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PYRAMUS AND THISBE IN SHAKESPEARE AND OVID

A Midsummer Night's Dream and *Metamorphoses* 4.1–166

THE OVIDIAN FRAMEWORK

The tale of Pyramus and Thisbe in Book 4 of the *Metamorphoses* comes within a group of stories set in Boeotia. The previous book begins with Cadmus and ends with Pentheus (the Theban king who was so horribly punished for resisting Dionysus). Book 4 itself begins with the daughters of Minyas, king of Orchomenus. These girls also offended Dionysus; for instead of joining in his worship they stayed at home telling stories. And they too were punished: as dusk fell, the scent of saffron and myrrh filled the air, wild music was heard, vines sprouted from their looms, and they were suddenly turned into bats.

Within this Boeotian setting we have three love-stories told by the daughters of Minyas. The first is that of Pyramus and Thisbe, the second (in three related parts) is about the Sun, and the third concerns the Carian water-nymph Salmacis. The girl who told of Pyramus and Thisbe[1] had other stories which she could have recounted. She thought first of the Babylonian goddess Derceto (44–6) who was changed into a fish;[2] then of Derceto's daughter (Semiramis) who became a bird; and then of an unnamed nymph who turned boys into fishes and eventually became a fish herself. But she settled finally on the story of how the white mulberry became red. Of these tales three, and possibly all four, are Babylonian.[3] The oriental setting is mentioned explicitly in v. 56: Pyramus was the most handsome young man and Thisbe the loveliest of the girls *quas Oriens habuit*. So at the very beginning we learn that Ovid has in mind an eastern story of youth and beauty.

To approach our next point we must return to Semiramis. In so far as she is a historical figure Semiramis is to be identified with the Assyrian queen Sammu-ramat, a woman of Aramaic descent who rose from the royal harem to become the wife of King Shamshi-Adad the fifth (824–810 B.C.) and the mother of King Adad-Nirari the third. After her death legend supplanted history, and by 400 B.C., when Ctesias was at the Persian court, Semiramis had become the daughter of

Derceto the Syrian goddess of love and war – the counterpart of the Babylonian Ishtar and the Phoenician Astarte. According to the account of Ctesias, as preserved in Diodorus Siculus 2, the baby girl was exposed at birth but was protected by doves and then brought up by the keeper of the royal herds who called her Semiramis – a name derived from the Syrian word for 'doves'. As a young woman she captivated the world conqueror Ninus (the mythical founder of Ninevah) and became his wife. When he died she built him a modest memorial in the form of a tomb one mile high and one mile wide. After gaining this constructional experience she went on to found the city of Babylon, and then embarked on a long series of travels and conquests. Eventually, after an unsuccessful expedition against India, she disappeared. Some say she turned into a dove. As she had the habit of murdering all her lovers a spider might have been a more suitable metamorphosis.

One more phase remained in the career of this remarkable woman. In a sentimental novel, which some scholars place as early as 100 B.C., she appears along with her cousin Ninus.[4] The three surviving fragments show that, although he is already an illustrious general, Ninus is still a lad of seventeen; Semiramis is only thirteen. The two are very much in love, and Ninus pleads with his aunt Derkeia for permission to marry her daughter (Derkeia being the goddess Derceto, who like the other two has dwindled into a cosy bourgeois figure). Puerile as it seems to have been, the novel must have travelled far beyond its place of origin. For, while the fragments came to light in Egypt, an illustration of the story has been found in a mosaic at Antioch dating from the second century A.D.[5]

However, the only Semiramis that we meet in Ovid is the *grande amoureuse* described by Ctesias.[6] And this has a bearing on our topic, for when Thisbe is called *Babylonia Thisbe* (99) and is described as living

> ubi dicitur altam
> coctilibus muris cinxisse Semiramis urbem (57–8)

she is thereby linked with a city of romance and adventure.

THE STORY

The girl chose the story, we are told, because it was not well known – 'quoniam uulgaris fabula non est' (53). *When* was the story not well known? The answer ought to be 'in the legendary period of Orcho-

menus' past', in which case the assertion could naturally claim no historical authority. Did Ovid, then (or his source), simply want to provide a plausible reason for the girl's choice? Perhaps. But there is no reason to think that the tale of Pyramus and Thisbe would have been any *less* familiar than the other stories which are passed over. The phrase, therefore, will not bear close examination. But in regard to the Roman readership one may perhaps conclude that Ovid would have avoided making the statement if the story had in fact been familiar in his own time. If so, it looks as if the situation altered after the appearance of the *Metamorphoses*; for in the fifty years following Ovid's death the suicide of Thisbe became a fairly common subject of Pompeian wall-painting.[7]

The structure is a simple threefold scheme of separation, decision, and union, the relative proportions being roughly 2, 1 and 6. At the outset we are told that the young couple's love has grown from a childhood acquaintance (59–70); it is reciprocal (62); and it aims at marriage (60). But in Lysander's famous words 'the course of true love never did run smooth' (*MND* 1.1.134). In all great love stories there must be some kind of barrier that keeps the lovers apart and tests their devotion, whether it is a family feud (as in *Romeo and Juliet*), religion (as with Eloise and Abelard), a stretch of water (as with Hero and Leander), or just a wall. The wall, of course, is the physical extension of the parents' veto. We are not given reasons for this opposition; Ovid simply says 'sed uetuere patres' (61). But the proximity of boy and girl makes their separation the more tantalizing. As Ovid points out, it is precisely the *communis paries* (66) that keeps them apart. Another consequence of the fathers' opposition is that the love of Pyramus and Thisbe must be kept secret; they can only communicate by signs (63). Yet this very secrecy makes their feelings more intense:

> quoque magis tegitur tectus magis aestuat ignis. (64)

Passion heightens perception; for they alone spy a chink in the wall (68) and use it to exchange endearments.

Then comes the decision: they will meet outside the town at night. It is a dangerous plan, especially for the girl; but love gives her courage (96). After reaching the spot Thisbe is frightened by a lion, and as she runs away drops her shawl. When Pyramus sees it, he is overwhelmed with guilt: he ought never to have involved her in such danger, and having done so he should certainly not have been late (109ff.). He plunges his sword into his body, calling on the lions to tear his corpse to pieces. In the cave Thisbe is still afraid, but she is more afraid of

letting Pyramus down. She emerges and finds him at the point of death; whereupon her reaction is exactly the same as his – she takes the blame (*causa* in v. 152) and resolves to follow him. Uttering a final prayer that they may be buried together she falls on his sword. And so the lovers achieve union at last, but only in death.

So we have a tale from the east of violent death in a forest by moonlight; a tale of two beautiful young people whose love is mutual and equal and aims at marriage, but is frustrated and forced into concealment; a love which involves all the faculties, overcomes fear, is full of tenderness and concern, and is faithful unto death. I have summarized the familiar story in these terms, because it has sometimes been stated by scholars who should have known better that romantic love was unknown in classical antiquity.[8] If true, this would be a fact of momentous importance, and it would greatly strengthen the case of those who regard the ancient world as desperately foreign. But it is not true, as the story of Pyramus and Thisbe amply demonstrates.

But now we must draw a distinction. If Pyramus and Thisbe are romantic lovers, it does not follow that Ovid can here be labelled as a romantic poet. For combined with the elements noted above are certain features of style which suggest that Ovid is not continuously involved with the lovers' feelings. Consider first such expressions as 'sed uetuere patres: quod non potuere uetare' (where *potuere* rhymes with *uetuere* while half echoing the sounds of *patres*), 'hinc Thisbe, Pyramus illinc' (where the separation implied in *hinc/illinc* is reinforced by the chiasmus), 'tutae . . . murmure blanditiae minimo transire solebant' (where a tiny whisper passes safely through a tiny chink), 'lux . . . praecipitatur aquis, et aquis nox exit ab isdem' (which elegantly conveys the alternating pattern of day and night), '"una duos" inquit "nox perdet amantes"' (where at such an extreme moment Pyramus still manages to shape a sequence of adjective adjective noun noun, in which the adjectives present a numerical antithesis). The marvellous neatness and dexterity of such phrases remind us we are still reading the author of the *Amores*. Or again, take those beautiful lines

> oraque buxo
> pallidiora gerens exhorruit aequoris instar,
> quod tremit, exigua cum summum stringitur aura. (134–6)
> *Her face paler than boxwood, she trembled like the sea which shivers when its surface is ruffled by a faint breeze.*

Beautiful; but at this critical moment does it not imply a slight distance between the poet and his subject?

The disconcerting lines which compare Pyramus' blood to water spurting from a burst pipe (121–4) seem to be a less successful instance of the same kind. If there *is* a fault on Ovid's side, it is surely better to assume a small lapse of stylistic judgement than to imagine that the poet is inviting us to laugh at the stricken Pyramus.[9] It is worth remembering, however, that not everyone appears to have found the simile absurd. Although Gower left it out, Chaucer took it in his stride:

> The blood out of the wounde as brode sterte
> As water, when the conduit broken is.[10]

And though Shakespeare could easily have turned it into something ludicrous in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* he did not take the chance. On the other hand, in *Titus Andronicus* after alluding to the death of Pyramus (2.3.231–2) he goes on to describe the blood coming from the mouth and nostrils of the unfortunate Lavinia (2.4.22ff.); and in doing so he uses a rather similar idea:

> notwithstanding all this loss of blood,
> As from a conduit with three issuing spouts.

So while Shakespeare disregards the Ovidian simile in his burlesque he does draw on it quite seriously in a tragic context.

Finally, there is the address to the wall:

> 'inuide' dicebant 'paries, quid amantibus obstas? . . .' (73)
> *'You mean old wall', they would say, 'why do you stand in the way of people in love? It wouldn't have cost you much to let us embrace properly; or if that's too much you might at least have opened wide enough for us to kiss.'*

Then, anxious to be fair, they add: 'But we're not ungrateful; we admit it's through you that our words find their way to loving ears.' Or, to put it more briefly, thank you very much for being cracked. Surely this is deliberate. Like all lovers, Pyramus and Thisbe are a little absurd; they live in a private world. But it is precisely their remoteness from ordinary life – the drab world where unglamorous problems exist and are dealt with by common sense and calculation – that is their glory. Ovid knew this very well, and so did Shakespeare. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* bears ample testimony to the magic of love – and to its silliness. And if in that play Pyramus and Thisbe are used mainly to illustrate the silliness, we can at least say that Shakespeare was developing a hint provided by Ovid himself.

Before we leave the *Metamorphoses* three points deserve attention

which, though very small, yet illustrate Ovid's subtlety as a narrative poet. In vv. 93–5 Thisbe cleverly opens the door in the darkness, slips out without the knowledge of her family, and covering her face makes her way to the tomb. The phrase 'adopertaque uultum' is a graphic touch, vividly realizing the idea of stealth. But it is more than that, for it makes us aware, however dimly, that she is wearing a shawl over her head. In v. 90 we read that the mulberry tree was close to a cool spring – 'gelido contermina fonti'. It is the kind of detail which one easily skims over as a piece of conventional scene-painting. But this is the spring which later attracts the lion and so precipitates the tragedy. Mention has already been made of blood. As there are over a dozen references one wonders how Ovid avoids monotony. He does so, it seems, not just by varying the grammatical form of each expression but by directing attention now to the movement (*emicat* in v. 121), now to the temperature (*tepebat* in v. 163), now to the different colours of blood, whether red (as implied by *recenti* in v. 96) or black – the darker colour of clotted blood being naturally assimilated to the shade of mourning (*atram* in v. 125 and v. 165, *pullos et luctibus aptos* in v. 160). He also varies the meaning of *caedes*, which signifies the blood of dead cattle in v. 97, the blood of Pyramus in vv. 125 and 163, and death in general at v. 160.

OVIDIAN INFLUENCE IN 'A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM'

Before we come to Shakespeare's treatment of Pyramus and Thisbe it may be useful to notice some more general signs of Ovidian influence in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This can best be done by recalling the main structural elements of the play. The outer frame (*a*) is represented by the court of Theseus on the eve of his marriage to Hippolyta.[11] Within that we have (*b*) the love-intrigue of the two couples Hermia/Lysander and Helena/Demetrius, (*c*) the quarrel of Oberon and Titania, and (*d*) the amateur dramatics of Quince and company.

(*a*) When we first meet Theseus in 1.1 we are told that he is 'Duke Theseus' of Athens, that he has defeated the Amazons and their queen in battle but now intends to marry Hippolyta

> with pomp, with triumph, and with revelling.

All these details are found in Chaucer's poem *The Knight's Tale* (1–12) and either less clearly or not at all in Plutarch's *Life of Theseus*.[12] Yet Shakespeare had certainly read the biography too, for in 2.1.78–80

there is a reference to Theseus' affaires with Perigouna, Aegle, Ariadne and Antiopa – all of whom are mentioned by Plutarch and none by Chaucer; moreover, in 5.1.47 we hear of Theseus' kinship with Hercules, which is also recorded by Plutarch alone. In 4.1.109ff. Theseus and Hippolyta go hunting, as they do in *The Knight's Tale* 825ff. But Hippolyta's memories of her hunting with Cadmus in Crete and Theseus' description of his hounds are based on Ovid. The Shakespearian lines run as follows:

> HIPP. I was with Hercules and Cadmus once,
> When in a wood of Crete they bay'd the bear
> With hounds of Sparta: . . .
> THES. My hounds are bred out of the Spartan kind,
> So flew'd, so sanded; . . .
> a cry more tuneable
> Was never holla'd to, nor cheer'd with horn
> In Crete, in Sparta, nor in Thessaly.

First, what was Cadmus doing in Crete? To understand what has happened we have to look at the beginning of *Metamorphoses* 3, where the abducted Europa arrives in Crete (2) and her brother Cadmus is told to search for her (3–4). A hasty glance might easily miss the fact that Cadmus himself is *not* in Crete but back home in Sidon. Later in the book, after Cadmus has founded Thebes, his grandson Actaeon goes hunting. One of his dogs is Cretan and another Spartan:

> Gnosius Ichnobates, Spartana gente Melampus. (208)

Others are from a Cretan father and a Spartan mother:

> et patre Dictaeo sed matre Laconide nati
> Labros et Agriodus et acutae uocis Hylactor. (233–4)

Labros is the Greek for 'furious', but Golding mistakenly derived it from the Latin *labrosus* 'having large lips' and so translated 'large flewed hound'. This in turn accounts for Shakespeare's 'flew'd', which means 'having pendulous chaps'. Shakespeare's 'sanded' probably comes from Golding's 'Tawnie' (260), which does not correspond to anything in Ovid but may represent a guess at the meaning of Asbolus (218) – another Greek name, which means 'soot'.[13]

Towards the end of the play (5.1.43) Theseus is asked to choose what performance he would like to see from a list of shows available. First there is 'The battle with the Centaurs' – an event in which the Duke himself had taken part. This he turns down – understandably, since

the story told how the wedding-reception of his friend Pirithous had been turned into a bloody shambles (*Met.* 12.210ff.). The reason which Theseus actually gives for his decision is that Hippolyta has already heard the story in a version which made Hercules the central figure:

> that have I told my love
> In glory of my kinsman Hercules.[14]

The next show offered is

> The riot of the tipsy Bacchanals,
> Tearing the Thracian singer in their rage.

That, of course, is the story of Orpheus' death as related at the beginning of *Met.* 11. The third show is a non-Ovidian satire. The fourth is Pyramus and Thisbe, and that is what Theseus selects.

(*b*) In the context of the love-intrigue there is only one Ovidian story which need be mentioned at present, viz that of Apollo and Daphne. In 1.1.168 Hermia declares her loyalty to Lysander, swearing

> by Cupid's strongest bow,
> By his best arrow with the golden head.

This is the arrow which Cupid shot at Apollo (*Met.* 1.469ff.). The actual phrase probably came from Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*, which Shakespeare had apparently seen in manuscript:

> Thence flew Love's arrow with the golden head. (1.161)[15]

Later, in 2.1.231, Helena sees herself taking part in a chase in which the Ovidian roles have been reversed and she, as Daphne, pursues the reluctant Demetrius/Apollo:

> Run when you will, the story shall be changed;
> Apollo flies, and Daphne holds the chase.

(*c*) The fairies have diverse origins. Puck, or Robin Goodfellow, is from Warwickshire folklore (though it seems that Shakespeare had also read of him in *The Discoveries of Witchcraft* by Reginald Scot, published in 1584); Oberon appeared in the romance *Huon of Bordeaux* and also in Green's *James IV*; Titania, in name at least, is from Ovid. But Shakespeare made some important changes, of which the most relevant here concerns the quasi-Olympian pattern of their relationships.[16] Thus Oberon and Titania, like Jupiter and Juno, preside over the fortunes of certain chosen mortals (2.1.74–6). Like Jupiter, Oberon has an eye for attractive girls (2.1.64ff.); Titania has a touch of Juno's

jealousy, and (although the ownership has been switched) her pretty Indian page-boy may well be a reminiscence of Ganymede. When she and Oberon are at odds, the effect is felt in the world of nature (2.1.88ff.).[17] Finally, Puck is both a messenger and a prankster like Mercury. All these changes are, in a sense, Ovidian.

(*d*) In the performance of the mechanicals' play (5.1) 'Pyramus' compares his loyalty to that of Limander (200), that is, of course, Leander, who is the subject of *Heroides* 18 and 19.[18] And shortly afterwards (202–3) the two lovers compare themselves to Shafalus and Procrus, i.e. Cephalus and Procris, whose story is told in *Met.* 7.694ff.

Such allusions, then, occurring in all the major divisions of the play, help to create a general Ovidian ambience.

THE MECHANICALS' PRODUCTION

Shakespeare, as everyone knows, used Ovid in several ways – in allusions, in Latin quotations,[19] and in references to Ovid himself.[20] Much the most interesting cases, however, are those in which an Ovidian story has been woven into the fabric of a play. A good example would be the use of the Philomela myth in *Titus Andronicus* (and again in *Cymbeline*). But the most famous instance is undoubtedly the burlesque of Pyramus and Thisbe in *A Midsummer Night's Dream.*

We start with the casting scene in 1.2. Here, from the very beginning, Quince the producer is eclipsed by Bottom. No sooner has he shouted 'Is all our company here?' than Bottom butts in and advises him to call a roll 'generally, man by man, according to the scrip'. Quince is just about to comply when Bottom interrupts again: 'First, good Peter Quince, say what the play treats on; then read the names of the actors, and so grow to a point.' Quince gives the title: 'The most lamentable comedy, and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisbe', at which Bottom remarks: 'A very good piece of work, I assure you.' This implies, quite falsely, that he knows what the play is about; for when given the part of Pyramus he has to ask 'What is Pyramus? a lover, or a tyrant?' On hearing that the main character kills himself most gallantly for love, Bottom at once has visions of his own histrionic powers: 'Let the audience look to their eyes! I will move storms, I will condole in some measure.' Had Pyramus been a tyrant that too would have been well within Bottom's scope: 'I could play Ercles rarely, or a part to tear a cat in, to make all split.' When the part of Thisbe is assigned to Flute, Bottom again intervenes: 'An [if] I may hide my face, let me play Thisbe too. I'll speak in a monstrous little voice "Thisne,

Thisne!" ' The same happens again when the moronic Snug is given the lion's part, which is nothing but roaring: 'Let me play the lion too', pleads Bottom. Quince hastily points out that 'Pyramus is a sweet-faced man; a proper man, as one shall see in a summer's day; a most lovely, gentleman-like man', and therefore can be played by no one but Bottom. Thanks to this blatant appeal to Bottom's vanity, arrangements are allowed to proceed. In this section, then, Shakespeare not only gives us the cast of the play but also reveals the exuberant self-confidence of his main comic character.

The mechanicals next meet at rehearsal (3.1). Here it is worth looking a little more closely to see what has been taken from Ovid. Of the wall and the opportunities it afforded for comic business something will be said presently; but one detail may be mentioned here. According to Ovid, Pyramus and Thisbe used to address the wall when they had taken up their positions (*constiterant*)

> inque uices fuerat captatus *anhelitus oris*. (72)

What does this mean? One idea, adopted by the Loeb translator, is that the lovers heard each other breathing. That was also Chaucer's view:

> Upon that o syde of the wal stood he,
> And on that other syde stood Tisbe,
> The swote soun of other to receyve.
> (*The Legend of Good Women* 750–3)

Golding, however, wrote:

> Now as at one side Pyramus and Thisbe on the tother
> Stood often drawing one of them the pleasant breath from
> other. (89–90)

Here the combination of 'drawing' with 'pleasant' suggests the idea of scent rather than hearing; and that is almost certainly the right interpretation. For although *anhelitus* can mean 'panting', we are not told that the two youngsters arrived breathless after dashing down the garden; in fact *constiterant* points the other way. More positively, in the *Ars amatoria* (1.521) when Ovid is warning his readers against the hazards of bad breath he says:

> nec male odorati sit tristis *anhelitus oris*.

So Golding was right. Apart from being more poetically arresting this gave Shakespeare an opening for a joke:

> BOTTOM: Thisby, the flowers have odious savours sweet, –
> QUINCE: Odorous, odorous![21]
> BOTTOM: – odorous savours sweet:
> So hath thy breath, my dearest Thisby dear.

Another joke, of comparable subtlety, is extracted from the name of King Ninus, who is mentioned just once in Ovid's narrative (*ad busta Nini* in v. 88). This time the speaker is Flute, taking the part of Thisbe:

> I'll meet thee, Pyramus, at Ninny's tomb. (102)
> QUINCE: 'Ninus' tomb', man.

But the correction is of no avail. At the performance (5.1.270) Flute enters, stares around him, and starts to speak:

> This is old Ninny's tomb. Where is my love?

The point was the same in Shakespeare's day as in ours: 'ninny' meant a nit-wit. And the joke implies, I think, that Shakespeare had the Latin (as well as a translation) in front of him. For 'Ninny's tomb' has rather more point for someone construing *ad busta Nini* than for one who is relying solely on 'Ninus tumb', which is Golding's rendering. Because it is so close to the Latin, the phrase may in fact preserve an Elizabethan schoolboy joke.

The last reference has taken us to the performance in Act 5, and that is where the comic possibilities of the wall are most fully exploited. Shakespeare's effects range from the mild facetiousness of 'walls are so wilful to hear without warning' (5.1.212–13) – a reference to the proverb 'walls have ears' – to verbal fooling like

> I see a voice: now will I to the chink,
> To spy an I can hear my Thisbe's face (195–6)

and

> Show me thy chink to blink through with mine eyne. (179)

These last words lead to the broad humour of the v-sign, as Wall holds up his fingers – a gesture politely acknowledged by 'Pyramus':

> Thanks, courteous wall:[22] Jove shield thee well for this!

Broader still are Thisbe's lines:

> My cherry lips have often kiss'd thy stones (193)[23]

and

> I kiss the wall's hole, not your lips at all. (205)

Again, when Pyramus exclaims

> Curs'd be thy stones for thus deceiving me!

Theseus remarks that the wall should return the curse. Bottom cannot resist setting him right, even though it involves stepping out of character:

> No, in truth, sir, he should not. 'Deceiving me' is Thisby's cue.

We saw above how Ovid's single reference to Ninus was elaborated by the playwright. Another feature mentioned only once in Ovid is the wood: the lion returns there after drinking ('dum redit in siluas' in v. 103). Shakespeare, too, says little about the wood; it is referred to very briefly in 1.2.105 ('meet me in the palace wood') and again in 3.1.3–4 ('this green plot shall be our stage, this hawthorn-brake our tiring house'). But we do not *need* anything more explicit, since that is where the rehearsal is taking place. The moonlight too is referred to only once by Ovid: Thisbe sees the lion *ad lunae radios* (99). For Shakespeare moonlight is so central that it is given the status of a character. As the producer says: 'one must come in with a bush of thorns and a lanthorn, and say he comes to disfigure, or to present, the person of Moonshine' (3.1.63ff.).

Night, which is mentioned several times by Ovid, is not brought on stage by Shakespeare, but in 5.1.172ff. it does receive from the hero a passionate apostrophe:

> O grim-look'd night! O night with hue so black!
> O night which ever art when day is not!
> O night! O night! alack, alack, alack!
> I fear my Thisbe's promise is forgot.

This is rather odd. In Ovid it is *morning* when the lovers plan their elopement (81ff.); there is no mention of any earlier promise of Thisbe's, nor is Pyramus in any way alarmed (why should he be?). It almost looks as if the hack script-writer who is supposed to have supplied the mechanicals' piece has confusedly imagined Pyramus in the wood at night awaiting Thisbe's arrival and has then transferred that scene to the garden, where it makes very little dramatic sense.

As for the blood, which recurs as a motif in Ovid's story, Shakespeare reserves it for the performance in Act 5, where it is given full weight in Quince's prologue:

> Whereat, with blade, with bloody blameful blade,
> He bravely broached his *boiling* bloody breast.

This is another passage which suggests that Shakespeare had read the original Latin; for Ovid writes:

> demisit in ilia ferrum,
> nec mora, *feruenti* moriens e uulnere traxit.
> *He plunged the blade into his entrails, and immediately, as he died, he drew it from the* boiling *wound.*

Golding merely says 'bleeding wound'.

Taking these points together we can see that the wall which separated the lovers, the moonlight which shone on their death, the royal tomb, the surrounding forest, and the shedding of blood – all features which helped to make Ovid's a romantic story – have been fastened on by Shakespeare and turned into farce. It is, of course, excellent fun. And yet, though it may have cast ridicule on some intermediate poems and sketches on the same theme,[24] it did not destroy the original. In fact non-classical readers would probably admit that in spite of all the fooling some sense of the pathos of Ovid's story still comes through.

RAMIFICATIONS

So far we have considered the tale of Pyramus and Thisbe only in relation to the mechanicals' production. But it also has wider and more subtle implications. First, as presented by the mechanicals, the story parodies the relationship of Lysander and Hermia. By providing, as it were, a distorted mirror-image of romantic love Shakespeare complicates and deepens an effect which on its own might be too sweet and sentimental. At the same time, for all its buffoonery, the production gently reminds us of the tragic possibilities of romantic love, especially when it defies parental opposition. (One thinks naturally of *Romeo and Juliet.*) The parodic function of Pyramus and Thisbe has been mentioned by various writers, but as far as I know the details of the correspondence have not been fully explored. Moreover, it appears that the influence of Ovid's story is not confined to Lysander and Hermia but makes itself felt (with varying degrees of strength) throughout the play.

In the opening scene Theseus is not only a powerful prince; he is a lover yearning for his marriage-day:

but O! methinks how slow
This old moon wanes; she lingers my desires. (1.1.3–4)

Hippolyta answers:

(*a*) Four days (*b*) will quickly steep themselves in night;
(*b*) Four nights will quickly dream away the time . . .

In Ovid, once the couple has decided to elope, the day seems to pass all too slowly – 'lux tarde discedere uisa' (91); then

(*a*) lux . . .
(*b*) praecipitatur aquis et (*b*) aquis nox exit ab isdem.

the day quickly steeps itself in the water and from the same water night emerges.

The form and phrasing, though not identical, are similar enough to justify comment, especially when taken in conjunction with the other more general Ovidian features of love, yearning for marriage (cf. 5.1.33–7 and 39–41), and moonlight. Theseus and Hippolyta, however, do not enter the wood until dawn and so do not participate in the dream.

We now move on to Hermia and Lysander. At the very beginning we hear of a barrier to their marriage: Egeus has forbidden it ('sed uetuere patres'). But there is the further complication that Hermia is being pressed to marry someone else. She asks the penalty of disobedience – very courageously: 'I know not by what power I am made bold' (59). This sounds like an unconscious echo of Ovid's Thisbe: 'audacem faciebat amor' (96) – a phrase rendered by Golding as 'Love made her bold'. In answer Hermia is told that if she refuses to comply she must either die or else enter a nunnery. Faced with this impasse, Lysander says:

If thou lov'st me then,
Steal forth thy *father's house* to-morrow night,
And in the wood, a league *without the town*, . . .
There will I stay for thee. (1.1.163ff.)

Golding's translation says that Pyramus and Thisbe resolved

To *steale* out of their *fathers house* and eke the Citie *gate* . . .
They did agree at Ninus Tumb to *meete without the towne*.
(106 and 108)

After gaining Hermia's consent Lysander discloses the plan to Helena:

To-morrow night, when Phoebe doth behold
Her silver visage in the wat'ry glass . . .
Through Athens' *gates* we have devis'd to *steal.*
HERM. And in the wood . . .
There my Lysander and myself shall *meet* (209ff.)

This plan will get Hermia and Lysander into the wood; Demetrius, we are told, will follow (247).

In the next scene Quince decides that the actors must have secrecy for their rehearsal: '*meet* me in the palace wood, a mile *without the town*, by moonlight' (1.2.105ff.). The exact place is 'at the Duke's oak' – a suitably sturdy substitute for Ovid's mulberry tree.[25] If at this point we are inclined to question the relevance of Ovid's story, we need only recall that Bottom and Flute are the stage Pyramus and Thisbe.

With the fairies in 2.1 the Ovidian echoes are naturally much fainter; yet when Oberon and Titania meet in the wood, Oberon's first words are 'Ill met by moonlight' (60). And when, later on, he sends Puck to fetch 'love-in-idleness' he describes it as

a little western flower
Before milk-white, now purple with love's wound (166–7) –

an expression which must surely recall Ovid's mulberry

quae poma alba ferebat
ut nunc nigra ferat contactu sanguinis arbor (51–2)

how the tree which used to bear white fruit now bears black because it has been stained by blood.[26]

Demetrius now enters, upbraiding Helena; and here the parallel is applied to the other pair of lovers:

You do impeach your modesty too much,
To leave the city . . . ('urbis quoque tecta relinquant' in v. 86)
To trust the opportunity of night ('nocte uenires', in v. 111)
And the ill counsel of a desert place
(perhaps a reminiscence of
'neue sit errandum lato spatiantibus aruo' in v. 87
combined with 'in loca plena metus' in v. 111)
With the rich worth of your virginity ('dignissima' in v. 109?).

As Helena continues to follow him, Demetrius utters a threat which represents a variation of the Ovidian theme:

I'll run from thee and hide me in the brakes,[27]
And leave thee to the mercy of wild beasts. (227–8)

In the next scene (2.2) Lysander tries to lie down beside Hermia, saying:

One turf shall serve as pillow for us both;
One heart, one bed, two bosoms, and one troth. (41–2)

This conceit, which is elaborated in the speech that follows, recalls the one/two combination found in Ovid:

'una duos' inquit 'nox perdet amantes' (108)
nunc tegis unius, mox es tectura duorum (159)
quodque rogis superest, una requiescit in urna. (166)

Shortly after, Helena finds Lysander:

But who is here? Lysander! on the ground!
Dead? or asleep? I see no blood, no wound.

How close this is to the Pyramus and Thisbe story can be seen by turning on to 5.1.332–4:

THISBE: Asleep, my love?
What, dead, my dove?
O Pyramus, arise!

We have now followed the characters into the wood, but we have not yet mentioned the factor which precipitates the drama, namely error. In Ovid, ironically, Pyramus and Thisbe arrange to meet at Ninus' tomb in order to avoid one kind of error – that of losing their way:

neue sit errandum lato spatiantibus aruo. (87)

But they do not succeed in avoiding the other kind of error – that of tragic misapprehension. The agent of error is, of course, the lion, which leaves blood-stains on Thisbe's shawl. But the idea is given a further, almost Sophoclean, twist in v. 128 where Thisbe nerves herself to leave the cave 'ne fallat amantem'. Alas, she has already 'deceived' him.[28] In Shakespeare's wood there are two agents of error – Oberon, who squeezes the magic juice onto Titania's eyes, and Puck, who first erroneously squeezes the juice onto Lysander and then, out of sheer mischief, turns Bottom's top into the head of an ass. These actions all lead to the misapprehensions or illusions of love. Such illusions may be said to have started before the beginning of the play: Lysander,

according to Egeus, has 'bewitch'd the bosom' of Hermia (1.1.27). Demetrius, however, is still enthralled by Hermia's beauty: 'he *errs*, doting on Hermia's eyes' (230). Once the lovers enter the wood these illusions give rise to the most delicious complications, which reach their climax in 3.2; and by that time the fairy queen has become enamoured of an ass. The action, with all its intricacy, centres on romantic love – that mysterious phenomenon which gloriously transcends common sense, leading to ecstasy or misery, and sometimes lapses into utter absurdity. Such love can only be assessed by judgement: one asks whether it goes against reason, or has reason behind it to strengthen and endorse it. Both kinds of answers are given at various points in the play. But assessment is one thing and action another. In the play, as in life, the 'reasonable' man cannot always impose his will. In 1.1.57, for instance, Theseus tells Hermia that she must make her love conform to her father's view and happily marry Demetrius:

Your eyes must with his judgement look.

But she is unable to obey. Moreover, we cannot be sure that when a character claims to have reason on his side he is necessarily right. When, for example, in 2.2.115–16, Lysander says to Helena

The will of man is by his reason swayed,
And reason says you are the worthier maid,

he is not using his reason at all; he is under a spell. The dramatist's irony is iridescent. Thus when Puck utters one of the most famous lines in the play: 'Lord, what fools these mortals be!' we feel like retorting 'Quite, and whose fault is that?' Finally, one must bear in mind that the conflict in the play is resolved in the end by redirecting the affections of Demetrius; and this is accomplished not by reason but by magic – the juice is never removed from his eyes. Reason, of course, applauds the result, but the vital agency is irrational.

Others better qualified, however, have studied the illusions of romantic love and their ramifications in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; I would only remark that the germ of the idea was present in Ovid. The crucial difference is that whereas the error of Pyramus is tragic and leads to death, the lovers' errors are comic and lead to eventual reconciliation. In Ovid the concluding ritual is burial:

quodque rogis superest una requiescit in urna (166)

and the heroine dies childless. In Shakespeare the ritual is the comic

ritual of marriage, which promises children and celebrates the continuation of life:

> To the best bride-bed will we,
> Which by us shall blessed be;
> And the issue there create
> Ever shall be fortunate.
> So shall all the couples three
> Ever true in loving be. (5.2.33ff.)

The second kind of illusion is the illusion of the theatre. In general we enter this illusion simply by enjoying the work. But as we watch the casting, rehearsal, and performance of the interlude we surrender to an even more subtle wizardry. For here is the greatest of all dramatists apparently demonstrating in considerable detail how to wreck a play. We must assume, I take it, that Bottom and his friends are in earnest throughout and play the piece absolutely straight. Such an assumption raises a question which I have not seen answered,[29] but it does seem necessary to one's whole conception of the mechanicals, and without it the good-natured condescension of Theseus and the rather less good-natured condescension of Philostrate and the others no longer make sense. Peter Quince, therefore, and his friends, quite unconsciously, set about the self-stultifying task of presenting a drama *without* dramatic illusion. If the text calls for moonlight or a wall, it is not enough to convert these entities into stage props; the props themselves must be given voices to explain their functions. With regard to the death of Pyramus we have an even more exquisite absurdity; for not only are the players unaware of destroying illusion, they are actually afraid of creating too much.[30] So, for the ladies' sake, a prologue must be written to assure them that Pyramus is not really killed; and another prologue must make it clear that the lion is in fact Snug the joiner.

Another way of preventing the willing suspension of disbelief is to mangle the writer's sense. This is done by mispronunciation (Ninny's tomb), malapropisms (odious savours), misuse of words ('obscene' for 'unseen'), the disregard of sense-units (all for your delight we are not here), and most disastrously by speaking all one's part at once, cues and all. Finally, there are the almost limitless possibilities of bad verse: clichés, padding, monotonous rhythm, tortured rhyme, and above all pompous rhetoric. Research has brought to light many specimens of the faults which Shakespeare was mocking: Heywood's translation of Seneca, Golding in his feebler moments, Edwards' *Damon and Pythias*,

the anonymous *Appius and Virginia*, parts of Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*. These are just a few examples. But one does not have to be familiar with such texts (thank heaven) in order to understand why Philostrate's eyes watered when he heard

> But stay, O spite!
> But mark, poor knight,
> What dreadful dole is here!
> Eyes, do you see?
> How can it be?
> O dainty duck! O dear! (5.1.283–8)

All this, I have said, destroys illusion. But here we must salute the bard's matchless ingenuity; for by making it impossible to believe in Bottom as Pyramus the lover he has made it certain that we shall accept him as Nick Bottom the weaver. The same applies in a lesser degree to the other mechanicals. And as we watch the atrocious performance in Act 5, we suddenly realize that we are in the same audience as Theseus, Hippolyta, and the four lovers, straining to catch their whispers and joining in their superior giggles.

The mention of Shakespeare himself brings us to the greatest illusion of all, since it includes everything else: I mean the illusion of poetry. This is implicit in every line of the play whether verse or prose, and whether the speaker is a gossamer fairy or a gross clown. But it comes into the open in 5.1 when Theseus adds the poet to the lunatic and the lover (7):

> The lunatic, the lover, and the poet,
> Are of imagination all compact.

In understanding this speech, which has caused a great deal of comment, a number of different considerations must (one feels) be kept in mind. First, the tone is one of friendly but rather patronizing banter. The Duke is in a good humour and certainly does not mean to *censure* these forms of irrationality; at the same time he does not take them seriously. In modern terms one might almost imagine him declaring: 'These poets are odd chaps. What extraordinary things they dream up!' Having said that, one must immediately point out that the products of the poetic imagination are genially dismissed, not in the idiom of the officers' mess, but in the most vivid and energetic verse. Moreover, Theseus' opinion is not left unchallenged. Hippolyta observes that the lovers who have emerged from the wood tell an impressively coherent story, and that although their attitudes have changed, they

have changed in such a way as to produce harmony; all of which adds up to something more solid than her fiancé admits:

> But all the story of the night told over,
> And all their minds transfigured so together,
> More witnesseth than fancy's images,
> And grows to something of great constancy. (23–6)

Although these lines refer to a specific group of lovers, they cast doubt on Theseus' generalization about lovers as a whole. Perhaps they also raise the question whether he has said the last word on poetry. Finally, one might well argue that Theseus' words cannot be confined to his character or to their immediate context. On their own they can be accepted quite seriously as a respectful account of what poets do. Such a favourable interpretation would not have been strange to anyone who had read Sidney's *Apology*.[31]

Had Shakespeare at this point put Ovid out of his mind? Perhaps not entirely. After speaking of 'the poet's eye in a fine frenzy rolling' Theseus goes on:

> And, as imagination bodies forth
> The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
> Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
> A local habitation and a name. (14–17)

To elucidate the meaning of this no doubt one must go to the Platonic tradition – in particular to Plotinus, who maintained that the artist might by-pass the sensible world and have direct access to the Ideas; he would then convey these Ideas in the particular terms of his own medium – whether stone, paint, or words.[32] But for the *expression* of Theseus' lines Shakespeare perhaps owed something to a poetic rather than a philosophical source. The opening words of the *Metamorphoses* are:

> in noua fert animus mutatas dicere formas
> corpora.
> *My mind bids me tell of forms turned into new shapes.*

When the interlude is over and the court has left, Puck enters with a broom and says:

> Now the hungry lion roars,
> And the wolf behowls the moon;
> . . .

> Now it is the time of night
> That the graves, all gaping wide,
> Every one lets forth his sprite,
> In the church-way paths to glide:
> And we fairies, that do run
> By the triple Hecate's team,
> From the presence of the sun,
> Following darkness like a dream,
> Now are frolic.

The verses are, of course, intelligible on their own; but when the eye moves down, lighting on *lion*, *moon*, *night*, *graves* (implying death), *fairies*, *Hecate* (or Titania), *darkness*, and *dream*, it is hard not to think that Puck is in some way glancing back over the play. If there is anything in this notion, it is clear that the story of Pyramus and Thisbe is included in his summary. When he has finished his sweeping, it only remains for Oberon and Titania to pronounce a final blessing and for Puck to close the play.

The thesis of this essay (which does not pretend to deal with more than one aspect of the work) might, therefore, be condensed by saying that the dramatist set out to show how love can transpose (1.1.233), how Bottom was translated (3.1.124–5), transformed (4.1.70) and transported (4.2.4), and how the minds of all the characters were transfigured (5.1.24). The result was Shakespeare's *Metamorphoses* – the most magical tribute that Ovid was ever paid.

Creative Imitation and Latin Literature

EDITED BY

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TONY WOODMAN

THE UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

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LONDON · NEW YORK · MELBOURNE