

## NOTES AND DISCUSSIONS/NOTES DE LECTURE

### THE DATE OF THE *CULEX*

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ALTHOUGH THERE ARE STILL BELIEVERS, the spuriousness of the *Culex* is by and large taken for granted today.<sup>1</sup> Here I want to add a single argument that will reinforce the *communis opinio* that the work is not Vergil's and also add some evidence for the dating.

Among the many trees enumerated in the *Culex*'s "catalogue" (123–147) there appears the transformed heroine Phyllis:<sup>2</sup>

*posterius cui Demophoon aeterna reliquit  
perfidiam lamentandi mala—perfide multis,  
perfide Demophoon et nunc deflende puellis* (131–133)

This is the earliest extant reference to the metamorphosis of Phyllis. In fact, only a few other sources attest this myth, all late and none giving evidence of derivation from early classical writings.<sup>3</sup> We especially miss her transformation in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In fact, Servius (*ad Ecl.* 5.10) ends his account of Phyllis' transformation with these words, *sic Ovidius in Metamorphoseon libris*, an error which is clearly the result of his natural, almost instinctual, assumption that Ovid must have included this tale in his work. Why then is there no reference in the *Metamorphoses* to this myth, in spite of Ovid's obvious affection for the story of Phyllis (e.g., *Her.* 2; *AA* 2.353–354, 3.37–38, 459–460; *RA* 55–56, 591–592)? Indeed, on two occasions he mentions an alternative conclusion to the myth in which the trees near Phyllis' grave mourn her (*AA* 3.38, *RA* 606; so too Hyginus

I am indebted to Professor E. J. Kenney for his helpful reading of this note. I also record here my indebtedness to my late colleague, Professor R. P. Oliver, with whom I had valuable discussions about the *Culex* many years ago.

<sup>1</sup>For a detailed survey of the *status quaestionis*, see Most 1987. Most's own argument is interesting and suggestive, if not quite as "objective" as he implies. For a recent discussion, see Gall 1999: 253–267.

<sup>2</sup>I assume, as I think all scholars have assumed, that lines 131–133, despite the difficulties of text and interpretation, do refer to Phyllis now altered into a tree. This seems the natural way to take the lines and is supported by the juxtaposition of the transformed *Heliades* and perhaps by the cry *perfide multis* (if we take these words as "Phyllis'" lament, not as an apostrophe by the poet). For, while trees are not in the habit of speaking, a tree that was once a human being might well be conceived of so doing.

<sup>3</sup>To be sure, the same could be said of quite a few of the transformations in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. For Phyllis, see schol. Pers. 1.34; Serv. *ad Ecl.* 5.10; *Myth. Vat.* 1.59, 2.214; Theodulus *Ecl.* 109–112. For a later version apparently drawn from Servius or his source, see Schol. Bern. *ad Ecl.* 5.10 (Hagen 1867: 785) ap. crit.

*Fab.* 59). The answer, I suspect, is that when Ovid wrote the *Metamorphoses* the story of the transformed Phyllis did not yet exist.

Similarities between the *Culex's* catalogue and Ovid's in the *Metamorphoses* (10.90–108) indicate that one probably depends on the other. Not only do the two list many of the same trees (which was perhaps inevitable), but each associates the trees with Orpheus. Each includes transformed trees, the *Culex* mentioning Phyllis, Ovid not. If Ovid is the imitator, why does he leave out Phyllis (= almond tree) alone of the trees in the *Culex's* catalogue? Moreover, if he knew the *Culex* with its allusion to the metamorphosis of Phyllis, it becomes the more inexplicable why, in all his accounts of Phyllis, he never makes the slightest reference to this aspect of the myth. If, however, we assume that the *Culex* postdates Ovid's work, then the occurrence of this story here but not in Ovid is plausibly explained. The myth did not yet exist when Ovid wrote.

We may offer a tentative reconstruction in broad terms of the stages of the Phyllis story. 1) Phyllis was betrayed by Demophoon, who left her and never returned. She committed suicide. 2) A tree motif was introduced (whether trees around her grave or the tree from which she hanged herself), as well as an aetiology Phyllis/Phylla (perhaps Callimachean). 3) Phyllis herself becomes the tree (to improve the aetiology?) and the return of Demophoon is introduced.<sup>4</sup> This last development may have taken place in the first half of the first century A.D. and may explain the romantic interest in the myth which Persius attacks (1.34). The tale took on a maudlin and melodramatic twist, à la Romeo and Juliet, as the lover, returning only to find his beloved dead, must be satisfied by loving her in a strange and unfulfilling way, by embracing the tree that was once his girl.

Be this as it may, I would in sum suggest that when Ovid wrote the *Metamorphoses*, there existed no story of the transformation of Phyllis and that the allusion to it in the *Culex* establishes this poem as post-Ovidian.<sup>5</sup> The reference in the *Culex*, however, is so casual as to indicate that the story was familiar enough to be immediately recognized. Therefore, the *Culex* itself must be somewhat later than the mythical innovation. Perhaps we will not go far astray in assigning the work to the period 20–40 A.D., the latter limit to allow a generation for the poem

<sup>4</sup>Whether these two turns were introduced together and, if not, which came first seems impossible to determine. The *Culex* apparently offers the transformation without the return of Demophoon, but Junius Philagyrus (*ad Ecl.* 5.10) and, following him, the Schol. Bern. (*ad Ecl.* 5.10) present the return of Demophoon without the metamorphosis (although the behaviour of the tree suggests human sensitivity). We should note that Demophoon's return also appears unknown to Ovid and Propertius, whose exclusive emphasis on his perfidy (Prop. 2.24.43–44) suggests they knew no version wherein he was delayed but finally returned. The details of the myth which Cremutius Cordus knew we cannot recover from Pliny's brief mention (*H.N.* 16.108).

<sup>5</sup>Or at least post-*Metamorphoses*. The role of Ovid's fellow-poet Tuscus (*Pont.* 4.16.20) in the development of the Phyllis-myth is impossible to delineate. We know nothing of the poet or the poem.

to win acceptance as Vergilian, since Lucan, Martial, and Statius all considered the poem Vergil's work.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See Suet. *Vita Lucani*; Mart. 8.56.19–20; Stat. *Silv.* 2.7.73–74.