

2020

## Aggression and Violence Against Females: Analyzing the Similarities Between Myth and Film

Julia Papanastou

College of the Holy Cross, jpapanastou@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/parnassus-j>



Part of the [Classical Literature and Philology Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), and the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Papanastou, Julia (2020) "Aggression and Violence Against Females: Analyzing the Similarities Between Myth and Film," *Parnassus: Classical Journal*: Vol. 7 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/parnassus-j/vol7/iss1/8>

This Essays is brought to you for free and open access by CrossWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Parnassus: Classical Journal by an authorized editor of CrossWorks.

Aggression and Violence Against Females: Analyzing the  
Similarities Between Myth and Film

Julia Papanastou, '18

Jane Campion's *The Piano* tells the story of a mute woman, Ada, and her attachment to her piano. What begins as an innocent enough film slowly turns increasingly sinister, culminating in a show of physical violence by a male character. This bears striking resemblance to the Procne and Philomela myth in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Specifically, violence committed against females, female silence, and female imprisonment are parallel themes that make the telling of both the Procne and Philomela myth and *The Piano* so captivating. These themes manifest themselves in different ways, but both stories follow a similar structure that involves conflicting feelings of loyalty and subsequent vengeance. Despite the different introductions of conflict, Ada and Philomela are first and foremost the objects towards which males direct their anger, sexual desire, and revenge. In this paper I will argue that after attempting acts of defiance in response to male violence, these female characters become victims and thereby transform into sympathetic characters for viewers and readers alike.

The idea of "giving" a woman to a man is present in both this myth and this film and works to showcase blatant female oppression at the hands of men. In both stories, the

central female is “given” by their father to another male figure. Philomela is only permitted to go with Tereus to see her sister once her father gives permission. Likewise, Ada lives with her father and daughter in Ireland until her father arranges a marriage to a man named Stewart in New Zealand. While both instances of exchange are not inherently violent, they do lead to a cascade of events that end with the women becoming victims of aggression. Implicit in this giving is the belief that whoever receives the woman then owns her. This is plain to see in both Tereus’ and Stewart’s actions, as Tereus believes he can rape, punish, and imprison Philomela because she has become his property. Stewart does the same. While he is not sexually violent, he expects that as soon as Ada becomes his wife, she should immediately be affectionate towards him. Thus, there is a latent sense that possession equals affection: Tereus is allowed to rape Philomela because he owns her while Stewart can expect affection after he marries Ada. Here, the men show that the women’s wishes and desires are not important--this is a more understated way to silence women. Stewart also expects Ada to be receptive to his affection, which is exemplified when he tries to hold her hand at the play they attend. Tereus assumes the same, that Philomela has reciprocated his desire, which is something Ovid indicates in the *Metamorphoses*: “Philomela is eager to go, wants the same thing, or seems to” (l.485). Both Stewart and Tereus

make assumptions about their partner's desires because of their expectations surrounding "ownership" of women.

Lack of speech is another aspect of both stories that contributes to the imprisonment of women. After Tereus rapes Philomela, he cuts out her tongue, removing her ability to express herself verbally and thereby imprisoning her in her own mind. Ada (who is mute) can communicate by signing, but expresses her true self by playing her piano. Because Stewart is insistent on not keeping the piano Ada has traveled with from Ireland, he thereby withholds a very meaningful form of expression for her. Their lack of speech forces both women to find other ways of expressing themselves. Philomela turns to her loom and uses it to convey to her sister that she was raped. Ada, on the other hand, turns back to the piano. In so doing, she falls in love with another man in the village, Baines, who is the only man who tries to retrieve her lost piano for her. This alienates her from Stewart, as she sees him as an adversary to getting her piano back. She also uses the piano in a different way to express herself: physically removing a key and expressing her love for Baines by writing a message on it. Male characters try to use silence to imprison the female characters, but this only allows the women to showcase their resourcefulness, as they are able to find means of defying their captivity and overcoming their silence. This, however, does lead to a cascade of much more serious events.

Women asking favors of their husbands becomes another important theme associated with this myth and this film. In the Procne and Philomela myth, Procne asks Tereus to get her sister so that Procne may see her again. There is a similar occurrence in *The Piano*. Because Stewart leaves Ada's piano at the beach, she is forced to ask Baines for a favor: to take her to the piano. The trouble begins when Baines goes to great lengths to bring the piano to his home and allows Ada to "teach" him. Inherent in the asking of a favor is agreeing to a covenant of repayment. For instance, by bringing Philomela to Procne and doing the favor asked of him means, Tereus thinks he has the right to seek repayment, namely by having sex with Philomela. The same goes for Baines: for every time Ada comes, he gives her one key of her piano so she is able to slowly win back ownership of it. Thus, he completes his favor, but this is not to say their relationship is completely centered around her playing the piano. Baines is extremely sexual with Ada the first time she comes, and he gets more sexually aggressive as time goes on. Ada no longer owes Baines piano lessons, but he still asks her for repayment: to play without her dress on, to take off her clothes, and to come lay in his bed with him while he is completely naked. Ada does become scared at first, just like the description of Philomela after her rape, "She shook and trembled/As a frightened lamb which a gray wolf has mangled/And cast

aside (*Metamorphoses* 1.531-533). More interestingly, because Ada had asked the same favor of her husband, Stewart, and he refused, she does not owe him anything. Her debt is to Baines, which she pays back in a mostly sexual way. These favors put men in a position of power and give them justification for taking what they want, as they are the only ones capable of completing the favors asked by the female characters. While the favors are innocent in nature (Procne's asks to see her sister, Ada's asks for her piano) they become extremely sinister after male characters use their authority to complete the favors. When the male characters complete both Procne's and Ada's favor, the two women end up owing the males sex.

Loyalty and vengeance become two central themes that cause conflict between the male and female characters. In both myth and film, one specific instance of loyalty leads to a subsequent act of vengeance. In the Procne and Philomela myth, Procne's loyalty is to her sister when she finds out her husband, Tereus, raped her. Her loyalty causes her to become enraged at what Tereus had done, so much so that she was willing to kill her own son in an act of vengeance towards her husband. Procne takes revenge for the violation and captivity of her sister in a way she knows will disturb and disgust her husband the most: by literally cutting up their son and feeding him to Tereus. This loyalty between sisters is similarly present

between mother and daughter. Flora, at the beginning of *The Piano*, is fiercely loyal to her mother Ada, even stating that she would never call Stewart “Papa.” She communicates her mother’s anger at having to leave the piano at the beach and remains attached to her throughout a large portion of the film. Once she catches her mother and Baines becoming intimate, however, Flora immediately shifts loyalty to Stewart, even calling him “Papa.” Flora begins the cascade of events leading to Ada’s eventual punishment. She betrays her mother by giving Ada’s love note on a piano key to Stewart, as she knows they have been forbidden from seeing Baines. The conflicting and changing loyalties make both the film and the myth extremely poignant, as betrayal and disgust become central themes. It is a difficult point for both the reader and the viewer, as we are not sure who to sympathize with. Both Flora and Procne lose loyalty to their loved ones and subsequently kickstart horrifyingly violent acts of vengeance.

Philomela and Ada are both physically punished by men for their defiance and intention to disobey. After Tereus rapes her, Philomela tells Tereus that she plans to tell everyone what he did to her; he retaliates by cutting out her tongue so she physically cannot. Ada also acts in defiance of Stewart, causing him to cut off one of her fingers. These males not only punish the female characters, but do so in a way that causes the most damage. Without her finger, Ada cannot play

the piano as before. Stewart knows this, which is why he chose that as her punishment. Tereus also punishes Philomela in a way that will do the most damage: directly inhibiting her plan to tell people of her rape. The nature of the punishment remains the same between myth and film: Philomela and Ada are not brutalized or physically beaten, but victims of calculated injuries. Stewart's punishment for Ada is especially calculated. He knows how attached to the piano Ada is, and that the piano has been the basis of her relationship with Baines. Moreover, Ada's hands are a very important part of the film: she uses them to sign, to write, and to play. As punishment for her disobedience, he, too, chooses a sinister course of action. By cutting off one of her fingers and threatening to cut off more each time she attempts to see Baines, Stewart effectively chooses the most damaging injury he could have given her. Physical punishment was not enough to satisfy the male characters. It needed to be something more personal, more damaging than a broken bone or a bruised body. This takes the brutalization of female characters to another level: they are not simply beaten to make a point, but are punished in a way that makes it much more difficult for them to heal--both physically and emotionally.

Tereus and Stewart not only punish the female characters in sinister ways but do so solely motivated by pride. Tereus, upon meeting Philomela, describes his infatuation

with her, but punishes her for her disobedience and defiance because of their potential effects on him. The only reason he does not hurt her is to protect his good name; he feels no compassion for Philomela. Stewart has the same motivation. Throughout the film, Ada is less than compassionate to him. Though he asks why she will not become intimate with him and waits for her to warm up to him, it is plain to see that Stewart does not deeply love Ada. He is hurt when he finds out that she has been unfaithful to him, but it is just his pride that is hurt. This hurt pride harkens back to the aforementioned point of ownership. Because Ada is Stewart's wife, he believes himself to be her keeper. It seems that it is not Ada herself that he wants, but rather compassion and intimacy from any woman. That being said, when he finds out she has been intimate with and trying to see Baines, he retaliates--because of her disobedience, not heartbreak. Stewart's pride is hurt because he has lost his possession to another man. In his retaliation, he attempts to prove to Ada and himself that he is still her owner. This show of masculinity and ownership is seen in both Stewart's and Tereus' actions. Pride motivates these punishments: both Tereus and Stewart refuse to be emasculated by Ada and Philomela and take actions to prevent further disobedience, prove their masculinity, and maintain their pride.

Both Ada and Philomela are subjected to violence at the hands of their male counterparts. This violence is motivated by a series of factors: pride, anger, and revenge, all of which are responses to ensure female submission. *The Piano* and the Procne and Philomela myth are by no means uplifting and light-hearted stories, but they nonetheless convey important messages about female imprisonment and female agency. Issues of females as “possessions” and male-imposed female silence are also central to the film and the myth, as they work to show the masculine desire to maintain a dominant position in relationships. Violence in the film and myth stem from machismo, or aggressive male pride, and the sole victims are the women. In the end, both female protagonists are able to escape their oppressors and flee to freedom. Both *The Piano* and the Procne and Philomela myth examine these issues in the context of male-female relationships in a way that sheds light on the complex nature of love, lust, and rejection.