenge in Ovid's "Procne and Philomela". *Humanities* 12: 96. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h12050096>

Received: 6 August 2023

Revised: 5 September 2023

Accepted: 5 September 2023

Published: 15 September 2023



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## 1. Lament and Revenge

Despite their shared origin in events of loss and suffering, lament and revenge are often regarded as opposites. Both address, each in its own unique way, a lost or violated object, an injury inflicted. Nonetheless, we often conceive of these reactions to loss and suffering as mirror images, and as irreconcilable.

*Lament* demonstrates an inherent, double impossibility: On the one hand, it derives from the deep impossibility of accepting the fact of loss and the pain that accompanies it. Therefore, it is a stark refusal of reality itself, a desperate attempt to protest against its blunt actuality, what Freud famously describes as a resistance to obey the reality principle (Freud 1955, pp. 244–45). At the same time, however, lament remains thoroughly entangled with the particular loss that gave rise to it, expressing the utter impossibility of doing anything about it, acting against it, or leaving it behind. There is, then, a very strong sense of passivity inherent in lament: when we lament, what we voice is, in fact, the song of the ungraspable reach of what is impossible for us; we face our impossibilities only so that we can express them. We cry them out, in a way that can only duplicate these impossibilities again and again, in an ever-repeating cycle of loss and pain. This is, indeed, the deep, painful paradox inherent in lament: it is impossible to express the pain felt, but it is also impossible *not* to express it—we cannot imagine bearing the loss, yet we must.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to mourning and specifically what Freud famously described as the work of mourning, at the end of which we relinquish our desperate clinging to the lost object and release it from our desperate clinging, and lament expresses the stark impossibility of letting go, of freeing ourselves from the presence of loss.<sup>4</sup>

If we imagine responses to loss and injury as a spectrum, then lament would be situated at one extreme, *revenge* at the other. Revenge is all about activity, its energy is so boundless that it seems able to feed itself forever. In what appears to be lament's mirror image, revenge not only marks the fundamental inability to accept the loss or injury, to come to terms with it—it expresses this impossibility in a violent act of restitution. The fact of loss is acknowledged, accepted in its very depths; this acceptance, however, is immediately accompanied by a strong, violent will to act, to create, to answer. Revenge demands the restoration of an equilibrium (the very basis of justice), desires that the perpetrators not only be accused of but also that they experience, on their own flesh, the suffering they have inflicted. In this context, the full biblical version of a well-known dictum is revealing: "But if there is serious injury,<sup>5</sup> then thou shalt give life for life, Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, Burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe. And if a man smite the eye of his servant, or the eye of his maid, that it perish; he shall let him go free for his eye's sake. And if he smite out his manservant's tooth, or his maidservant's tooth; he shall let him go free for his tooth's sake" (Exod. 21: 23–27 [Carroll and Prickett 1998]). The justice meted out in revenge does not take place in court, where violence is answered by punishment; it is, rather, a replication of violence, its meticulous, detailed repetition. It is not enough that the perpetrators understand (on an intellectual level) that they have done wrong and must be punished for it ("pay his debt to society"); he or she has to understand, as Simone de Beauvoir phrases it, "this reciprocal rapport between human creatures—this reciprocity whose negation constitutes the most fundamental of all injustices" (de Beauvoir 2004, p. 249).

One of the most important and complex philosophical accounts of revenge can be found in the corpus of Friedrich Nietzsche. In his (1887) *Genealogy of Morals* (Nietzsche 1997), he explores revenge from a comparative point of view, considering it against the background of *ressentiment*. *Ressentiment*, according to Nietzsche, is a feeling characterizing those who have been subjugated by "slave morality"; it stems from an unhealthy internalization of resentful feelings and hatred that "swells into something huge and uncanny to a most intellectual and poisonous level" (Nietzsche 1997, vol. I, chp. 7). *Ressentiment* becomes a hallmark of the weak, who are satisfied with "imaginary revenge" rather than insisting on the execution of a tangible act. The connection between *ressentiment* and revenge is immediately clear: the ills of the internalization of *ressentiment* mark the inability as well

as the fear of executing one's deepest desires, in this case a sweeping revenge on those responsible for our injury. For Nietzsche, the weak are those who, rather than take revenge against those who have wronged them, instead internalize their anger, believing or having been made to believe that doing so will make them virtuous. The noble (or "masters"), in contrast, do not restrain themselves when (if at all) they feel resentful or angry: they simply act. There is no "free will" at stake here, no choice or self-restraint and, therefore, there is no question of virtue being exercised—the act of vengeance naturally follows the feeling of hatred or resentment.<sup>6</sup> The act of revenge is therefore inseparable from who they are, the popular moral conception "separates strength from the manifestations of strength, as though there were an indifferent substratum behind the strong person which had the freedom to manifest strength or not [...] 'the doer' is invented as an after-thought,—the doing is everything" (Nietzsche 1997, vol. I, chp. 13). The act of vengeance is not simply a deed or a choice but is instead a direct, inevitable materialization of the strong, noble self, Nietzsche suggests.

Another valuable (though lesser-known) account of revenge is found in Nietzsche's (1880) *The Wanderer and His Shadow* (Nietzsche 2013). In Section 33, "Elements of Revenge", Nietzsche differentiates what in his conception are the two types of acts of vengeance, both spurred by an initial act of wrongdoing or injury. The first type is intended to prevent further harm to oneself; here, as soon as we sense an injury, we act immediately out of an instinct of "rational" self-preservation: "we are basically thinking not about the person who caused the injury, but only about ourselves", Nietzsche writes, and "we behave thus without wanting to do harm ourselves, but only in order to escape with life and limb" (Ibid., p. 173). The second type of revenge is delayed, deliberative vengeance. Here, we act neither immediately nor out of instinct, but rather we take action that reflects our intention to cause our adversary pain: "it presupposes reflection about the other's vulnerability and capacity for suffering; we want to cause pain" (Ibid.). Put in temporal terms: the first type of revenge concerns the future and possesses the logic of prevention and self-preservation, whereas the second type is backward-looking and is grounded in the desire for equilibrium.<sup>7</sup>

Our consideration of the relationship between past and present, loss and injury and the question of revenge and self-preservation or reproach now leads us to psychoanalytic theory, specifically to Freud. Whereas lament and loss form one of the more dominant themes in psychoanalytic theory, psychoanalytic discussions of revenge can scarcely be found in the literature.<sup>8</sup> Let me point at two important instances where Freud does in fact address revenge. In his (1915) "Mourning and Melancholia" (Freud 1955), Freud finds a surprising link between the passivity of mourning and the active agency and power involved in vengeance. He famously provides his account of the split between two possible responses to a loss: the mourner is he who first suppresses the loss, then rebels against it, until he eventually surrenders to the "call of reality" and slowly (and painfully, Freud emphasizes) detaches himself from the lost-loved object. The melancholic patient, however, cleaves to his refusal and remains trapped in an endless cycle of attachment to what is lost and therefore no longer exists (Freud 1955, p. 244).

In the first case, we surrender to the loss and constitute new, libidinal relations with a different object of attachment. In the second case, we internalize the loss, and in effect split the ego in two, forever harboring a destructive absence within us. Vengeance appears on the scene in this text as what is turned towards the self in the form of self-accusations and punishment, and this, Freud writes, is the "key" to the clinical picture of melancholia: "the self-reproaches are reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted away from it on to the patient's own ego" (Freud 1955, p. 148). He then adds that such self-reproach is sometimes expressed circularly: a conflict arises marked by its ambivalence, in which the once-loved object becomes the object of hate and abuse and one takes sadistic satisfaction in its suffering (p. 251). What Freud points at here is self-punishment that takes the form of vengeance on the original object of love, now internalized as hated and debased.<sup>9</sup> Thought of more broadly, vengeance represents a cunning means to secure a bond with our lost object (violence sometimes allows for a more effective form of attachment than complete

separation). Although revenge pushes us into a new cycle of pain, it nevertheless possesses a unique power to keep us close to our losses, regardless of the price exacted. As Rosen puts it, “in the preoccupation with revenge, powerlessness is not only denied, but in the escalating disproportionality of the revenge fantasy, one manically gains virtually limitless power. An eye for an eye soon gives way to a life for an eye, a family for a life, a tribe for a family, and a nation for a tribe” (Rosen 2007, p. 603).

An analogous discussion of revenge, although almost hidden, can already be found at the beginning of psychoanalytic theory’s development, in Freud and Breuer’s (1893) “On The Psychological Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena: Preliminary Communication” (Freud and Breuer 1956).<sup>10</sup> In this text, revenge is portrayed as an “adequate” (*adequate*) response to injury. Freud and Breuer regard the choice to act and respond to injury (at the right time and in the proper proportion) to be a healthy discharge of excited energy, a fitting “energetic reaction” to whatever had caused the painful effect. If, however, the reaction is suppressed or delayed and the injury is accepted “in silence” rather than giving rise to action, we experience a “*Kränkung*”, a mortification: literally, delay in mounting a proper response can make us ill (Ibid., p. 8). A similar logic is found in the theoretical third section of Freud and Breuer’s (1895) *Studies on Hysteria*, written by Breuer (Freud and Breuer 1955). Here, there is another, more detailed and telling reference to the “drive for revenge” (*der Trieb der Rache*). In a long footnote in his theoretical discussion of Hysterical Conversion, Breuer argues that the intensity of the affect which arises upon the recollection of an idea is to a great extent brought about by the degree of the original abreaction or release of affect that is bound to it, by action. He provides the example of the anger we feel when recollecting a past insult: the intensity of our anger would be affected by our original response to it. “If the psychological reflex was fully achieved on the original occasion, the recollection of it releases a far smaller quantity of excitation. If not, the recollection is perpetually forcing on to the subject’s lips the abusive words which were originally suppressed and which would have been the psychological reflex to the original stimulus” (Freud and Breuer 1955, pp. 205–6).

Further on, Breuer explains that the instinct of revenge originates in the “excitation of a reflex that has not been released”. Breuer’s main idea here is that an inability to respond (or an “insufficient” response) at the proper time—that is, the time when the injury was endured—results in a pathological accumulation of excitation. When this psychic energy is eventually released, after a delay, it manifests itself as an “instinct of revenge”, taking the form of “an irrational volitional impulse, just as do all other ‘instincts’” putting the vengeful subject himself at risk. We see that Freud’s argument about self-reproach is united here with the risk to the subject’s safety in Breuer’s description of the drive to vengeance. In both cases, a delayed response is not only what turns the psychic energy into a bundle of violent internalizations of unfulfilled anger but is also a reaction whose implications would eventually hurt the would-be avenger himself. Put in terms of the interrelation between lament and revenge: the avenger who is acting so as to respond to a prior injury would make himself a victim yet again. The violence of revenge would open up new opportunities for lament.

With these accounts in mind, let me now return to Ovid’s story of Procne, Philomela and Tereus, a tale about an instance of unimaginable suffering answered by both lament and revenge. Both responses appear interconnected, and they are dependent on each other, presented in kinship with each other through the two sisters’ blood bond: as the story progresses, lamenting Philomela and vengeful Procne change roles. A word about my choice of Ovid is in order here. There are of course many texts featuring lament and revenge, but in most cases each appears separately. It is rare to find an apt example of a story in which they co-exist and, moreover, sustain an interesting relation and interconnection with each other. Ovid presents us with an exemplary account in which the two responses can be thought together, without viewing them as diametrically opposed binaries. The title of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is important in this context: it allows us to think about the productivity of the interrelation between lament and revenge and, especially, a possible transformation and transition from the one to the other. Therefore, the story’s two female

protagonists—the sisters Philomela and Procne—also represent the relation between lament and revenge: both share the same origin, and although they are completely different, they allow their interconnectedness to become evident and permit each to transition into the other.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. Philomela

As the result of a political alliance with Pandion, king of Athens, Tereus marries Pandion's daughter Procne and takes her back to his kingdom of Thrace. After a few years away from her father and her beloved sister Philomela, Procne asks her husband if she could meet with her sister once again; Tereus agrees and sails to Athens in order to bring Philomela back and reunite the sisters. As soon as Tereus encounters Philomela, he is struck by her unmatched beauty and, in Ovid's words, "was inflamed the moment he saw her, /As if one were to set fire to a field of grain [. . .]/Tereus/His own libido and the passionate nature/Of men from his region [. . .]/Mad with passion [. . .] his heart could not contain the fires within" (*Met.* 6.544–461 [162]). Early in the story, Tereus's scheme begins to materialize: going through a variety of potions, he moves from tempting Philomela with lavish gifts to raping her (in the next line). He would risk everything, including his kingdom, to possess her. Unaware of the danger awaiting his daughter, Pandion agrees to Philomela sailing off to visit her sister and bids Tereus to take care of her with "a father's love" (*Met.* 6.495–500). Philomela boards the ship with Tereus enroute to what she thinks will be a happy reunion with her beloved sister. However, as soon as the ship reaches the shore, Tereus, unable to control his desire for Philomela, takes her to a deserted hut in the woods, where he attacks and violently rapes her: "One girl, all alone, calling often for her father, /Often for her sister, but above all the great gods" (*Met.* 6.524–526 [164]).

After she regains her senses, Philomela begins to lament "like a mourner" (*Met.* 6.532 [165]), threatening Tereus that she will not keep the violent act secret: "I'll go to the marketplace/If I can, and if I'm shut up in these woods, /I'll fill the woods with my story and move/Even the rocks to pity. Heaven's air will hear it, /And if there's any god there he'll hear it too" (*Met.* 6.545–548 [165]). Frightened that she will escape the forest hut and speak about what he has done to her, Tereus outdoes his prior violence and cuts out her tongue with his sword's "pitiless blade", *linguam/abstulit ense fero* (*Met.* 6.556–557 [165]). The *literally* speechless Philomela continues to lament her terrible fate but does so not by way of a song or cry, as this possibility has been violently taken from her. Philomela finds thread and a loom in the hut and begins to weave her story, "weaves [*intextuit*] purple signs/Onto a white background, revealing the crime" (*Met.* 6.577–578 [166]). When Procne receives the woven cloth and its text, she immediately understands everything. But she, in contrast to her sister, does not lament but begins to plan the revenge she will take on her husband. Procne finds her sister, brings her in disguise to the palace and continues to plot her revenge. When her beloved son Itys enters the room, his resemblance to his father strikes her, and she makes up her mind to act. She kills her son, chops his corpse into pieces and cooks his flesh in a stew which she then serves to her husband. "Get Itys here", he cries out, and Procne answers: "You have him inside" (*Met.* 6.652–655 [169]), Philomela then enters the room, the dead child's head in her hands. Tereus, furious, draws his sword and chases the two sisters into the woods, where the trio, so Ovid tells us, are transformed into birds: Philomela into a nightingale, Procne into a swallow, and Tereus into a "a bird with a crest on his head/And an outsized beak instead of a sword" (*Met.* 6.672–673 [169]).<sup>12</sup>

This story has been given a wide array of interpretations emphasizing its feminist context, or the specifically sexual violence inflicted on Philomela's powerless body (see for instance Marder 1992; Goldenhard and Zissos 2007; Natoli 2017). I would like to call attention to the unique way it stages the relationship between lament and revenge as two sibling responses.

Philomela offers a particularly straightforward embodiment of lament. She is helpless in the face of the evil that befalls her, and her passivity becomes a repeatedly emphasized characteristic, at least in the first half of the story. Ovid likens her to a quivering, wounded

lamb, which “[a]fter it has been wounded and then spat out/By a grey wolf, cannot yet believe it is safe”, and to a dove “shuddering in fear” after its “feathers are smeared/With its own blood” (*Met.* 6.527–530 [164]). The first, most obvious characteristic of lament exhibited by Philomela occurs right after the horrible rape, when she “clawed at her hair, /And beat and scratched her arms like a mourner”, as she cries out to Tereus in what seems like a classic expression of lament: “Why don’t you just kill me, [. . .]/I wish you had killed me before/That unspeakable bedding! [. . .]/If the gods above/See these things, if there are any gods at all [. . .]” (*Met.* 6.531–548 [165]). When the two sisters meet later on in the story, Philomela is described as looking downwards, unable to lift her eyes. Her innocence, the violence she has suffered, her passivity in the face of evil, and, finally, the depiction of downcast eyes, the beating on the chest and clawing at her hair—all are classic depictions of grief.

The second, perhaps most terrible embodiment of lament occurs when Tereus holds Philomela by the hair, bending her hands behind her back and gripping with his pincers her “protesting tongue”, which he cuts off while she calls out for her father and sister: “Still struggling to speak [. . .]/The root writhed in her throat; the tongue itself/Lay quivering on the dark earth, murmuring low;/And, as the tail of a snake twitches when severed, /So too her tongue, and with its last dying spasm/It sought its mistress’ feet” (*Met.* 6.557–560 [165–166]). With this violent act, he makes her speechless, in the most literal sense of the word. This graphic account can be read as an extraordinary description of the language or “tongue” of lament that is unable to say anything about the loss one has endured and can only recurrently refer to the unbearable and irreversibility of that loss. Its root, its very connection to the suffering body lacks, however, the slightest possibility of uttering a word: the utter passivity I referred to in the first part of the text reappears here in the figure of Philomela. It can only lie on what Ovid beautifully describes here as “dark earth” (*Met.* 6.557), able to utter nothing more than the impotent sounds of its own incapacity. It is interesting to note the conspicuously active language Ovid uses here in his depiction of the tongue, which becomes an independent object, protesting, crying out, trembling.

Despite Ovid’s clear inclination to cast Philomela as a helpless victim, we should note that she is actually a rather competent protagonist, whose cunningness is made to manifest at this point of the story when she decides to weave a detailed tapestry recounting her violations and then finds a way to have it sent to her sister. “Mute lips cannot tell”, writes Ovid, “But grief has its own genius” (*grande doloris/ingenium est; Met.* 6.574–575 [166]). Instead of sinking into a trauma-induced passivity, she mounts, in fact, a surprisingly active response, adequate (to recall Freud and Breuer’s aforementioned accounts) and creative. Though bereft of her tongue, she has not been entirely robbed of the means to express her suffering and take action to help bring about her own rescue. With regard to the essential interdependence of lament and revenge, Philomela’s mournful textual tapestry functions as the condition of possibility governing Procne’s subsequent vengeful act. Although Philomela narrates the story without words, it is a most powerful narration, communicated by one woman and read by another.<sup>13</sup>

### 3. Procne

While Philomela represents the paradigm of lament, Procne is the epitome of revenge. Ovid describes the moment when she receives her sister’s tapestry and learns of her husband’s appalling act: “The tyrant’s wife unrolls the cloth and reads/The strands of her sister’s song of lament, /[. . .] her tongue cannot find/Words indignant enough. There is no room for tears, /But she rushes ahead to confound right and wrong, /And all she can do is imagine her vengeance [*poena*]” (*Met.* 6.581–586 [166]). Procne’s reaction to the representation of the atrocity in the tapestry strikingly mirrors Philomela’s actual suffering: Procne’s tongue cannot find suitable words, just as Philomela has lost her tongue. Yet the one manifestation of speechlessness is unlike the other: While Philomela grieves and turns to writing, Procne is immediately moved to act. Procne does not linger on her sister’s sorrow or her own heartbreak; she is possessed by rage, “driven on by grief’s fury”, *furiisque*

*agitata doloris* (*Met.* 6.595 [167]). Wasting no time, Procne finds a way to bring her sister to the palace: during the Bacchus festival (which is, of course, all about desire, passion and violence). She is in a complete frenzy: “Her head wreathed with vines, a deerskin hanging/From her left side, a light spear on her shoulder. /She streaks through the woods”, “mimicking” Bacchus’ lustful rage (*Met.* 6.592–594 [167]). Ovid likens Procne to an animal (covered in a deerskin, running through the woods) and mentions no sorrow, sadness or disappointment directed toward her husband, no passivity whatsoever: Procne is filled with the violent energy of rage and the desire for vengeance. Even when she arrives at the hut, she is depicted as utterly violent: she breaks down the doors.

As the two sisters meet, so do their responses. The sisters’ acts of lament and revenge echo each other and move back and forth, over and over, duplicating but at the same time facing each other: rage and sorrow, action and passion, restitution and acceptance. When the sisters meet, Philomela weeps and uses her hands to explain herself. Presented as helpless and voiceless, the young woman seems unable to grasp the violence she has to bear. Procne, for her part, confronts her sister, “scolds her”, as Ovid writes, and shows neither compassion nor pity, dismissing her weeping once again: “‘This is no time for tears’, she said, /‘But for steel, or, if you have it, something stronger/Than steel” (*Met.* 6.610–613 [167]). Procne longs for revenge and for it to be as violent as possible. Glancing back to Nietzsche’s account, we find that Procne embodies the second type of vengeance: she is not acting for the sake of her future (self-preservation) but rather, looking back at the violence her husband committed against her sister, she chooses revenge because she is seeking to create an equilibrium, wants justice, payback. When her son, Itys, enters the room, Procne’s plot becomes clear to her.

But this is also a moment when the raging Procne understands that she is about to lose her beloved son and begins to cry.<sup>14</sup> This moment of the story is crucial in light of our understanding of the relationship between lament and revenge. Recognizing that she will lose her son, Procne began to “shed tears in spite of herself” (*Met.* 6.628 [168]), that is, in spite of her avenging-self. Her sorrow rises almost to the point of being able to fight back, to cause her to relinquish her anger. But this, as we know, does not happen. “[S]he turned toward her sister’s face/And then back and forth between both of them. /One coos, the other has no tongue with which to speak. /He calls me mother; why can’t she call me sister?” (*Met.* 6.630–633 [168]).<sup>15</sup>

Two forms of echoing appear here: first, Procne literally oscillates between lament and revenge, her love for her son and her sister serving as the living reminder of her fury. She looks “back and forth” at their faces repeatedly, as if reminding herself that her fury is always also her lament, and vice versa. Another interesting expression of an echo appears in this scene when Ovid reminds us that Tereus not only raped Philomela but also robbed her of the ability to speak. The child “coos”, the sister “has no tongue”, he “calls me mother” and she cannot “call me sister”—here we find a clear structure of a resonating echo. That is, the two extremes of sorrow and anger are also the two poles of speech and silence. Moreover, Procne’s comparison between the voice and the voiceless is presented in the context of both of them calling *her* name, addressing her, as if these were two objects of lament and of revenge, trying to win her attention. In so doing, it becomes clear that lament and revenge are never really about the lost or suffering object but are rather always about the lamenting or avenging subject herself.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the prospect of sacrificing her own flesh and blood and the horrid consequences of such an act, Procne decides to pursue her vendetta by killing Itys and serving up his body as food for the king (her husband, his father). This is one of the story’s most terrible moments, bringing forth the sheer power of vengeance together with the terrible price it exacts from us. To put the matter bluntly, Procne chooses to commit an act that would bring about justice for her sister, and pays the price of sacrificing her own son. Although it seems that the first violent event (the rape and cutting out of the tongue) is entirely different than the second (the killing of Itys and the serving of his body to Tereus as food)—a closer look reveals their almost perfect symmetry. Gildenhard and Zissos point to

several such similarities: Tereus brought Philomela to a secluded hut in the woods, whereas Procne takes Itys to a remote part of the house and then kills him there; Tereus ignores Philomela's cries for help, Procne is indifferent to the child's cry of "Mother, Mother" (*Met.* 6.640 [168]) while putting his arms around her neck; Tereus uses his sword to cut out Philomela's tongue and Procne employs hers to stab her son. Murder is of course different than rape; however, Procne's choice to feed Tereus his son's body does in fact resemble the act of rape insofar as she explicitly penetrates the father's body with that of her son. This is, without doubt, a perfectly symmetrical act of vengeance ([Gildenhard and Zissos 2007](#), pp. 10–11).

The murder scene has another absorbing moment for the purposes of our discussion: "Procne struck him in the side/With a sword, and did not change her expression. /This one wound was fatal, but Philomela/Slit his throat also, and they sliced up the body/Still warm with life" (*Met.* 6.641–646 [168]). Ovid emphasizes here that Philomela killed the boy with the first stab of her sword. The first cut, in other words, was more than enough to do what she had set out to do. Why, then, did Philomela slit the boy's throat as well? It is clear that her act was superfluous for the killing; it is, however, necessary in sustaining the strange co-dependence between the sisters and consequently between lament and revenge. The act of revenge is always also about lament and loss; retribution can never involve rage and fury exclusively, it is never a mere compensation "completing" the cycle by effecting justice—and it is always also about sorrow and mourning, as well as the attempt to compensate, is always an essential expression of the inability of restitution. Procne herself is an embodiment of this awful echo: she is avenging but also mourning. Her ability to achieve justice for her sister's rape and mutilation is dependent on and conditioned by her bringing herself to lament through the killing of her own son.

It is useful to take a closer look at the figure of Tereus here. Tereus is, in many senses, the pivotal figure in the story. He initiated and is at the center of the cycle of violence, first by the abduction and rape of Philomela, then by being the object of Procne's revenge. He is also interesting insofar as he is transformed in the course of a single, brief moment. At the outset, the king is portrayed as a violent barbarian with animalistic passions of sexual desire and violence. Yet his violence turns him into a victim of revenge, into a lamenting father and finally into an avenging husband. "Tereus sits on his high, ancestral throne/And stuffs his belly with his own flesh and blood" (*Met.* 6.650–651 [168–169]). He then asks his wife to bring Itys to the table, and she replies with the terrible words: "You have him inside" (*Met.* 6.652–655 [169]). The (dinner-)tables are turned, so to speak, in what seems like a strange melancholic gesture in which the lost object (the boy) is literally inside the mourning father (Tereus). Here, we find yet another manifestation of the fundamental excessiveness of revenge: the profusion of anger and hatred builds up ever higher through a series of overabundant escalations, and it is not enough to kill Itys, Tereus has to eat his corpse. As if this hideous insult is not enough, the child's severed head has to be brought before the pain-stricken father.<sup>17</sup>

At first, the king demonstrates features of the initial unacceptance of loss to be found in mourning: he does not believe his wife, looks around for the boy, asks her again, calls out to him. He cannot believe what she is telling him. It is at this moment that Procne's echo—her sister Philomela—enters the room, holding the child's head in her hands. In yet another transformation, the two responses continue to echo each other: revenge turns to lament as Procne speaks; suffering becomes revenge as Philomela enters the room holding the bloody, decapitated head, avenging her pain. As Tereus comprehends his loss, mourning and lament immediately yield to vendetta: drawing his sword, he chases the two sisters into the woods.

In this precise moment of the story, all responses and emotions are simultaneously on stage, on the table, so to speak. Philomela, initially lamenting, passive and voiceless, now enters the scene with a vengeful expression, holding a dead child's head in her hands. Tereus, violent and barbaric, has just understood that not only has his son been murdered by his own mother, but the body of the innocent child is now buried forever symbolically

inside his own body: “If only now he could lay open his chest/And draw out the feast, vomit his son’s flesh. /But all he can do is weep, and call himself/His son’s wretched tomb” (*Met.* 6.663–665 [169]).<sup>18</sup> Finally, Procne, who, driven by her thirst for vengeance, could not pause to feel compassion or sorrow for her sister and rushed to take action, finding satisfaction in seeing her husband’s surprised and tortured face. Yet at the same time she understands that it is now she who has lost her most precious treasure, her son, and it is now she who is mourning and lamenting.

#### 4. Pain’s Echo

My argument here is that at the heart of both lament and revenge lies a repetition of injury and suffering, connected in an eternal cycle of injury, pain and retribution that assumes the structure of an *echo*. A sound that originates from a previous sound and is dependent on its source, the echo nevertheless reverberates long after its source has fallen silent. An echo is a repetition, indicating a fervent insistence to hold on to its originating sound even as that sound has disappeared. Through its monotonous, recurring movements toward and away from it, an echo clings to the dissipated sound. For it to be repeated, the original sound wave has to reflect off a surface or object. In our case this would be the wronged victim or the griever. Revenge causes the original harm to reverberate, demanding that its sound does not die off. Such incessant repetition is manifest, for instance, in the structure of a vendetta—the exemplary taking of “an eye for an eye”—which exemplifies something important about revenge: its re-staging not only retains the original event but also asserts the strength of its resonance. Lament, too, reverberates, causing the event of injury to resonate; in this case, however, the echo is not that of a corresponding act but is indeed acoustic: In lament, we recite and reiterate the original pain. There is no possible answer to our bewilderment in the face of loss, no reciprocation to act out—each cry begets yet another cry, in an endless resonance.

Revenge inheres in repetition. Creating a symmetry of suffering is its very essence, so that it inherently entails further suffering. Equilibrium is a double-edged sword: it seems to address punishment and justice, purporting to be a just response to an unjust act, a turning of the tables where the victim wins the right to become a perpetrator, where strength and honor regain power. It is as if the act of revenge can cancel out the violence that brought it about: one victim replaced by another. The structure of revenge is here revealed, yet again, as that of an echo: an eye for an eye, a victim for a victim. Revenge, however, is not really a balancing act. To eradicate suffering, further suffering has to be inflicted: at stake is not only one victim facing another, but in many cases, one victim facing two (the perpetrator, and the avenger herself). This is why for Nietzsche, true revenge must always risk injury to oneself, a “loss of health or life or other deprivations—counts as an indispensable condition of revenge” (Nietzsche 2013, p. 33). Revenge demands that the avenger suffer or decidedly put himself at risk. For there to be justice, the act of revenge has to beget further suffering—on perpetrator and avenger alike. Retribution being at stake, it is in principle impossible to restore a genuine balance; further justice entails further injustice (de Beauvoir 2004, p. 251). This is why revenge is always in a state of excess: a plethora of pain, with retribution impossible. This impossibility is baldly manifested in the restless, destructive nature of revenge.

Despite the obvious differences between the two responses of lament and vengeance, they nevertheless share a fundamental presupposition: what was done cannot be undone, what was lost cannot be regained. Lament *expresses* this very impossibility, whereas revenge *exerts power* over what has remained of its ruined reality in an attempt to compensate for the injury. It is precisely in this sense that both lament and revenge must fail. In both cases the loss is irretrievable, and both manifest what is essentially ineffective. Lament is trapped in its circular repetitions, whereas revenge can never actually succeed in replicating the violent act, in causing the perpetrator to pay for his or her deeds, since such a symmetry of pain is inherently impossible. Unable to bring back the lost object, the act of revenge nevertheless does everything in its power to create another loss, to effect a restitution of

the original loss. This destructive power is also present in lament. Lament is possessed of astounding force—not in action or the demand for compensation, but in the form of its linguistic expression, in its repetitions, monotonous utterances, sighs and cries. Again and again, and forcefully, it utters its expression but expresses only the inexpressible.

The end of Ovid's story brings the relationship of lament and revenge and their constant echo into the realm of pure sound. All three protagonists are transformed into singing birds as they run in the woods, Tereus after the sisters and they from him. Philomela, whose tongue was cut out, becomes the nightingale, a bird known for its loud but beautiful song. In the wake of Philomela's being "by the barbarous king/So rudely forced", the nightingale's song, writes T. S. Eliot, fills "all the desert with inviolable voice/And still she cried, and still the world pursues, /'Jug Jug' to dirty ears" (Eliot 1971, p. 40). Procne becomes a swallow, a bird famous for its loud calls, expressing not only signs of warning but also excitement and courtship. Its plumage, however, is reminiscent of the crime: "And even now their breasts/Retain the marks of the slaughter, and their feathers/Are stained with blood". Tereus is transformed into a Hoopoe, whose unique crest on its head symbolizes the king's royal status, yet whose loud song and sharp beak signal his violent nature.

Ovid does not say why he chose birds to be their fate. Yet not unlike the song of the birds—speechless yet expressive—lament and revenge will forever echo themselves and each other: lament marks the ever-recurring echoing of the original loss that can only repeat itself, unable to act or receive an answer. Revenge resounds even more strongly: every wrong, every suffering requires to be answered by its echo. Revenge, therefore, is not about compensation. It is, rather, the tragic attempt to create an impossible symmetry of suffering. Lament and revenge are not opposites, nor are they identical. Like the two sisters, they share a bond of kinship, where one cannot be without the other: one is forever committed to the other. Lament cannot exist without the possibility of revenge, which, in turn, needs the company of lament. Like an echo, lament and revenge are the repetition of what can never be repeated—the singularity of suffering.

**Funding:** This research was supported by the Israel Science Foundation (grant No. 315/19).

**Acknowledgments:** I thank Andrew Benjamin, Shira Dushy-Barr and Omer Michaelis for their helpful comments and suggestions.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I am here using Stanley Lombardo's translation (Ovid 2010). In my citations throughout the article, I use the abbreviation *Met.* for Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, book no. and pp. no., as well as the ref. to the pp. no. in the translation in square brackets. An earlier version of the story appears in Sophocles' *Tereus*, from which we have only fragments (Sophocles 2003, pp. 291–301); a reconstruction in Fitzpatrick (2001). The best commentary on Ovid's works is no doubt Franz Bömer (1976).
- <sup>2</sup> See also (Gildenhard and Zissos 2007, pp. 4–5).
- <sup>3</sup> For a philosophical reading of Gershom Scholem's discussion of biblical laments, see (Ferber 2013).
- <sup>4</sup> According to Werner Hamacher (2007, p. 17) lament, in its expressive consistency, negates the very possibility of temporality. Hence, it not only destroys itself but also annihilates anything capable of development or of being worked through. Furthermore, due to its characteristic unanswerability, lament's expressive movement can never reach resolution. It can only echo itself. See also, Hamacher, "Bemerkungen zur Klage".
- <sup>5</sup> The King James version uses "mischief" as translation to the Hebrew word מִשְׁכָּח. I have chosen to use "serious injury" from the New International Version (NIV), since it is more accurate and lacks the somewhat frivolous connotations "mischief" sometimes has.
- <sup>6</sup> Hence, the difference between resentment and Nietzsche's *ressentiment*; for details see Grayson.
- <sup>7</sup> Nietzsche further discusses the example of honor and considers how revenge operates in cases where our honor has suffered. In this context, he also uses the important categories of public and private revenge (Nietzsche 2013, pp. 172–75). For a thought-provoking discussion of revenge in temporal terms, see also (Comay 1990).
- <sup>8</sup> This theoretical lacuna in the literature is described in detail in (Beattie 2005) and in (Collens 1998) who rigorously addresses this theoretical absence and provides a detailed account and mapping of the different types and functions of revenge. Other authors who stand out in their rigorous accounts of the topic: (Akhtar 2018, pp. 143–62; Horney 1948; Rosen 2007).

- <sup>9</sup> For an analysis of revenge in Freud see (Prade-Weiss 2019).
- <sup>10</sup> This text appeared as a separate paper in 1893 and later re-printed as the first chapter of *Studies on Hysteria* (Freud and Breuer 1955). It provides a theoretical substratum to the later, more famous research on hysteria.
- <sup>11</sup> There are ample studies of lament and revenge in Classical literature. See, for example, (Suter 2008; Dawson and McHardy 2018; Pippin Burnett 1998).
- <sup>12</sup> There is a significant correspondence between Ovid's story and Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*: Lavinia, Titus Andronicus' daughter, is raped and mutilated by Demetrius and Chiron, her tongue cut out and her hands chopped off so as to deprive her of the possibility of reporting her rape (sct. 2.4, pp. 1–4). Marcus Andronicus, her uncle, is the first to explicitly compare her to Philomela, saying: "Fair Philomela, she but lost her tongue, /And in a tedious sampler sew'd her mind:/But, lovely niece, that mean is cut from thee;/A craftier Tereus, cousin, hast thou met, /And he hath cut those pretty fingers off, /That could have better sew'd than Philomel" (sct. 2.4, pp. 38–43; see also sct. 5.2, pp. 194–96). Lavinia, too, compares her own rape and disfigurement to that of Philomela when she asks her father, mute and without hands, to open Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and leads his hand to the story of the two sisters, thus communicating her rape. Titus responds by saying, "This Is the tragic tale of Philomel, /And treats of Tereus' treason and his rape:/And rape, I fear, was root of thine annoy" (sct. 4.1, pp. 47–50). Titus, at first a lamenting father, soon turns his grief into the furious pursuit of revenge against Demetrius and Chiron as well as their mother Tamora ("Why, I have not another tear to shed:/Besides, this sorrow is an enemy, /And would usurp upon my watery eyes/And make them blind with tributary tears:/Then which way shall I find Revenge's cave?"). In a vendetta almost identical to Procne's, he kills, chops and grinds up the bodies of the two perpetrators, serving them cooked in two pies to their mother: "Hark, villains! I will grind your bones to dust/And with your blood and it I'll make a paste, /And of the paste a coffin I will rear/And make two pasties of your shameful heads, /And bid that strumpet, your unhallow'd dam, /Like to the earth swallow her own increase" (pp. 186–91). For a more elaborate account of this correspondence see (Detmer-Goebel 2001; Lugo 2007; Starry West 1982).
- <sup>13</sup> Marder offers a rigorous interpretation of the story, emphasizing Philomela's feminism. She also provides an interesting account of relation between the injury (rape) and the act of vengeance (see Marder 1992, pp. 156–62).
- <sup>14</sup> There is a longstanding tradition of an inseparable linkage between lamentation and motherhood. As Hasan-Rokem meticulously demonstrates, laments inherently concern the violent separation of mother and child and the severing of the maternal tie. "It may not be an exaggeration to suggest", Hasan-Rokem writes, "that it is exactly the harsh contrast between the intuitive, wished-for inseparability of the mother-child relationship and the finality of the separation caused by death that constitutes the bleeding heart, the burning epicenter of laments" (Hasan-Rokem 2014, p. 36).
- <sup>15</sup> The connection between Procne and the figure of Medea is evident. Both are mothers who kills their children as an act of revenge against their husbands (Tereus and Jason, respectively). Ovid includes both stories in his *Metamorphoses*, and interestingly enough, locates them only 45 lines apart (Procne and Philomela's story ends Book 6 whereas Medea and Jason open Book 7 [175–188]). This is not accidental. Ovid leads his readers to make this comparison, whereas his own position is clear: his narration clearly favors Procne and is very critical of Medea (despite the clear similarities between the circumstances). Whereas Ovid emphasizes Procne's internal conflict over the murder of her son, it is Euripides who presents Medea's torment most elaborately in his *Medea* (See Euripides 1994). See also (Newlands 1997, pp. 192–95; Maniotti 2018).
- <sup>16</sup> Ovid's novel treatment of the story of Narcissus and Echo, which corresponds in interesting ways to my argument (See *Met.* 3.339–510 [371–561]).
- <sup>17</sup> A version of the theme of serving up a man's children to him as dinner also occurs in the story of Atreus and Thyestes, as dramatized in Seneca's *Thyestes* (Seneca 1966).
- <sup>18</sup> Note the correspondence with Freud's notion of the melancholic's internalization of the lost object in terms of internal crypts, see (Abraham and Torok 1994).

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