

Pyramus and Thisbe:
Ovid's Spoof on Soap-Opera

by: L. Neuru

The story of Pyramus and Thisbe is told by Ovid in the Metamorphoses, Book 4, 55ff, and is a very sad story indeed. The families of the two young and beautiful lovers, Pyramus, the most handsome of all the young men, and Thisbe, the most popular girl in the city of Babylon, lived next door to one another but were not on speaking terms, and therefore would not let the young couple marry. There was even little opportunity for the lovers to meet, as young girls in ancient Babylon did not go to High School or University, nor were they allowed to hang out downtown where they might meet their boy-friends. What was left for Pyramus and Thisbe but to carry on their preliminaries by means of a crack in the garden wall between their families' houses? The two lovers whispered sweet nothings to each other, and got so involved in their method of communication that they began to hate the wall for interfering in their would-be lovemaking, even accusing the wall of being jealous of them (there is often, in Latin love poetry, a lover's insult or plea addressed to a wall or closed door, since the Latin lover was frequently shut out or thrown out and wished to vent his emotions on the wall or door).

Finally, however, Pyramus and Thisbe decided to sneak out into the countryside under cover of darkness, and away from their families they could at long last be together. They sealed this plan with a kiss---but since they couldn't cuddle up to each other, they cuddled up to the wall and kissed it (Can you imagine this scene?).

Thisbe sneaked out in the dark of

night to the agreed-upon meeting place in the countryside, the tomb of Prince Ninus of Babylon, a famous lover, which was in the shadows of a mulberry tree (arbor, tree, not bush), notable for its white berries. The poor girl saw a lion drinking in a nearby spring, and was so terrified that she dropped her scarf and ran off to hide in a dark cave which Ovid conveniently placed in the scene. The lion tore apart the girl's scarf with her bloody jaws, and departing, left it on the ground. Of course Pyramus feared the worst when he arrived at the meeting-place and saw Thisbe's scarf all ripped and bloody, and noble chap that he was, blamed himself for the death of his beloved. He resolved that he too would die, and after fondling and kissing Thisbe's clothing (at least he was getting closer than a wall!) he took his sword and sent it down deep into his side (*demisit in ilia ferrum*). Without delay, while he was dying, he drew the sword from his hot bubbling wound (*nec mora, ferventi moriens e vulnere traxit*), and as he lay dying, his blood flashed up high [into the air] (*ut iacuit resupinus humo, cruor emicat alte*).

The bleeding of Pyramus' wound in death is compared to a broken pipe, which is certainly an image well known to most of us, and would also have been to the well-to-do citizen of Rome (*non aliter quam cum vitiato fistula plumbo / scinditur et tenui stridente foramine longas/ eiaculatur aquas atque ictibus aera rumpit.*) Poor Pyramus' wound bled so fiercely that like jets of water from a broken pipe, it was able to reach the white mulberries on the tree and their appearance was turned dark from the

spurting of his gore; moreover, the root of the tree, saturated with his blood, stained the mulberries with a purple colour (arbori fetus adspergine caedis in atram / vertuntur faciem madefactaque sanguine radix / purpureo tinguit pendentia mora colore). I ask you, is this not a bathetic scene?

How could Pyramus be still alive? Ovid uses words like cruor, caedes meaning gore more often than blood, fervens, steaming or boiling hot with respect to the wound; madefacta...sanguine radix indicates an excess of blood, and all this blood and gore spurting (adspergine) and flashing out (emicat), plus the comparison to a burst pipe, rather indicate that poor Pyramus went out while his various interior components behaved like one of the geysers at Yellowstone Park. Should we compare this lover to Old Faithful, or is that too gushy?

Thisbe, since she was not really dead of course, wandered out from her hiding place to find her lover who, despite the great gushings of gore and guts, still hadn't died! In fact, she saw his bodily parts, trembling repeatedly, pulsating on the bloody ground (tremebunda videt pulsare cruentem membra solum). The reader may or may not wonder if the membra are still attached.

Despite all this, Pyramus managed to rouse himself for the standard death scene and farewell to his girlfriend, familiar from many grade B movies on the Late Show (oculos iam morte gravatos / Pyramus erexit visaque recondit illa). Recognise this scene? And need I fill you in on the final details? Thisbe has, of course, figured out what has happened, and herself resolved to die. She gives a final command to the mulberry tree, to keep its berries forever dark, in a sign of mourning for the tragic deaths of the two young lovers, then leans forward on Pyramus' sword, which he has conveniently removed from his own wound.

Despite the Roman taste, well documented, for violence and blood generally, and also for melodrama (soap-opera), Ovid really overdid this episode, by describing the hero's death (a mistake to begin with) as if it were a heroic scene, and undercuts it by a choice of words and images (plumbing!) incongruous for the circumstances. The effect is humorous.

The bare outlines of this story are recognisable as the famous 'Romeo and Juliet', and they were adapted by Shakespeare (among others) for tragic drama. But Shakespeare also borrowed Ovid's humorous version, and put it into one of his own comedies, as the 'play within a play' in A Midsummer Night's Dream.