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Spaces in Between in the Myth of Myrrha: A Metamorphosis into Tree

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Abstract. Within the larger context of metamorphoses into plants in Greek and Roman mythology, the paper aims to analyse the myth of Myrrha and her metamorphosis into a tree, focusing on the triggering cause of the transformation as well as the response given to her newly-acquired form of life. Myrrha's transformation into a myrrh tree takes place as a consequence of her transgressive incestuous act of love with her father, Cinyras. Her metamorphosis occurs as a consequence of sinful passion – passion *in extremis* –, and she sacrifices her body (and human life/existence) in her escape. I will look at Ovid's version of the myth as well as Ted Hughes's adaptation of the story from his *Tales from Ovid*. My discussion of the transformation into tree starts out from the consideration that metamorphosis is the par excellence place and space of in-betweenness implying an inherent hybridity and blurred, converging subjectivities, a state of being that allows for passages, overlaps, crossings, and simultaneities. I am interested to see in what ways Myrrha's incestuous desire for her father as well as her metamorphosis into a tree can be "rooted" back to her great-grandfather Pygmalion's transgressive love for the ivory statue Galatea.

Keywords: myth, metamorphosis, Myrrha, myrrh tree, incest, Pygmalion

"Give me some third way [. . .].
Remove me
From life and from death
Into some nerveless limbo."
(Hughes 1997, 127)

The tragic story of Myrrha's transgressive incestuous love for her father, Cyniras, and her transformation into a myrrh tree is best known from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In postclassical times, Myrrha's story has had widespread influence in Western culture. She is mentioned in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, in Shakespeare's *Othello* as well as in Mary Shelley's short story "Mathilda." The story of Myrrha and Cinyras also features in the volume *After Ovid: New*

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Metamorphoses (edited by Michael Hofmann and James Lasdun, 1994), in a poem written by American poet Frederick Seidel, and it was chosen as one of twenty-four tales from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* retold by English poet Ted Hughes in his poetical work *Tales from Ovid*, published in 1997. Mary Zimmerman's 2002 play entitled *Metamorphoses* features the story of Myrrha among other tales from Ovid's classic. More recently, in 2006, a musical performance of *Myrrha* premiered at Carnegie Hall, written and directed by composer *Kristin Kuster*, featuring three sopranos and a choral orchestra. In 2008, *The Guardian* named Myrrha's relationship with her father as depicted in Ovid as the most disturbing and overwhelming story of incestuous love (Mullan 2008).

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses,* Myrrha's story comes right after that of Pygmalion as a consequence of – and as a "punishment" for – Pygmalion's sinful deed, his "incestuous" love with "his kind," Galatea, the woman he "fathered" (created). Pygmalion is Galatea's creator, and therefore, as Hillis Miller argues, his love for the figure is an act of transgression, of autoerotism and narcissism: "For Pygmalion, the other is not really other. Pygmalion has himself made Galatea. She is the mirror image of his desire. His relation to her is not love for another […]. It is a reciprocity in which the same loves the same" (Miller 1990, 4).[1] The payment for his forbidden love falls not on his girl child (Paphos) but on his grandson Cinyras and his daughter, Myrrha, who fall in love and make love to each other. Cinyras is Paphos's son, and his tale follows right after Pygmalion's as if suggesting that coming generations have to pay for the parents'/fathers' transgressions. In what follows, my remarks shall focus on Ovid's version of the myth (in Frank Justus Miller's English translation) as well as on Ted Hughes' version of the tale, from his *Tales from Ovid*.

With reminiscences to King Laius and Oedipus's story, Cinyras's narrative starts with the following foreword: "Cinyras was her [Paphos's] son and, had he been without offspring, might have been counted fortunate. A horrible tale I have to tell" (Ovid 1958, 85). He "might well have been known as Fortune's darling / If only he'd stayed childless" (Hughes 1997, 113). Offspring, as Cinyras and Myrrha's tale suggests, have to atone and pay penance for their fathers' deeds. Cinyras's curse is his daughter, Myrrha's is her father. The "enormity" of their love might be traced back to the "soil that nursed it" (Hughes 1997, 113) – symbolically the parents/ancestors one descends from. With a reference to the name's etymological (and etiological) significance (myrrh tree), Myrrha's story starts with the ill-boding foreword "a new tree was not worth so great a price" (Ovid 1958, 87), also suggesting that Myrrha's transformation into a tree is a retribution that "commemorates" her transgression and at the same time sends her back into her great-grandmother, Galatea's "footing," her sculpture state: she is bound to stay stuck in the soil (parentage) she descends from. As she could

1 For a detailed analysis, see Veres (2019).

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not help embracing her father, she is predestined to forever embrace the soil she stems from. In deviance, her soil/womb is planted with the seed of her father; so, she is doomed to transform into deviation – a tree that symbolically means origins, origination, and roots. For her deviance (loving one she is forbidden to love) and for her defiance (to be/stay/behave as human, i.e. not love someone one is forbidden to love), she is punished to live on as no longer human. She is transformed into a myrrh tree to forever cry away law's (civilization's) prohibition to mate with one's parent. Her name, "myrrh" means "bitterness" (Hebrew *mar*, Greek *smurna*, Latin *murra*); with its hanging branches, the myrrh tree resembles the weeping willow. According to Ovid, the resin of the myrrh tree was used as medicine and as a beautifying ointment. Myrrh resin is gained with the incision of the branches of the tree, as if it is "hurt." Then it produces "tears," the aromatic gum that the tree produces in order to heal its wound. It was used for its analgesic effect and for the anointing of corpses (after Jesus was taken from the cross, he was anointed with myrrh). It is a symbol of (commitment to) sacrifice and devotion (offering oneself) ("Mirha" n.p.).[2] The mythical character Myrrha is a casualty of forbidden love, of "*pietas perverted*" (Nagle 1983, 311).

Despite the resemblances to Oedipus's story and despite the fact that in some respects her story can be seen as even more tragic than that of Oedipus, Myrrha's myth is not among the well-known stories in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Oedipus makes love to his mother not knowing it is his mother he makes love to, but Myrrha makes love to her father knowing it is her father she makes love to. At the beginning of her story, Cupid disowns his complicity with Myrrha's sin, "that crime of yours," denying responsibility for her sinful desire: "his weapons did not harm you" (Ovid 1958, 87), and therefore, the fact that Myrrha's desire is not caused by an external factor (Cupid) but comes from within arouses the audience's sympathy for her (Resinski 2014, 277). As Ovid suggests, her love comes from and is related to the underworld: one of the three sisters from Styx "blasted you" (Ovid 1958, 87). Hughes uses the term "possession;" she is possessed by the venom of hell, by "criminal desire" [Hughes 1997, 114–115]), or "*furiosa libido*" (Brooks Otis qtd. in Nagle 1983, 301), and in the end (after committing her sin – sleeping with her father – and suffering of it) she prays to the gods: "Remove me / From life and from death / Into some nerveless limbo" (Hughes 1997, 127). She aspires for a nerveless (unfeeling) in-between state – a limbo, the porch of Hell – and then, as an answer to her prayer, she is transformed into a myrrh tree. The nerveless limbo would be the tree that, however, keeps on shedding tears, crying away her tragic fate and mourning her loss – the loss of human life and human love.

2 The Magi bring myrrh to the new-born Christ as a token of their worship and sacrifice. Christ's mother's, Mary's name (Hebrew *mar*) is also related to the word and meaning of *myrrh:* bitterness, sacrifice. Myrrh becomes the iconic image and symbol of sacrifice committed out of love ("Mirha" n.p.).

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As Rebecca Resinski argues, Ovid authorizes opposing responses to Myrrha's incestuous desire. On the one hand, Orpheus, the narrator of her story, clearly condemns her at the outset of the tale, but Ovid's portrayal of Myrrha invites sympathy for her at the same time. She is a mortal caught in an impossible predicament rather than an unclean criminal, and the audience is allowed to decide how to respond: "whether to condemn or sympathize, honor or abhor" her (Resinski 2014, 273–274, 281). In both Ovid and Hughes, we see her internal debate. In despair, Myrrha tries to justify her feelings and her deed querying whether her feelings are sinful: "*if* indeed it is a crime. But I am not sure, for piety refuses to condemn such love as this. Other animals mate as they will [. . .] Happy they who have such privilege! Human civilization has made spiteful laws, and what nature allows, the jealous laws forbid;" [. . .] "so that natural love is increased by the double bond" (Ovid 1958, 87–88, emphasis added). Myrrha refers to piety – the love of God – that withholds her from not loving Cinyras and she

> experiments with philosophical and relativist explanations which would disarm the force of the incest taboo. Myrrha considers the possibility that the customs which keep her father from being an acceptable erotic choice are arbitrary, neither established by nor mirrored in nature. Sounding like a Cynic philosopher, Myrrha observes that female animals mate with their sires (10.324–328), and she suggests that jealous laws prohibit what nature allows (10.330–331). Within this framework Myrrha tries to normalize her desire. (Resinski 2014, 278)

On the last two pages of his collection of essays on love entitled *On Celestial and Earthly Love* (*Az égi és a földi szerelemről*, 1991), Péter Nádas discusses Plato's *Laws*, coming to the following argument about the question of incest:

> In this respect, mentioning the example of a rather extreme cultural prohibition, we should not consider incest unnatural; on the contrary, the denial of incest from ourselves should be considered unnatural. We should not consider unnatural the fact that we are in love with our beautiful and clever mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers nor that we are in love with our daughters and sons, with whom we should not be in love according to human laws; on the contrary, we should consider it unnatural if they are good and beautiful and still we dare say that we are not in love with them. As if we said that we have no eyes and that lead had been poured into our ears from our birth. (2000, 157; my translation)

Myrrha insists on raising the question: "Is it criminal? / Is it unnatural?" (Hughes 1997, 115). In her rhetoric, nature – what would be natural – is juxtaposed

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with law (human life regulated by law), and as a result of this juxtaposition the notions "normal" and "abnormal" or "deviant" emerge in her rhetoric. Myrrha argues that her love for her father is natural, i.e. accepted by nature, "innate," instinctual, only law and human civilization condemn it unnatural and therefore forbidden (a taboo) ("Avaunt, lawless desires!" [Ovid 1958, 88]). She experiences that she is a victim of what Jonathan Bate calls "man's self-exile from Nature" (1994, 28): "Man has distorted that licence – / Man has made new laws from his jealousy / To deprive nature of its nature" (Hughes 1997, 115). Her sexual desire to be joined with the father falls under prohibition; yet, she argues, there are nations which exercise "their deepest happiness / The bliss of their infancy as a wedding present. [. . .] It would be a crime indeed to withhold it" (Hughes 1997, 115–116). Nádas argues as follows: "There is a huge difference between declaring that something has no effect on me and declaring that something does have an effect on me but I make every effort to resist this effect for one reason or another and thereby expose myself to the anguish of the soul" (Nádas 2000, 158; my translation). Like the notions of "natural" and "normal," the notion of crime also gets a twisted meaning in Myrrha's understanding: the law says it is a crime to love Cinyras, she says it is a crime not to love him. Ironically, in Hughes's adaptation, "Mighty Nature" is invoked to "Set this prohibition / Between a human father and his daughter" (1997, 117). As if with the voice of a chorus, Myrrha is warned in Hughes's version: "Choose [any of the princes that came courting you], Myrrha, before the story twists" (1997, 114), but, like Oedipus, she cannot escape her fate.

Myrrha's story raises questions about the nature of the relationship between father and daughter: "would I be better off as a stranger?" – Myrrha asks, adding that "because he is mine, he is not mine" (Ovid 1958, 89). Shall she leave the borders of her country like Oedipus, to avoid crime, or shall she live her desire and break the law? Her sin is excess, propinquity, and therefore, she recalls Oedipus's fate: "Think how many ties, how many names you are confusing! Will you be the rival of your mother, the mistress of your father? Will you be called the sister of your son, the mother of your brother?" (Ovid 1958, 89).

When asked by her father what husband she desires to have, her answer, just like her sin, repeats her great-grandfather Pygmalion's words in his prayer to Venus: "One *like* you," is Myrrha's answer (in the original, "*similem tibi*") (Ovid, 1958, 90–91; emphasis added).[3] "'I pray to have as wife one *like* my ivory maid,'" Pygmalion says to Venus ("*similis mea eburnae*," Ovid, 1958, 84–85; emphasis added). Like Pygmalion who does not dare say he wants his ivory maid, Myrrha does not dare say she wants to have her father as a husband. Incest is bound to be repeated, but while in Pygmalion's case incest is symbolical, in Cinyras's

3 A similar ironical answer is given by the nurse to Cinyras when he asks her about the age of the girl (Myrrha) he takes to his bed at night: "The same as Myrrha's" (Ovid 1958, 95).

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and Myrrha's case, it is literal. Grandsons and great-granddaughters are bound to repent and repeat their ancestor's sin. Cinyras is deeply moved by his daughter's declaration of love, answering "May you always be so filial" (Ovid 1958, 91). Hearing her father's answer, in Hughes's version, Myrrha stands "like a beast at the altar, head hanging" (1997, 118). The notion of the beast anticipates the forthcoming incestuous act: in a short time, she will be or act like a beast, copulating with her father. At stake in Myrrha's myth is the question of man – what is human – and where is the boundary between human and beast? The idea of the beast at the altar associates her figure with the motif of sacrifice. Transformed into a tree, Myrrha as a human being is sacrificed on the altar of civilization and humanity.

At the beginning of her story, Orpheus announces Myrrha's deviant marginality, condemning her barbaric deed to the "barbaric east," opposing it to the "civilized west" where he and his audience belong (Resinski 2014, 276). Her deed is judged as profane, impure, and deviant. However, as Barghiesi argues, Orpheus's moralizing is misplaced (and therefore a source of irony) as his audience are presumably animals and trees, that is, beings for whom incest is no taboo (qtd. in Resinski 2014, 276). "Individual audience members may decide whether to follow Orpheus' lead in assessing Myrrha and her actions or to discount Orpheus' explicit judgement of Myrrha and form a different opinion about her" (Resinski 2014, 277). Myrrha is writhing between "the opposite onslaughts of her lust and her conscience" (Hughes 1997, 118). Her writhing and bewilderment is described as the swaying of a tree under a striking axe. Myrrha is "like a tree" before becoming a tree per se; the idea appears in both Ovid's and Hughes's versions:

> just as a great tree, smitten by the axe, when all but the last blow has been struck, wavers which way to fall and threatens every side, so her mind, weakened by many blows, leans unsteadily now this way and now that, and falteringly turns in both directions; and no end nor rest for her passion can she find save death. She decides on death. She rises from her couch, resolved to hang herself. (Ovid 1958, 91)

"Her lust, consummated, had to be death; / Denied, had to be death" (Hughes 1997, 118). Myrrha grieves not giving free reign to her insufferable desire. Like Iokaste (towards her son Oedipus) and Phaedra (towards her son Hyppolitus), she grieves her precious love which was not allowed to be released and unleashed. The image of the cloven tree stands as a symbol of her defragmentation, disintegration, and decomposition: her soul dies before she would die as a human being. The simile of the split trunk of the tree functions as a trope of the trauma of mourning, loss, and renunciation. Myrrha cannot suffer any longer, deciding that suicide is the only way out, and when she is hindered to commit it, she feels she is left with "less than nothing" (Hughes 1997, 119).

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Pitied and helped by her old nurse, Myrrha finally arrives in her father's incestuous bed. In yet another rhetorical repetition of Pygmalion's words, her old nurse says to the desperate Myrrha: "'have your' – she did not dare say 'father;' she said no more" (Ovid, 1958, 95),[4] as if not uttering the word would maintain Myrrha's "virginity." She gets access to her father's bed on a night when the king's bed is "deprived of his lawful wife" (Ovid, 1958, 95), Queen Cenchreis celebrating the annual festival of Ceres, which means that for nine nights she abstains from her husband's bed. In her mother's absence, she takes her mother's place and sleeps with her father. Michèle Lowrie remarks that Myrrha's opportunity to sleep with her father comes about because her mother is celebrating ritual abstinence from sex in honour of Ceres, and she contrasts maternal abstinence with filial sexual impiety (1993, 51–52). Shawn O'Bryhim notes that Myrrha perceives their incestuous act as a marriage (2008, 190).

In Hughes, their mating is associated with "luxury:" the father welcomes "his own flesh and blood / Into the luxury / Of the royal bed" (Hughes 1997, 125). As Myrrha anticipates at the beginning of her tale, they live "their deepest happiness" (Hughes 1997, 115). In the act, they call each other "father" and "daughter," "So the real crime […] / Let nothing of its wickedness be omitted" (Hughes 1997, 126). Myrrha leaves the king's chamber "crammed" "with his seed" (Hughes 1997, 126), "full of her father, with crime conceived within her womb" (Ovid 1958, 97). Meaningfully, Hughes's text does not name the sinful act, referring to it as "it" and "the same" (they do "it" again, then night after night "the same" [Hughes 1997, 126]).

Upon learning the identity of his lover, Cinyras takes the sword, and Myrrha hardly escapes death (though it is unclear whether he wants to do away with himself or with his daughter). She wanders for nine months, and when she can no longer bear the "burden of her womb" (Ovid 1958, 99) she prays to the gods to be left neither alive nor dead. Her metamorphosis into a tree serves the purpose, place, and space of this in-between world – a limbo –, implying an indefinite, blurred identity, a state of being that allows for passages and simultaneities:

> [T]he earth closed over her legs; roots burst forth from her toes and stretched out on either side the supports of the high trunk; her bones gained strength, and, while the central pith remained the same, her blood changed to sap, her arms to long branches, her fingers to twigs, her skin to hard bark. And now the growing tree had closely bound her heavy womb, had buried her breast and was just covering her neck; but she could not endure the delay and, meeting the rising wood, she sank down and plunged her face in the bark. Though she has lost her old-time feelings with her body, still she

4 Pygmalion prays to Venus: "'I pray to have as wife,' he did not dare add 'my ivory maid,' but said, 'one *like* my ivory maid'" (Ovid 1958, 84; emphasis added).

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> weeps, and the warm drops trickle down from the tree. Even the tears have fame, and the myrrh which distils from the tree-trunk keeps the name of its mistress and will be remembered through all the ages. (Ovid 1958, 99)

Her metamorphosis into a tree is an "ontological exile" from communities of humans both alive and dead (Resinski 2014, 279). Her transformation into a tree is depicted as a response to her request, and it reads as a return to the "anonymous, amorphous stuff from which she came" (Resinski 2014, 279). Her metamorphosis into tree sends her back into Galatea's statue condition: the earth becomes her footing as the earth/stone used to be her great-grandmother's footing. Hughes's lines read: "the earth gripped both her ankles […] Roots forced from beneath her toenails," suggesting that she is reclaimed by "her roots" in the earth – her ancestors, and she becomes, like Galatea, "living statuary on a tree's foundation" (Hughes 1997, 128). Like a statue, her skin changes to rough bark and "the gnarling crust has coffined her swollen womb" (Hughes 1997, 128). Hughes's coffin metaphor buries the child in her womb as well as the mother-to-be whose whole body is subject to the "burial" of the tree bark. Myrrha as a human is dead but her in-between tree body gives birth to the child conceived in "pietas perverted" (Nagle 1983, 311). Myrrha weeps away her human life and keeps dripping tears – as a myrrh tree: "warm drops ooze from her rind" (Hughes 1997, 128). Her "tears" might also be read as the tears crying in remembrance of her sinful passion: "To this day they [the tears of the tree] are known by her name – Myrrh" (Hughes 1997, 128). The ooze of the tree commemorates the tragic fate of the daughter who fell in love with her father. Her metamorphosis into a tree is a result of father's and daughter's transgression: as the father *plants* his *seed* into her, she cannot help but turn into a plant herself. Out of the seed planted in her womb a tree grows, reaching into the earth – her sinful incestuous ancestry – with its roots. The plant then bears its fruit; out of the "pregnant tree," the "misbegotten child," the beautiful Adonis, is born: "like a woman in agony, the tree bends itself, groans oft, and is wet with falling tears. [. . .] The tree cracked open, the bark was rent asunder, and it gave forth its living burden, a wailing baby-boy" (Ovid 1958, 101). Out of this – according to the laws – most sinful, most unnatural love and at the same time most natural love – according to Myrrha –, beauty is born: Adonis, the most beautiful boy whom even Venus cannot help falling in love with. As if nature justified the naturalness of Cinyras and Myrrha's joining, what is born of their love is no freak, no monster but beauty itself. By being doomed to fall in love with the mortal Adonis, Venus too is punished for fulfilling Pygmalion's wish of transforming the ivory statue into flesh and blood.

Ovid's power and the overwhelming quality of his work stand in daring to face up to and tackle the taboo of passionate love between father and daughter. Myrrha's story (in Ovid's and Hughes's versions) considers this love natural, and it says yes

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to this love deemed by the law sinful and unnatural and, most importantly, by this, it redefines what is human saying passionate love for one's parent is also human – a possible, thinkable, valid feeling. Like Phaedra's story, which considers the idea of passionate love between mother and son, Myrrha faces up to – cannot help accepting – her passion for her father. Unlike Oedipus who does not know he fell in love with his own mother, Myrrha knows very well whom she loves, and after an unaccomplished suicide attempt she faces it. Like Phaedra, she embraces an emotion, a love that is culturally foul and forbidden, allowing and pleading who should it be first and foremost that one falls in love with if not one's parent (or one's child). Learning it is his mother he made love to, Oedipus blinds himself. Knowing she made love to her father, Myrrha prays to be no longer human, and she transforms into a myrrh tree forever crying away her fate. The question of the difference in their reactions – maiming and metamorphosis – remains to be the subject of further consideration. Myrrha's passion stretches the limits of what is human, and her physical metamorphosis is partly her punishment for trespassing the boundaries, but her metamorphosis also allegorizes her transgression. Her transformation is the metaphor of her crisis, and her metamorphosed form becomes the metaphor of her essence. Leonard Barkan says that the essence of metamorphosis lies in the fact that it reveals the essence of something; the essence/nature of something is to be found in its form (Barkan qtd. in Bényei 2013, 17). Myrrha's essence (deciphered from her myrrh tree form) would be her never-ending sorrow and pain in consequence of her renounced love and of her renounced human form. In a way, the child conceived from this love validates her transgression: the child lives on even in her tree body, in her non-human form, and Myrrha feels human pain upon giving birth from her tree body. Her metamorphosis is this limbo state, the "third way, neither wholly dead / Nor painfully alive" (Hughes 1997, 127). The power of Myrrha's story is that it redefines humanness in its liminality, and her tree-state is the bodily limit of her subjectivity.

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