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Procne in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Sethe Suggs, the protagonist in Toni Morrison's novel Beloved*, is often compared to Medea. The same analogy with the Colchian princess was often made by contemporaries in relation to Margaret Garner, the historical person on whose life the novel is loosely based. An enslaved African-American woman in the mid-nineteenth century, Garner killed her own daughter after being found by her former owner and was styled a 'Modern Medea' in the press. Despite Morrison's dislike of the comparison as well as its obvious asymmetries, it has become so prominent in recent scholarship on* Beloved *that it tends to eclipse other elements of classical mythology in the novel. This article explores the hermeneutic productivity of reading Sethe's infanticide against the backdrop of the myth of Procne and Philomela.*

Introduction

In her fifth novel *Beloved* (1987), Toni Morrison presents us with a haunting, modern legend about slavery and lost motherhood. It is inspired by the life of the historical person Margaret Garner, an enslaved African-American woman who murdered her two-year-old daughter in 1856 after having fled from a slave farm but later been caught by her former owner (Morrison 2004: xvii–xviii). The novel takes place eighteen years after the infanticide and a decade after the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. Garner's fictional counterpart, Sethe Suggs, now lives in a cursed house near Cincinnati, 124 Bluestone Road, together with her daughter Denver. One day, Sethe's friend Paul D arrives and exorcises the ghost of a baby. Not long thereafter, a young mysterious woman who calls herself Beloved crosses their way; eventually, Sethe recognizes that her deceased daughter has returned from the dead.

Under the influence of plays and operas based on Euripides' tragedy *Medea*, Margaret Garner was depicted and framed as a 'modern Medea' in contemporary mediatic and artistic representations and debates about the murder. In the same spirit, Sethe has often been approached and analysed as a 'Medea character' in modern literary scholarship, despite Morrison's own refutation of that analogy (Smith 1987: 51). Here, I will expand on the problems involved in this line of interpretation.

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I will then collect and examine a series of allusions scattered throughout the novel to the ancient myth about Procne and Philomela. These references suggest that we have something to gain from examining the role of this mythical complex in the novel. What does the myth about Procne and Philomela do in *Beloved?* How does it function as an ongoing dynamic cultural process in the novel? How does the novel avail itself of and contribute to the collective significance of this ancient tale?[1]

Sethe, a 'modern Medea'?

As noted above, the novel is loosely based on the life of Margaret Garner, who fled to Cincinnati from Kentucky in 1856 together with her family. The authorities tracked them down in a matter of hours, and shortly before the arrest, Garner killed her two-year-old daughter. This was not a unique case of child infanticide among slaves, but it attracted much public attention and was invoked as an argument by slavery supporters and abolitionists alike (Weisenberger 1998). The former argued like the slave owner in *Beloved*: 'All testimony to the results of a little so-called freedom imposed on people who needed every care and guidance in the world to keep them from the cannibal life they preferred'.[2] Abolitionists, on the other hand, saw Garner's infanticide as a manifestation of the inhumanity of slavery: 'Any life but not that one', Sethe explains to Paul D (Morrison 2004: 42).

Shortly after the event, comparisons between Garner and the ancient tragic heroine Medea became popular.[3] The life of Medea was a widespread motif in Athenian tragedy. Episodes such as her birth and early life in Colchis and her adventures with the Argonauts or journey to Athens were staged in at least twenty different plays (Wright 2020: 235). In many of these renderings, it was not asserted or implied that Medea would kill or had killed her own children. Yet, owing to the subsequent preservation and canonic status of Euripides' *Medea*, she became the prototypical child murderer in the Western cultural tradition, and any mother's infanticide is spontaneously associated with hers. The artist Thomas Satterwhite Noble depicted Garner's infanticide in the painting 'The modern Medea' (1867), and a lithography of the artwork was produced by the photographer Mathew Brady and printed in *Harper's Weekly Magazine* the same year. It has often been suggested that the French author Ernest Legouvé's libretto *Medea, a Tragedy in Three Acts* (1855) inspired the comparison from the beginning. It has been suggested that Morrison engages with this tradition in *Beloved*; Legouvé's Medea loves her children 'too much' and kills them to protect them from ruin. This is indeed a leitmotif in *Beloved.*

[1] For this interpretive and analytic framework, see Morales (2007: 19–21); cf. Lévi-Strauss (1958).

[2] T. Morrison (2004 [1987]: 151). From now on, references from this book will appear in the running text.

[3] Garner was compared to other Greek and Roman figures as well, see discussion in Malamud (2011: 294–296).

Sethe's love for her children is 'too thick' (Morrison 2004: 164, 165).[4] However, Morrison explicitly stated that Garner 'is not Medea who kills her children because she's mad at some dude, and she's going to get back at him. Here is something that is huge and very intimate' (Smith 1987: 51). Medea and Sethe are both tragic heroines who commit infanticide, but they differ in significant ways. While the Colchian princess in Euripides' version of the myth murders her children in order to avenge Jason for abandoning her, Sethe is a defenceless slave who attempts to save her child from the gruesome life she has lived through herself in the only way she can: through death.

Despite this asymmetry and Morrison's objections, scholars have insisted on the comparison. 'For Medea is Sethe and Sethe is Medea', as Shelley P. Haley puts it (1995: 205), and hence the story of Medea becomes the sole resonating background against which Sethe's fate becomes meaningful. Lillian Corti, for instance, observes that Sethe 'remains true to herself in a way that Medea does not', when she 'proceeds into the future, riding in a pompous conveyance that is quite worthy of her arrogant oppressors' (1992: 74). But Medea, we may object, the glorious daughter of a king, has acted cruelly and erratically several times before. Tracey Walters notes that it is difficult to feel empathy for Euripides' Medea, a 'vindictive woman blinded by rage' who 'ruthlessly kills her brother and Jason's uncle, Pelias'. Yet, she nevertheless clings to the analogy and defines Sethe as 'Morrison's reincarnation of the Medea figure', suggesting that *Beloved* improves our understanding of Medea: 'By stripping Sethe of mystical qualities, Morrison allows us to see a more vulnerable image of Medea' (2007: 110).

Comparisons between Sethe and Medea often involve discussions about barbarism. Haley, for instance, suggests that in Euripides' play *Medea* and in *Beloved*, 'the "barbarians" are the "civilized" and the "civilized" are the "barbarians"' (1995: 195). In a similar spirit, Corti suggests that this is a fundamental question in *Beloved* and in the Greek play: 'Just as Euripides tends to ask, "Who are the barbarians?", so Morrison asks who the cannibals in the world of *Beloved* are' (1992: 68; cf. also Emmett 2010: 251, n. 9). The question is adequate in discussions of the former, since the novel illustrates how Afro-American slaves were seen as 'primitive barbarians' by white Americans, whereas, in fact, the violence executed against these slaves was barbaric, at least in the modern sense of the word, that is cruel, brutal, brutish, vicious and fierce. In Euripides' play, however, the question's relevance is less obvious. Jason acts cowardly, unfaithfully, and egotistically towards Medea, but rejecting him as a 'barbarian' is beside the point. The play is occasionally staged in this way, but these are rarely discussed in scholarship on Morrison and *Beloved*, which tend to turn exclusively to Euripides' tragedy. And from that point of view, from an Athenian perspective, the question is odd. Medea, not Jason, is a barbarian in the ancient Greek sense of the word, since she is an exiled foreigner, a non-Greek person originating from the Island of Colchis in the Black Sea.

[4] Malamud (2011: 295–296); Roynon (2013: 81).

Naturally, neither the author's explicit disinclination nor these asymmetries are causes enough to dispel the comparison between Sethe and Medea. We should expect Morrison's engagement with any ancient myth to be both ambivalent and complex (cf. Roynon 2013).[5] Still, I would suggest that it is problematic to regard Medea as the single mould in which this story is cast, and that the prominence of this particular myth in scholarly discourse on *Beloved* has obscured at least one other pervasive classical element in the novel.

Philomela and *Beloved*

In an article on how we can deal with the Roman poet Ovid's many depictions of rape, Amy Richlin concludes that '[w]e're stuck with Philomela; she's like Beloved, the dearly beloved ghost of grief, and to be blind to her is not to exorcise her. We need to know her and keep faith with history' (Richlin 1992: 178–179). The point is that the rape and mutilation of Philomela haunts western culture just like Beloved, but perhaps the comparison can be fruitful in the other direction too. The earliest known version of this myth in archaic Greek epic poetry has only two characters: the mother Aëdon who accidentally kills her son Itylos. Grief-stricken she asks the gods for mercy, and Zeus grants it by transforming her into a nightingale, forever lamenting her dead child.[6] The classical articulation of the myth during antiquity was Sophocles' lost play *Tereus*. In this version, Procne was the tragic heroine whose fate was sealed when her father, king Pandion, married her to the Thracian king Tereus, a foreigner or a 'barbarian' according to the Athenians. In Thrace, Procne missed her sister and asked Tereus to bring Philomela back from Athens. On his way home, Tereus betrayed his new Athenian family: he raped Philomela and cut off her tongue to prevent her from revealing what happened. Locked up and abandoned, Philomela nevertheless succeeded in communicating Tereus' crimes by depicting them in a tapestry, which she sent to her sister. Together, they avenged themselves on Tereus by killing his son with Procne, Itys, and serving the boy's flesh to the father. When Tereus realized that he had consumed his own child, he attacked the sisters with a weapon, but before the blow, the gods transformed all three into birds. Only small fragments of Sophocles' tragedy have survived.[7] Therefore, later receptions of the myth largely depend on the Roman poet Ovid's version in the *Metamorphoses*. Ovid focuses not on Procne and Itys, but on elements that would have occurred off-stage in Sophocles: on the rape and mutilation of Philomela as well as her testimony

[5] On the pursuit of the comparison between Sethe and Medea despite Morrison's disapproval, see Hall (2011: 222).

[6] The myth about Aëdon who murders her son and is transformed into a nightingale is found in the *Odyssey* (19.518–524) and in a longer version in Pherecydes of Athens' (fl. *c.* 465 f.v.t.) comment on Homer; Pherecydes *FGrH* 3 F 124. See for instance Alden (2017: 132–137).

[7] Sommerstein and Fitzpatrick (2006). See also Slattery (2016: 8–14) and discussion in Finglass (2016, 2020).

through weaving. Furthermore, in several Roman texts (and in receptions of them), it is Philomela and not Procne who is turned into a nightingale in the end. Hence, the main theme of the myth shifts from being a mother's painful sacrifice to avenge her sister to violence, rape trauma, and artistic expression of that suffering against all odds.[8]

It might be tempting to read Sethe not as a 'modern Medea' but as a 'modern Procne'; yet, we can safely expect Morrison's treatment of Greco-Roman narratives to be more subtle than that. To quote Catherine S. Quick, the author's classical allusions 'invite the reader to tease out implications, rather than figure out one-to-one symbolic correspondences'.[9] *Beloved* does not abide by any strict rules of analogy and cannot be paraphrased or translated into any other story than that about Sethe, Beloved, and the cruelty of slavery. The novel does not have one single hypotext, and it cannot be forced to fit the narrative pattern of one specific myth. However, the fate of Procne and Philomela repeatedly reverberate in the text, and we can ask about the meaning of these echoes.

Let us focus on the presence of Philomela first. Morrison's preoccupation with this character is apparent already in her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Pecola Breedlove is raped and abused like Philomela, driven to madness, and in the end wishes that she could escape through the air: 'flail[ing] her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly' (Morrison 1970: 158).[10] In *Beloved*, the repeated references to Sethe's sore tongue have been interpreted as obvious allusions to Philomela. We eventually learn that she was whipped so hard that she unintentionally bit off a piece of it: 'It was hanging by a shred. I didn't mean to. Clamped down on it, it come right off. I thought, Good God, I'm going to eat myself up' (Morrison 2004: 202). As noted by Andrea O'Reilly: '[Sethe's] tongue is not severed as in the Greek myth of Philomela's rape. Sethe is not silenced, and her story becomes a story to pass on' (O'Reilly 2004: 138). O'Reilly reads the allusion in connection to Morrison's reflection on transgenerational transmission of trauma that concludes the novel. Just as Philomela relates the atrocities she experienced against all odds, Morrison discloses Sethe's history, and by extension, the history of slavery, but in the closing chapter ambiguously declares that this is 'not a story to pass on' (Morrison 2004: 274–275); not to repeat and relive but apparently to narrate and memorialize.

Procne and *Beloved*

Morrison has often described how the idea of writing *Beloved* first came to her while editing *The Black Book* (1974), a collection of documents on the history of

[8] See for instance Brooks (1939: 148) on Philomela in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*; Hartman (1969); Joplin (1984); Marder (1992).

[9] Quick (2003: 150). On Morrison and the classical tradition, see especially Roynon (2013).

[10] See discussion in Miner (1985) and Cutter (2000).

African Americans. In the process, she came across a newspaper clipping about Margaret Garner (Morrison 2004: xvii–xviii). She was struck by Garner's sense of calm and self-control:

> In the inked pictures of her she seemed a very quiet, very serene-looking woman and everyone who interviewed her remarked about her serenity and tranquility. She said, 'I will not let those children live how I have lived.' (Naylor 1994: 207).

Similarly, Garner's counterpart Sethe carries herself with dignity and serenity despite her reputation. Sethe is proud that she managed to flee from Sweet Home with all her children. She did not accept to breed slaves for a master but claimed genuine motherhood, one of the many rights that were denied to slaves. A much-quoted episode illustrating the mutilation of family bonds between slaves occurs early in the novel, when the narrator recalls the losses of Sethe's mother-in-law:

> Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn't run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen and seized. So Baby's eight children had six fathers. What she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children. (Morrison 2004: 23)

Sethe would not let anyone 'play checkers' with her children's lives and fought to get them out of slavery.

Resistance against exploitation is a key issue in the Athenian version of the Procne and Philomela myth as well. The theme is succinctly summarized in the Sophoclean fragment 583, where Procne delivers one of the most powerful complaints of Ancient tragedy: 'As it is, I am nothing on my own. But I have often regarded the nature of women in this way, seeing that we amount to nothing' (tr. Finglass 2016: 61). In childhood, the speaker continues, the life of the girl is happier than that of any other human being, but when she reaches youth and 'gains understanding', she is 'pushed out and sold'. The young woman is forced away from her paternal home to men who may be strangers or barbarians, to homes that may be 'joyless' or 'abusive'. In retrospect, Procne's criticism of the social position of women in Athens looks like a warning, as noted by Patrick Finglass (2016). It points towards one of the main questions of the play, as discussed by Anne Pippin Burnett: What atrocities is a powerless, overlooked, and oppressed woman able to commit? Can she purposefully hurt her own children? (1998: 177–191). Procne avenges the crime committed against her sister and her family with her own hands, without reaching out to the gods or taking counsel from any male relatives. In a fragment from the end of Sophocles' play, a god or a messenger establishes that Tereus was indeed a fool, but that it was with even greater folly that Procne and Philomela struggled against him into the very end (fragment 589). Their action is compared to that of a doctor who has no knowledge of diseases. Every person who applies a cure worse than the disease resembles a flawed

doctor of this kind. Tereus was guilty of hubris, but Procne's revenge was an even greater error.

Despite the fact that Procne's action is repudiated in the play, the Athenians looked to her as a patriotic hero; or at least, this is what a number of testimonies from the classical period indicate. Around the years 420–425, a statue depicting Procne and Itys was raised on Parthenon at Acropolis. The geographer Pausanias describes its location in the north east corner of the temple between Athena and Poseidon. She is standing with the head slightly bent and the left arm lifted, probably holding a knife in the left hand while she is pulling back the head of her son with the other. The composition is characterized by a sense of elevated calm. Pausanias suggests that Alcamenes had caught the moment in which Procne had made up her mind to end Itys' life. She does not kill him in anger or frenzy, as when Agave and her sisters tore Pentheus to pieces or when Minyas' daughters lacerated Hippasos. Procne did not act under the influence of Dionysos, but was fully aware of her action, determined that she must sacrifice her son to avenge the foreign king.[11]

The statue served to remind the Athenians, and particularly the Athenian women, of the value of a mother's sacrifice for her city. A century later, when the Athenian empire was waning, Procne and her sister were once again invoked as a source of inspiration. In a passage in Demosthenes' funeral speech that pays tribute to the soldiers who fell in the battle of Chaeronea against Philip II of Macedonia, one of the foremost Athenian tribes is invoked, the Pandionids, descendants of King Pandion. These men did not find their lives worth living if they did not act as bravely as Pandion's daughters, Procne and Philomela, when they saw 'Hellas' being attacked (Demosthenes 60.28).

Procne's husband had offended Pandion's house, betrayed the king's confidence and disgraced his eldest daughter and their marriage by raping his sister-in-law. She felt it as her obligation to put an end to Tereus' lineage. Procne's infanticide was regarded as an expression for a strong communal claim; a patriotic action executed at the expense of her individual life. Similarly, American abolitionists claimed Margaret Garner as their hero for what they considered her sacrifice for the cause. As examples, these figures teach us that political resistance comes at a high price. Still, an extreme act of violence has been committed; a child has been killed by a mother. Procne and Sethe are represented not only as self-sacrificing and heroic but also as committers of a tragic mistake.

In *Beloved*, the reader's attention is persistently turned towards the process of dehumanization that led Sethe to a point where she felt that her baby would suffer less in death than in life. This process of dehumanization, Lillian Corti suggests, is explored in terms of cannibalism, which she sees as an 'organizing principle' in the novel: 'Old men and women like Stamp Paid and Baby Suggs complain of "exhausted marrow" (177, 180, 181) as if some rough beast had sucked the living tissue from their bones and left them lying around like so many empty casings' (Corti

[11] See analysis and discussion in Stevens (1946); Neer (2012); Fullerton (2016: 342–344).

1992: 68). Corti notes that the issue of cannibalism is introduced with the new slaveholder, the so-called 'schoolteacher', who overtook the farm 'Sweet Home' from its preceding owner Mr Garner (Corti 1992: 67). The schoolteacher conducts studies in racial biology on the slaves at the farm; measuring their skulls, counting their teeth, and asking them questions while taking notes. He instructs his pupils to observe the behaviour of the slaves and assigns them to fill in two columns in their notebooks; one with 'human' and another with 'animal' traits. The owner treats the slaves like animals and does not stop until he feels that he has proven that they *are* animals. At the same time, he is wholly dependent and 'feeds' on their work down to the smallest detail. Even the notetaking was indirectly the fruit of black labour since Sethe prepared the ink they used in their pseudo-documentation. On these grounds, Corti concludes that he practices a form of cannibalism.

Sethe's exposure to the humiliating violence of the schoolteacher reaches its peak when his nephews hold her down to the floor and suck the milk out of her breasts: milked [her] like she was 'the cow, no, the goat, back behind the stable because it was too nasty to stay in with the horses.' (Morrison 2004: 200). Meanwhile, the schoolteacher watches and takes notes. Sethe returns to this event over and over again in her thoughts. She connects it to memories of her escape from the farm and her urge to get milk for her baby daughter. It has been noted that these events and reflections highlight and interfere with the construction of slave mothers as breeders in a system of exploitation whose only purpose was to gain profit for the slaveholders (see discussion in Emmett 2010: 252). The novel actively links the rape of Sethe's maternal body to the infanticide, the tragedy that lies at the core of the narrative.

In the novel as in real life, Sethe's and Garner's crimes were not unique incidents of this kind among slave mothers, but it raised strong reactions. In the novel, Paul D admits that he finds it bestial: 'You got two feet, Sethe, not four' (165), he tells her when he learns about it. The ways in which Sethe, and her historical prototype Garner, killed their children were considered extremely brutal. While other slave mothers who saw no point in keeping their children alive left them to starve, Sethe cut the throat of her baby. We are reminded of Ovid's retelling of Procne's infanticide in the *Metamorphoses*. Charles Segal has noted that Tereus' savagery is mirrored in the sisters' gradual transformation into 'demons of revenge', and that their metamorphosis in fact begins long before the final one takes place. It starts already when Procne receives the news of Philomela and sets out to find her, accompanied by Thracian women in a Bacchic celebration of Dionysos, 'fearful and driven on by the furies of her grief (*terribilis Procne furiisque agitata doloris*, 595)'. Once the sisters are back in the palace, Procne immediately begins to plan revenge and descends into a monstrous, 'subhuman form', to quote Segal: 'from maenad to Fury to wild creature'.[12] Tereus is compared to an eagle ('the ravenous bird of Jove', *praedator Iovis ales* 6.517), once he has captured Philomela. Similarly, Procne is described as a tiger at the time of her killing: 'Without more words she dragged Itys away, as a tigress

[12] Segal (1994: quotations from 274–276).

drags a suckling fawn through the dark woods on Ganges' banks' (*nec mora, traxit Ityn, veluti Gangetica cervae/lacentem fetum per silvas opacas*, 6.636–637).[13] Tereus' rape of Philomela transforms Procne to a 'tigress'.

A related issue is the theme of wrongful eating, which constitutes a core element in our ancient myth as well as in Morrison's novel. Beloved has an insatiable appetite; she craves sweets, and Sethe, who is getting thinner by the day, supplies them. Beloved's love for Sethe is expressed as a hunger: Sethe is 'licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved's eyes' (Morrison 2004: 57), especially when she tells stories.[14] Beloved is occupied with eating, both literally and metaphorically, but also with a fear of being eaten herself. She senses that she is falling to pieces and is troubled by dreams in which she 'explodes' and is being 'swallowed'. Corti suggests that these fears are related to the infanticide: 'when her throat was cut her blood exploded outward, and when she died the earth swallowed her up' (Corti 1992: 69). From our perspective, this fear is reminiscent of Itys' fate, who is literally torn to pieces by his mother and swallowed by his father. We are reminded of how Procne brings the atrocity of infanticide one step further by luring Tereus to eat the flesh of his son. This reflects Tereus' crime, as Charles Segal points out: 'violation of the ties between husband and wife and between sister and sister is answered by the violation of the bonds between mother and son and between father and son. Incest is answered by filicide and cannibalism' (Segal 1994: 275).

In classical as well as folkloric narrative traditions, parents killing and eating their children is associated with a symbolic shift where civilization is conquered by savagery. *Beloved* complicates the traditional motif by submerging it in the political context of slavery, where slave children are consumed by labour and hardship. Rather than letting her child's life be eaten by slavery, Sethe ends it herself. But, in that very moment, she also commits her tragic mistake. Sethe exacts a form of retribution moulded in the barbaric language of her oppressor, resulting in a violent crime against herself and her own flesh.

Finally, we turn to the novel's allusions to birds and flying, a motif that repeatedly appears in Morrison's authorship. Several birds are present in *Beloved*; the rooster, the cardinal, the dove, the hawk, and the hummingbird (see discussion in Vega González 2000 and Roynon 2013: 90–92). In moments closely related to Sethe's infanticide, imagery involving the hawk and the hummingbird is used. First, when Stamp Paid pictures Sethe at the time of the killing: '. . .she flew, snatching up her children like a hawk on the wing; how her face beaked, how her hands worked like claws, how she collected them every which way' (Morrison 2004: 157). Like the infuriated Tereus in some versions of the ancient myth, the exasperated Sethe is imagined as a hawk at the time of her killing. Another allusion to Tereus occurs when Sethe learns from Paul D that her husband Halle Suggs was present but did not interfere when she was abused by her slave master's nephews. Her immediate

[13] Ed. and trans. Miller (1977).

[14] On the concept of 'Abiku' in *Beloved*, see for instance Grewal (1998: 106–107).

reaction is to grip her elbows 'as though to keep them from flying away' (Morrison 2004: 68). When she asks again, Paul D answers: 'A man ain't a goddamn ax. Chopping, hacking, busting every goddamn minute of the day. Things get to him. Things he can't chop down because they're inside' (Morrison 2004: 69). This passage echoes the final episode in Ovid's rendering of the myth of Procne and Philomela in the *Metamorphoses* in which Tereus asks for his son and Procne answers that what he seeks is inside him. The situations are admittedly different: in the myth, a weapon—an ax or a sword—appears in the final episode preceding the transformation into birds; in *Beloved*, the comparison between Halle and the ax occurs at the moment in which Sethe learns that her husband witnessed the brutal assault on her. But its proximity with the reference to bird flight invokes the *Metamorphoses* and creates a sense of asymmetrical parallelism. Halle ends up sitting alone by a churn, staring, with 'butter all over his face' (Morrison 2004: 69), having lost his wits after witnessing the assault on his wife. His position is thus implicitly contrasted with that of Tereus: the violence broke him like a twig, it is inside of him and he cannot take revenge or run after it with a blade.

A series of allusions to hummingbirds and bird flight occurs when Sethe tells Paul D about what happened in the woodshed of 124 Bluestone Road eighteen years earlier. She remembers how she 'heard wings' and lost contact with reality: 'She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them' (Morrison 2004: 163). A similar wording appears towards the end of the novel when Denver's employer Bodwin arrives at the house and Sethe believes that he has come to seize her children: 'She hears wings. Little hummingbirds stick needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thinks anything, it is no. No no. Nonono. She flies' (Morrison 2004: 262). This second time, women in the community put a stop to her action before it is too late. These episodes have been recognized as allusions to West African Yoruba culture and Afro-American narrative traditions.[15] But these are fused, I would like to suggest, with allusions to the moment of flight in the myth of Procne and Philomela. In a frequently cited passage from Toni Morrison's lecture 'Unspeakable Things Unspoken', the author declares that she felt 'intellectually at home' in Greek tragedy. Athenian fifth-century spectacles reminded her of Afro-American communal structures: the song, the function of the choir, and the struggles of heroes in the tension between the claims of the community and the hubris of the individual (Morrison 1988: 125). It has often been noted that we find struggles of this sort on many levels in *Beloved* and its story about the tragic heroine Sethe, who has been analysed inter alia as 'a modern Medea', a Demeter figure, and a Niobe character.[16] My aim here is to add Procne to that list. Together with other significant

[15] Washington (2005). See also Barnes (2000).

[16] On the structure of tragedy in *Beloved*, see Schmudde (1993). On Sethe as a tragic hero, see Walters (2007: 109), who briefly evokes Procne when discussing Medea as an

moments in the novel; the abuse of Sethe, her sore tongue, Beloved's feeling of falling to pieces, and her fear of being swallowed, the presence of birds and flying can be read as references to this myth. In this context, it is noteworthy that we find allusions to the myth of Aëdon and the dream of escaping moments of distress by flying through the air like a bird in a number of Greek tragedies (Loraux 1998: 60–63). Instances in which the choir recalls the miserable mother who never ceased bewailing her son—'Itys, Itys'—when they sense that a terrible act of violence is about to take place (Aesch., *Ag*. v. 1140–1145; Soph., *El*. v. 1076–1079), and the tragic heroines Cassandra (Aesch., *Ag*. v. 1146–1149) and Electra (Soph. *El*. v. 104–109, 145–150) who turn to Aëdon/Procne when they feel lost and wish that they too had wings and could escape their wretched lives, reverberate in Sethe's dream of taking flight. Yet unlike Cassandra, Electra and Sethe, Procne is rescued from her misery by the gods in the end. Morrison employs the Greek myth as a contrasting image in her fictionalization of the tragedy of Margaret Garner and of the enslavement of Africans during the Middle Passage. The presence of the myth of Procne and Philomela offers the moment of flight as a promise in the narrative of *Beloved*; a promise that is never fulfilled.

The myth of Philomela has often been interpreted as a complex expression of emancipation. We encounter it in contemporary film, art, and literature from around the world, especially when it deals with topics related to abuse, violence, trauma, language, and literary writing.[17] In scholarship, commonly held views are that Tereus' rape, Philomela's mutilated tongue, weaving, and final transformation illustrate the relationship between suffering and artistic creativity;[18] the impossibility of representing trauma verbally;[19] or the quest—not least of female artists and feminist critics—to articulate painful experiences both produced by and silenced by patriarchy:[20] Philomela as an example that incarnates the productive dualism between femininity and artistry on the one hand, and violence and oppression on the other; writing/weaving as an act of resistance against violent oppression or/and as a way out of it. Patricia Joplin and Elissa Marder famously criticized Geoffrey Hartman's interpretation of the Philomela myth, the gist of which is that there is always something that does violence to us, takes away our voice, and drives art towards the aesthetics of

ancient model for Sethe; Tally (2009), who reads Sethe as a Demeter character; Roynon (2013: 85–89), who discusses Morrison's trilogy on slavery—*Beloved*, *Jazz* (1992) and *Love* (2003)—in comparison with Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and Sethe as a Niobe-figure (especially Phillis Wheatley's poem 'Niobe in Distress'); see also Twagilimana (2016).

[17] For example, Angelou (1969); Irving (1978); Naylor (1982); Hébert (1982); Walker (1982a); Rushdie (1983); Coetzee (1986); Wertenbaker (1989); Ransmayr (1988) Maraini (1990); Frostenson (1994); O'Brian (1997); Anderson (1999); Coetzee (1999); Atwood (2006); Collins (2008–2010).

[18] For example, Hartman (1969). See also examples in Tomiche (2010).

[19] For example, Johnson (1998); Codde (2007); Alsop (2012).

[20] For example, Gilbert and Gubar (1979); Walker 1982b; Joplin 1984; Marder 1992; Linklater 2003.

silence. For them, the myth is primarily a story about female poetics. Once Philomela has found a way of expressing herself, Marder writes, it turns out that she only has one story to convey, and that is the one about how she lost her language; and the language in which she may finally express her anger is 'tongueless'; limited to and restrained by an oppressive power. But Procne opposes the patriarchal violence represented in Tereus: 'The weapon that is stronger than the sword is a language fuelled by excess instead of loss. She stuffs his mouth and belly with the body of his son, leaving Tereus no room for words. Procne violates her husband by making him gag on the law of the father; she arrests the progression of paternity by feeding him his own child through the mouth. Procne thus uses her own child as a substitute for a tongue' (Marder 1992: 161, see also discussion in Enterline 2000: 11). While we are 'stuck with Philomela', we more easily forget about Procne and her sacrifice. In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison establishes a dialogue between the tragedy of slavery and this neglected dimension of the ancient myth.

Despite fundamental differences between Euripides' Medea and Morrison's Sethe Suggs, comparisons between them have become a commonplace in literary scholarship. While Euripides' Medea murders her children to avenge the unfaithfulness of her husband Jason, Sethe kills her daughter because she finds no other way to 'save' her from a lifetime of slavery. This article has identified and examined allusions on various levels of the narrative to another myth. Subtle and complex evocations of the story about Procne and Philomela contribute to the memorialization of Margaret Garner in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*. The cut-off tongue and the impossible dreams of being transformed into a bird point us to the Greek myth. Its tension between a mother's revenge through infanticide as an exemplary and a despicable act also unite the two narratives. The mythical figure Procne and the biographical person Margaret Garner were both acclaimed heroines in their respective contexts: Procne was a patriotic hero in classical Athens, and Garner a symbol for resistance against slavery by American abolitionists; but both are complex examples. In Sophocles' *Tereus* and in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Procne's infanticide is represented as a savage act. Like the Athenian sisters, Sethe uses the same means as her oppressor in response to his brutality. But there is also a marked difference between the two stories. The mythical figures of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are transformed in moments of utter desperation. When Daphne's or Myrrha's fear become so intense that they pray for death, the gods show them mercy through transformation, but there can be no such delivery for Sethe and Beloved. In colonialism and enslavement, there is nothing but suffering. Hence, Morrison's allusions to the rape and mutilation of Philomela and the infanticide of Procne epitomize the incomprehensible brutality of colonial slavery. But Morrison leaves the end open; even though Beloved persists, Sethe and Paul D look to 'some kind of tomorrow' (Morrison 2004: 273). With this openness and uncertainty about whether any happy ending or viable future can be a reality in the world of *Beloved*, Morrison invites her readers to fill in the gaps at the end of the story. We are reminded of Morrison's Nobel lecture from 1993. An elderly blind woman, reputed for her clairvoyance, is visited by a group of young people.

Putting her to the test they ask: 'Old woman, I hold in my hand a bird. Tell me whether it is living or dead'. The woman pauses but finally responds: 'I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands'.

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