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Shakespeare and the Mediterranean • 1

Romeo and Juliet

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1

River, Town, and Wilderness: Notes on Some Hellenistic Narrative Motifs Behind 'Pyramus and Thisbe'

Guido Avezzù

Abstract

In addition to the model famously provided by Ovid's story of Pyramus and Thisbe, the fate of a hapless pair of lovers has other variants belonging to the Hellenistic age and up to the late imperial period, when the Mediterranean coasts seem to be populated with pairs of unhappy lovers like Pyramus and Thisbe, Alphaeus and Arethusa, or Pamphilus and Eurydike, to recall only those of which we are left with an explicit memory. These tales are characterised by a constellation of variously combined elements: from the families that oppose love, to the suicide of the male lover, whose death, caused by some form of delay and error, in turn causes that of his beloved, from the voluntary annihilation of the lovers, to the participation of nature in the event (the metamorphosis of the mulberry fruit that is the pretext for the Ovidian epyllium). In this article, it will be proposed that not all of these elements are necessarily incorporated in the revivals of the Ovidian model, but that some of them, known precisely thanks to Ovid, seem to re-emerge in other narrative contexts.

Keywords: Pyramus and Thisbe; Hellenistic love stories; narrative motifs; ancient Mediterranean cultures

What shal I say of yong Piramus?
Chaucer 2004, *A Complaynte of a Lovers Life*, 365

It is well known that the many models and sources referable to the story of Romeo and Juliet follow closely the narrative pattern of

Pyramus and Thisbe's *non vulgaris fabula*[1] in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 4.55-166 through direct and/or indirect knowledge. I will not linger on the meaning of the word 'source' here, nor on the Italian narratives behind Shakespeare's play. Instead, I will select some motifs common to a few relevant classical narratives comparable to the story of Pyramus and Thisbe and therefore, indirectly, of Romeo and Juliet. I will start from the assumption that in many cases when we deal with ancient stories connected with early modern texts we cannot assume direct knowledge of them, and therefore conscious appropriation, but rather a variety of possibly indirect ways in which they circulated.

Although Romeo and Juliet is the end-point of a genetic line that through Arthur Brooke and William Painter goes back to Pierre Boaistuau, Matteo Bandello and Luigi Da Porto, there are other narratives that appear relevant to it while not belonging to that tradition. In such cases one question is whether we are dealing with the same story. Another way to put it, is whether we should consider differences in the setting, the characters' names and functions, as well as in some other relevant details of the plot as signals that alert us to major changes in the transmission of that particular story. By borrowing a term from textual criticism, we could consider such changes as a kind of *Leitfehler*, or 'index fossils', that is, variations suggesting that some potentially radical swerve from the main narrative line has taken place, marking a new stage in its articulation. In the case of the Romeo and Juliet story, the variety of narratives connected with it raise questions whether and to what extent we can speak of a single narrative and various stages in its history, or whether we should instead identify points of intersection, such as themes, imagery, and plots motifs, of different narratives. We must also consider that at any stage of their dissemination, stories may be subject to contamination with other circulating narratives – not necessarily 'versions' of the same one – which modifies and enriches their basic structure. As for this particular phenomenon, it is significant that, in his *Myths* (*Fabulae*), Gaius Julius Hyginus (64 BC - AD 17), active under Augustus and

1 *Met.* 4.53: "this tale . . . was not stale nor common" (trans. Golding 2004 [1567]).

Tiberius, gives an account of the story of Pyramus and Thisbe in which the most characteristic feature, namely the death of Pyramus by an error, is missing, and the brief report speaks generically of suicide "because of love" (*ob amorem*). This suggests that the version known to Hyginus could be substantially different from the one we can find in those same years in the *Metamorphoses*.[2] Having to rearrange a large number of sources, Hyginus sometimes confuses different versions and sometimes arbitrarily simplifies them. For instance, shortly after mentioning Pyramus, he informs us that "Oedipus, the son of Laius, because of his mother Iocasta took out his own eyes and killed himself" (*Oedipus Laii filius propter Iocasten matrem ipse se occidit ablatis oculis*) – a detail otherwise unknown to us. Hyginus, in any case, does not allude to a death due to an error. We could also imagine that, because of the prestige of the repertoire of Babylonian love stories, which were eventually collected in the *Babyloniaca*, a lost work by the novelist Iamblichus (second century AD), the two lovers could be 'recycled' as protagonists of stories with different characteristics from the original one, which could be already lost.

As we shall see, the tale of the unhappy lovers has other variants and many of these belong to the period comprised between the first century BC and the first century AD.[3] In the Hellenistic age and up to the late imperial period, the Mediterranean coasts seem to be populated with pairs of unhappy lovers sharing the fate of Pyramus and Thisbe, Alphaeus and Arethusa, or Pamphilus and

2 Hyginus 2002, *Fabula* 242,5: "The Babylonian Pyramus killed himself for love of Thisbe (*Pyramus in Babylonia ob amorem Thisbes se occidit*)" and 243,8: "The Babylonian Thisbe ‹killed herself› because Pyramus had killed himself (*Thisbe Babylonia ‹se interfecit› propter Pyramum quod ipse se interfecerat*)".

3 Systematic expositions of this tale and its ancient variants are offered by Immisch 1902-1909 and Fiehn 1936. A concise account is given by March 2014, 427. By contrast, the tradition alluded to by Grimal, who narrates that "Pyramus and Thisbe . . . slept together before they were married. Thisbe became pregnant. In despair, she committed suicide" (1990, 381-2) is merely "implicit" according to Rodríguez-Mesa who, however, follows Grimal (2020, 332n1); the outline proposed by Knox 1989 is more reliable. The adventurous implications of this variant also include a children's book by Martino Menghi (2006, see Figure 5).

Eurydike. The variants of the story, from the Pyramus-river's love affair with a Thisbe-spring – on which I will return later – to that of Pamphilus and Eurydike, and on to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, present constellations of narrative elements, neither secondary nor purely decorative, which are co-present in Ovid. Medieval and Renaissance authors as well as Shakespeare himself selected only those which were functional to their narratives or plays. However, it is precisely their simultaneous presence in the *Metamorphoses*, a text that enjoyed a very wide circulation in both Latin and vernacular translations, that suggests a whole range of visual possibilities, making them relevant even when discarded. This is the case, for example, of the motif of the mulberry fruits changing colour, from white to red and black, which, as will be seen, was also present in Greek tragedies: in Ovid this metamorphosis guides the narrative (*Met.* 4.51-3), and yet in Boccaccio and in the Renaissance versions of the story it disappears, although Shakespeare seems to remember it in *Titus Andronicus* 4.3 231 – a detail the audience must not have failed to recognise.

River (and Spring)

Originally the name Pyramus is linked to a river. The Athenian historian Xenophon (430-354 BC) mentions it in his *Anabasis* 1.4.1. It appears to be a watercourse in the nowadays Hatay province of Turkey, which is on the east coast of the Mediterranean and borders Syria to its south and east. From Strabo (64/63 BC - c. 24 AD) we learn that it was a very fast-flowing river, partially karstic.[4] This may have suggested its possibly temporary and only apparent death, which did not prevent it from continuing to flow towards its desired destination underground. A very similar metamorphosis, but this time into a spring, had befallen his Thisbe, who also lived in Cilicia – so narrates the so-called Pseudo-Clement in his Recognitiones (first half of the third century AD): "They [the pagans] say . . . that

4 Strabo *Geographia* 12.2.4: "[T]he Pyramus, a navigable river with its sources in the middle of the plain, flows through Cataonia. There is a notable pit in the earth through which one can see the water as it runs into a long hidden passage underground and then rises to the surface.".

Thysbe in Cilicia was dissolved into a fountain; and Pyramus, at the same place, into a river" (10.26; trans. D.M. Riddle).[5] This story is not very different from that of another thwarted love, also recounted in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (5.572-641) and by a great number of poets, from Hesiod to Keats, from Vergil to Montale:[6] the young Alphaeus falls in love with the nymph Arethusa and she, in order to escape his attentions, is turned into a spring on the little island of Ortigia, the heart of the city of Syracuse in Sicily. But Alphaeus in turn becomes a river which flows through the plain of Olympia in the Peloponnese and then crosses the Ionian Sea to rejoin its beloved. Thisbe becomes a river also in the legend reported in Himerius' (c. 315 - c. 386.) Speech 1.11 (fourth century AD), but his story takes place in mainland Greece, perhaps in Boeotia, and the lover is the river Asopos:

> The river [Asopus] was in love with Thisbe, who lived nearby, and the same impulse [i. e. the love of rivers for the sea, which drives them to pour into it] turned the maiden into a river and preserved the couple's love uniting the flowing waters of the beloved and her spouse.[7]

Asopus' love for a girl is mentioned by Ovid also in *Amores* 3.6, an elegy dedicated "to a river searching for the beloved" (33-4; the Latin title is *Ad amnem dum iter faceret ad amicam*). Here, however, her name is not Thisbe, but Thebe.[8] And it should also be noted that the names of the heroines of Hellenistic love novels sometimes pres-

5 https://web.archive.org/web/20040822 053941/http://compassionatespirit.com/Recognitions/Book-10.htm. (Accessed 10 July 2022).

6 Hesiod, *Theogonia* 337; Vergil, *Bucolics* 10.1, *Georgics* 4.334, *Aeneis* 3.694; J. Keats, *Endymion* 2.936; Eugenio Montale "L'estate" 8, in *Le occasioni*, see Montale 1998.

7 Trans. Penella 2007, 148; note especially the idea of the two lovers' merging into one: καὶ τηρεῖ . . . εἰς ταὐτὸν ἄγων τῆς τε ἐρωμένης καὶ τοῦ νυμφίου τὰ ῥεύματα.

8 So in Ovid's manuscripts and also in Christopher Marlowe's translation, published after 1602; but this could be an early confusion, induced by the setting of the story in Boeotia or the mention of one or more daughters of Asopos, called Thebe, with a clear allusion to the main city of the region. For all other sources on Asopos and Thisbe/Thebe cf. Penella 2007, 149-50n19. Like Thebe, Thisbe is also a common toponym in Boeotia.

ent suggestions of springs, for instance Callirhoe ('Beautiful Flow'), the protagonist of Chariton's *Chaereas and Callirhoe* (perhaps first/second century). Then the rhetorician and philosopher Themistius (317-388) mentions the river Thisbe as the protagonist of a love story similare to that of Arethusa with Alphaeus (*Speech* 11). In his *Dionysiaca*, the late imperial epic poet Nonnus of Panopolis (fifth century) parallels the Alphaeus-Arethusa couple with Pyramus and Thisbe. However, he makes no mention of the 'death by an error' motif narrated by Ovid and instead confirms the story's connection to the ancient Cilicia and the nearby island of Cyprus, one of the traditional locations of the goddess Aphrodite:

> The Nile . . . encounters in his wanderings Alphaeus [who], unlucky in love, . . . seeing himself deviated from his usual sea-path, is carried away in anguish; seeing the lovely Pyramus proceeding with them, Alphaeus exclaims: "Nile, what shall I do if Arethusa disappears? Pyramus, why this haste?[9] To whom have you left your Thisbe? . . . I fear that your Thisbe will become the object of [Zeus'] effusions. Pyramus, consolation of Alphaeus, not so much the rain of Zeus upsets us both as the dart of the foam-born goddess [i. e. Aphrodite]! Follow me, the flame of love guides me as I seek Arethusa of Syracuse, you, Pyramus, seek the traces of your Thisbe." (6.339-55)

Later on, Nonnus also recalls that Thisbe had been "turned into water with Pyramus, both of the same age and in love with each other" (*Dionysiaca* 12.84-5). Whichever the cause of their separation, the divine will or the maiden's rejection of her lover, the reunion of the two youths becomes 'invisible' insofar as the river currents run underground or through the depths of the sea – from Cilicia to Cyprus, from the Peloponnese to Syracuse – or because they both mingle in the sea. These various aquatic Thisbes or Arethusae, although located in different quadrants of the Mediterranean Sea, nevertheless seem to realise the erotic paradigm provided by Himerius: their metamorphosis into rivers allows the lovers to achieve a permanent and perfect union – that of the rivers' water into the waves of the sea. It is also possible to argue that such a concep-

9 The whole passage seems to echo Strabo's *Geographia* 12.2.4, because of the speed of the Pyramus current and the association with the Nile.

tion of eros, involving the annihilation and undifferentiation of the lovers, is in its own way analogous to death, an ending which, as we shall notice, is more peculiar to the genre of the novella than to the Hellenistic romance. Perhaps the most characteristic feature of this type of narrative is its 'liquid' conclusion, typically marine and Mediterranean. It also does away with the conditionings from which the tale unravels. On the contrary, in the novel we find a progressive and autonomous development of the personalities of the two lovers who will finally be reunited in the same milieu where their separation took place, or in another very similar one.

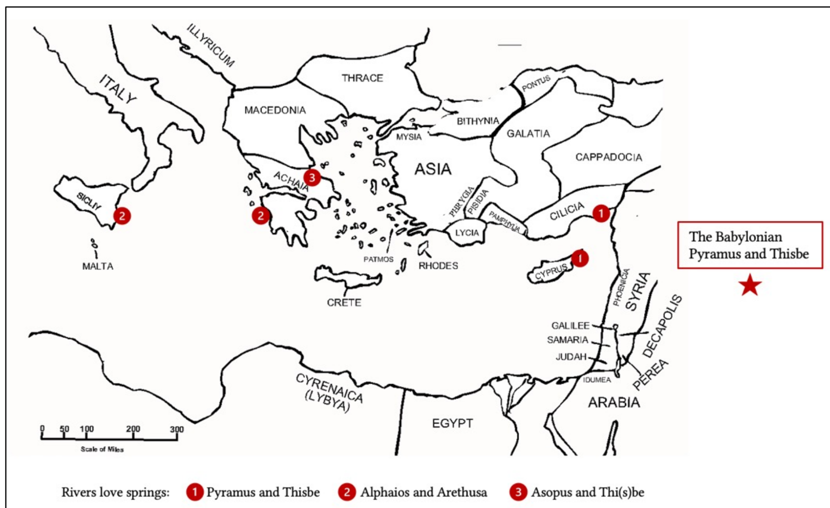

Fig. 1: Pyramus and Thisbe in the Ancient Mediterranean and the Near East.

"Without the towne", into the Wild

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* notoriously offered readers an immense and valuable repertoire of stories, plots, and images during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Translated into English by Arthur Golding in 1567, this collection of epyllia was also a major source of inspiration for Shakespeare, who famously cast the Pyramus and Thisbe story as a hilarious piece of metatheatre, a cameo improvised performance, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – a play contemporary to *Romeo and Juliet*, possibly following

hard on its heels. I have already mentioned *Titus Andronicus*, another play whose composition is very close to the "Excellent And Lamentable Tragedie of Romeo and Juliet", which through this Ovidian story re-elaborates a typically Mediterranean aetiological myth concerning the colours of the mulberry fruit. The broad outlines of *Met.* 4.55-166 are well-known: Pyramus and Thisbe love each other but their love is opposed by their two families. They can only communicate through a chink in the wall, and therefore they plan to abscond from their homes, which they perceive as a prison, as well as from the larger prison of the city of Babylon, surrounded by colossal walls:

> Pyramus et Thisbe, iuvenum pulcherrimus alter,
> altera, quas Oriens habuit, praelata puellis,
> contiguas tenuere domos, ubi dicitur altam
> coctilibus muris cinxisse Semiramis urbem.
> notitiam primosque gradus vicinia fecit;
> tempore crevit amor. taedae quoque iure coissent,
> sed vetuere patres: quod non potuere vetare,
> ex aequo captis ardebant mentibus ambo. (Ovidius 2004, 55-62

Here is Golding's 1567 translation:

> Within the towne (of whose huge walks so monstrous high and thicke
> The fame is given Semyramis for making them of bricke)
> Dwelt hard together two yong folke in houses joynde so nere
> That under all one roofe well nie both twaine conveyed were.
> The name of him was Pyramus, and Thisbe calde was she.
> So faire a man in all the East was none alive as he,
> Nor nere a woman maide nor wife in beautie like to hir. (1904, 67-73)

Their houses entrap the young lovers within a confined space that replicates the prison-like city where they live. A wall divides Pyramus and Thisbe and another wall, "monstrous high and thicke", encloses all within Babylon. In order to escape their own prison-like houses, the lovers must also escape from the larger prison that pens in parents and children alike. Broadly speaking, this will also characterise modern retellings of the story up to and including Shakespeare: the city is a closed space which qualifies and gives sense and meaning to those who are part of it. As observed by

Conn Liebler (2003, 306), the concept of the self-sufficient city is an ancient ideal, which the early modern age strongly re-proposes:

> The idea(l) of the walled city, self-contained and carefully managed, and of its microcosmic analogue, the family compound (similarly walled, self-contained, and carefully managed), occurs widely throughout late medieval and early modern writings, and has been well documented.

This is true even when the city becomes the opposite of a well-organised microcosm and its system degenerates into one hosting institutionalised violence (Conn Liebler, 305 and *passim*; Bigliazzi 2016). However, as negative as this social conditioning of the city may be, unlike Pyramus and Thisbe Romeo and Juliet do not attempt to direct their steps "without the towne", but Romeo alone is forced to do so. The two Veronese lovers try to evade the obligations established by the city, from family antagonisms to fathers' potestas over their daughters, yet not the city and its walls – they try to elude the city's rules without escaping them, starting with the regular, albeit secret, marriage officiated by a religious man. And even the fortuitous elements that determine the decisive turning point belong to the city space: the unplanned killing of Tybalt and the fatal error caused by the lack of communication between the two civic spaces of Verona and Mantua. Ovid's myth becomes quite different in Da Porto's novella, where there is no room for the wilderness where Pyramus and Thisbe's deaths occur, and the tragedy takes place entirely within the no less dangerous space of town. On the contrary, in his novella about "Mariotto and Ganozza" Masuccio Salernitano keeps closer to the Ovidian model by introducing a diversion to Alexandria: not a wild space but still a distant and exotic place and a land of infidels. While in Da Porto the obstacle to communication between Verona and Mantua, i.e. the plague, is typical of urban agglomerations, in Masuccio the misunderstanding which will prove fatal for the two lovers is mainly due to the Mediterranean sea, with the mishaps of navigation and the greed of the merchants who sail it. And yet, the sense of a wild area as the locus of tragedy in the texts derived from Da Porto lingers in the memory of authors and audiences alike as a potential antimodel in respect to the town as the setting of the *peripeteia* of the two lovers. From Babylon, the

city surrounded by monstrous walls as a visual memento of social constraints, to Brooke's beautiful Verona, "preferde above the rest / Of Lumbard townes, or at the least compared with the best" (11-12), the city becomes a space of symbolic and social tensions. Division and violence feature in the Romeo and Juliet story in Da Porto and down the whole narrative line reaching Shakespeare, where both come to the fore at the play's very outset in 1.1. Not coincidentally, the wall between the two houses in the Pyramus and Thisbe myth has received much attention· Perhaps one of the most interesting visual representations, because it accurately reproduces some of the

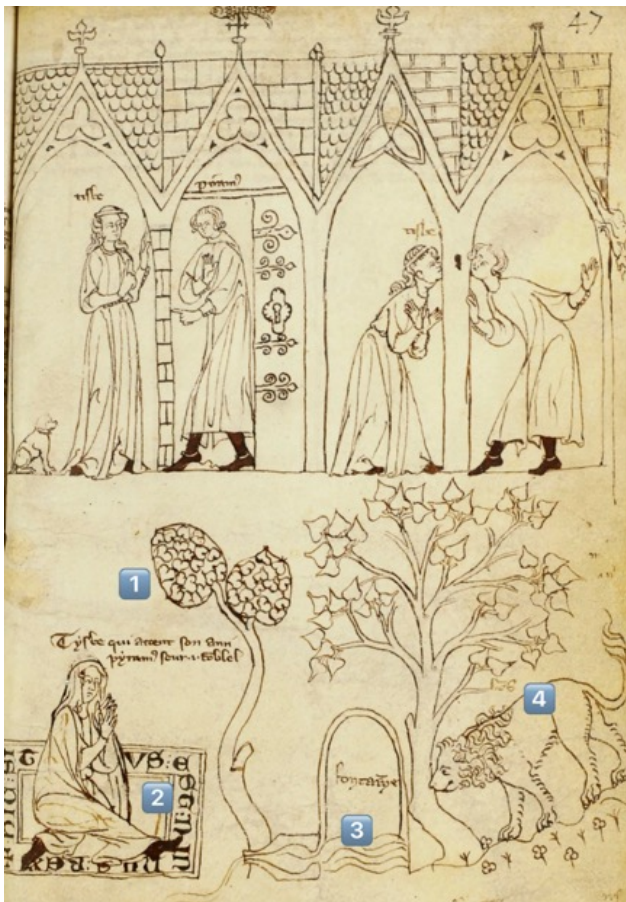

Fig. 2: Paris, B. N. F. Ms. lat. 15158, fol. 47r. (c. 1289).

details in Ovid's narrative, is a medieval manuscript today kept at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Fig. 2).[10]

In the upper, bipartite band, we can see the two lovers falling in love with each other and their precarious talking through the crack in the wall. In the lower one, some details of Ovid's narrative: (1) the mulberry-tree, (2) Thisbe on Ninus' tomb, (3) the spring, (4) the lion(ess). The latter provides a constellation of iconic elements that are mutually linked and in turn affect several narrative details. In this drawing, for instance, the beast is indisputably a lion, rather than a lioness, as it was in Ovid (97: leaena). A lion will also be present in Caxton's engraving, two centuries later (see Fig. 3): his decision to deviate from the *Metamorphoses* must have been dictated by the desire to ensure maximum iconographic clarity through the beast's mane. Therefore, the variant "This / Leoun in his wildest rage" proposed by John Gower in his Confessio amantis (1398-1400) and then passed on to Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night' Dream* ("lion . . . in wildest rage", 5.1.217), and possibly suggesting the beast's gender also elsewhere (e.g. in the "Lion fierce" of John Thomson's *New Sonet of Pyramus and Thisbe*),[11] should probably be considered as the product of a dialogue between image and text. From a methodological point of view, here, as in other cases, we should not necessarily assume the image's dependence on the word. This constellation of narrative motifs seems to precede the Metamorphoses. To date, the study of models for the Romeo and Juliet story has gone no farther back than the so-called "Story of Pamphilus and Eurydike", preserved in a first-century BC Michigan papyrus edited for the first time in 1981 and then studied by Antonio

10 However, there is no lack of interest in modern times as well: between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Symbolist engraver Max Klinger (1857-1920) produced an aquatinct entitled *Pyramus and Thisbe* (1879; source: https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b525025038/f99.item) clearly depicting the initial setting of the story. *Thisbe* (1909; source: https://www.john-william-waterhouse.com/thisbe/), a painting by John William Waterhouse (1849-1917) is instead a belated product of the Pre-Raphaelite Movement.

11 Published in *A Handful of Plesant Delites* (1584). See Bullough 1957, 409-11. On Gower and Shakespeare's Pyramus and Thisbe in the *Dream*, cf. Taylor 2007.

Stramaglia (2001).[12] In its scanty twenty-seven lines, this papyrus "presents a prose narrative closely related to the famous episode of Pyramus and Thisbe . . . whose version appeared until then fairly isolated within the Greek-Latin literary tradition" (82). This story is supposedly set in Cyprus (col. 1, l. 8), the island mentioned in the tradition that reaches Nonnus. However, if we compare Pamphilus and Eurydike with the Pyramus and Thisbe storyline, we can detect some common elements (literal quotations from the papyrus, essential to the reconstruction of the story, are in italics):

a) there are *openings* (Gr. ὀπαί) – although unspecified at least in the readable portion of the papyrus – which are suggestive of Ovid's "tenui[s] rima" (65, "little chink") in the wall, that allowed the two lovers to communicate secretly;
b) Pamphilus is late at the appointment, after *leaving* his beloved *alone*;
c) not finding her and seeing her *clothing* (which we may presume to be blood-stained) as well as a *circular* set of footprints as if she had been chased, Pamphilus presumes that Eurydike has been *eaten by a wild beast.*

The pathetic energy conveyed by the wall is so intense that it can be used for parody – which is what happens in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where it becomes an unusual stage property in 3.1 207-16:[13]

QUINCE Ay; or else 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. Then, there is another thing: we must have a wall in the great chamber; for Pyramus and Thisby says the story, did talk through the chink of a wall.
SNOUT You can never bring in a wall. What say you, Bottom?
BOTTOM Some man or other must present Wall: and let him have some plaster, or some loam, or some rough-cast about him, to signify wall; and let him hold his fingers thus, and through that cranny shall Pyramus and Thisby whisper.

But let us return to Ovid's Pyramus and Thisbe. Their story

12 Stramaglia also provides a full list of bibliographic references about this fragment.

13 All quotations from Shakespeare refer to the 2016 edition.

develops in stages which will interestingly be replicated in Da Porto's novella, despite the change of scenery:
a) 81-92: the lovers promise each other to meet at night under the mulberry tree next to Ninus's grave; here are Ovid:

> neue sit errandum lato spatiantibus aruo,
> conueniant ad busta Nini lateantque sub umbra
> arboris: arbor ibi niueis uberrima pomis,
> ardua morus, erat, gelido contermina fonti. (2004, 87-90)

and Golding's translation:

> They did agree at Ninus Tumb to meete without the towne.
> And tarie underneath a tree that by the same did grow
> Which was a faire high Mulberie with fruite as white as snow
> Hard by a coole and trickling spring. (1904, 108-11)

Fig. 3. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* trans. and printed by W. Caxton (ca. 1480).

These visual details will recur again in Renaissance iconographic renditions of this story. For instance, the woodcut illustrating the *Metamorphoses* translated and printed by William Caxton (ca. 1480) shows the city, the fountain, the tree and the lion, however in a daylight setting (see Fig. 3); while an engraving by Urs Graf (ca. 1506-1507, Fig. 4) displays a moonlit scene with an epigraph in Hebrew, presumably on the tomb of Ninus, recalling the eastern source of the story. It restores a mythical dimension that, although following Ovid's narrative, predates it.

Fig. 4. Urs Graf, *Pyramus and Thisbe* (1506-1507).

These images present the same scenario with only slight differences: the "coole spring" and the mulberries which are at first "as white as snow" and then will take on the same colour as the blood of

the two lovers: snowy white flesh, freshly shed red blood, and coagulated black blood. This is a Mediterranean mythical paradigm passed down from Babylon to the Rome 'invented' by Shakespeare in his *Titus Andronicus*, composed just a few years before *Romeo and Juliet*. The symbolism of white ranges from the smoothness and purity of flesh, to feminine delicacy, to erotic attractiveness; red suggests a shift to ideas of gruesome violence, whose first effect is the blood springing from a wound in the flesh; black is the clotted blood, the colour of the violence that has been fully perpetrated, the blood that carries within itself the endless memory of violence. As already mentioned, the motif is ancient; thus, for example, it can be found in Sophocles' *The Prophets or Polyidue*, frg. 395:

> First you will see a crop in flower, all white;
> then a round mulberry that has turned into red;
> lastly old age of Egyptian blackness takes it over.
> (Sophocles 1996)

Ovid ensures the survival of the metamorphic motif until the late Middle Ages; it is also taken up by Dante in the *Purgatorio*:

> Come al nome di Tisbe aperse il ciglio
> Piramo in su la morte, e riguardolla,
> allor che 'l gelso diventò vermiglio. (27.37-9)
>
> [As at the name of Thisbe, though on the point of death, /
> Pyramus raised his lids and gazed at her, / that time the mulberry turned red (Dante 2003)][14]

Yet the motif is missing in Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris*, written in 1361-1362, despite the fact that the author amplifies the narrative of this part of the story:

> [Tisbe] nomen invocavit Pyrami oravitque ut Tisbem suam saltem morientem aspiceret, et exeuntem expectaret animam, ut invicem in quascunque sedes incederent. Mirum dictu! Sensit morientis deficiens intellectus amate virginis nomen, nec extremum negare

14 Dante and then Boccaccio pick up *Met.* 4.143-4 "Pyrame, responde! tua te, carissime, Thisbe / nominat . . . ad nomen Thisbes oculos iam morte grauatos / Pyramus erexit" (Golding: "Make aunswere, O my Pyramus, it is thy Thisb . . . He earing Thisbes name, / Lift up his dying eyes etc."; 1904, 183-6).

> postulatum passus, oculos in morte gravatos aperuit, et invocantem aspexit. (9-10)
>
> [She called out the name of Pyramus and begged him to look upon his Thisbe at least in death and to wait for her soul as it departed her body, so that they could go together to wherever might be their resting-place. Wonderful to relate, the dying Pyramus still heard the name of his beloved. Unable to deny her last wish, he opened his eyes and looked upon the woman who was calling him. (Boccaccio 2001, 58-9)][15]

Thus purged of its mythological component, the story is brought back to a purely human sphere, and the narrative itself is, so to speak, 'secularised'. We could claim that Boccaccio delivers to humanistic literature a historicised figure, as will later be the case with the Montecchi and Capuleti in Da Porto's novella. As noted by Kolsky:

> In spite of the poetical source, Boccaccio attempts to create an illusion of historicity by abandoning all reference to the metamorphic aspects of the Ovidian version . . . Boccaccio creates the illusion of Thisbe as a historical figure by having the narrator state at the beginning of the chapter that he had been unable to find the names of Thisbe's parents[16] (a procedure similar to that employed in the more historical biographies). (2003, 36)

The performance of a *Pyramus and Thisbe* play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, although obviously selective, will privilege precisely this scene, a parody (or incunabulum?) of the analoguous scene in Romeo and Juliet:

15 This is the first complete translation printed in England. On the contrary, on the Continent it was repeatedly printed between 1473 and 1539 and had many translations into Dutch, French, German, Italian and Spanish until 1596 (see Boccaccio 2001, 505-7). As remarked by Armstrong, in English early modern culture, "access to Boccaccio's [minor] writings, both 'fictional' and 'non-fictional,' was limited to those people who could read Latin, French, or Italian, which until the mid-sixteenth century at least meant the elite and the professional classes. This is a remarkably restricted picture in comparison to other countries" (2013, 164). The absence of the mulberry tree in Boccaccio makes it unlikely that Dante may be a source of Boccaccio (see Rodríguez-Mesa 2020, 333n6).

16 "Although we have not learned from our ancient sources who her parents were, etc." (Boccaccio 2001, 54-5).

FLUTE *[as Thisbe]* Asleep, my love?
What, dead, my dove?
O Pyramus, arise,
Speak, speak. Quite dumb?
Dead, dead. A tomb
Must cover thy sweet eyes.
These lily lips,
This cherry nose,
These yellow cowslip cheeks,
Are gone, are gone;
Lovers, make moan;
His eyes were green as leeks.
O Sisters Three,
Come, come to me,
With hands as pale as milk;
Lay them in gore,
Since you have shore
With shears his thread of silk.
Tongue, not a word.
Come, trusty sword;
Come, blade, my breast imbrue.
[She stabs herself]
And farewell, friends;
Thus Thisby ends;
Adieu, adieu, adieu. *[She dies]* (5.1.307-30)

Chaucer's choice in his *Legend of Thisbe*[17] is even more radical: here, despite declaring his Ovidian source ("Naso saith thus", 20 = 720), instead of the mulberry-tree he speaks of a generic "tree" (80 = 780), hence the motif of the metamorphosis is missing, as is the scene of the last exchange of glances between the two lovers (which suggests Chaucer's autonomy from Boccaccio's *De mulieribus*). This very short thread relating to a natural metamorphosis clearly shows how the selection of motifs nevertheless fails to obliterate the discarded ones, which in fact help us decode the reasons behind the new choice.[18]

17 *The Legend of Good Women*, probably composed between 1385 and 1386, 706-923 (see Chaucer 1900, and cf. Spisak 1984).

18 The mulberry tree recurs, obviously without any metamorphic impli-

As opposed to the prison-house and the prison-city, the wilderness in which Pyramus and Thisbe seek to fulfill their desire features a series of details we have already noticed with regard to the Paris Ms. mentioned above (Fig. 2): (1) a mulberry tree and its fruits; (2) Ninus' tomb; (3) a fountain or stream; and, obviously, (4) the lion(ess). To these must be added the moon, necessary for Thisbe to be able to see the beast:

> quam procul ad lunae radios Babylonia Thisbe
> vidit et obscurum timido pede fugit in antrum.
> (Ovidius 2004, 4.99-100)

> . . . Whome Thisbe spying furst
> A farre by moonelight, thereupon with fearful! steppes gan flie,
> And in a darke and yrkesome cave did hide hirselfe thereby.
> (Golding 1904, 123-5)

While the moonlight is absent in *Romeo and Juliet*, as their suicide takes place within Capulet's monument, it is famously foregrounded in the Pyramus and Thisbe scene in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where a figure "with a bush of thorns / and a lanthorn" should "com[e] to disfigure, or to present, the person of Moonshine" (3.1.59-60). It is also mentioned in *Titus Andronicus*, where dead Bassianus's paleness is compared to the moon's pallid ray that illuminates Pyramus soaked in Thisbe's blood: "So pale did shine the moon on Pyramus / When he by night lay bathed in maiden blood" (2.3 231-2) [19]

Here is how the story continues:

b) 93-104: Thisbe temporarily remains alone, and this involves Pyramus' responsibility; an unforeseen event seems to produce evidence of her death;
c) 105-27: at his arrival, Pyramus gathers from this evidence that she is dead and kills himself;
d) 128-63: she returns, discovers the body of her beloved, and commits suicide;

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cation, in the King James version of 2 *Samuel* 5.

19 Cf. the "blood-drinking pit" in the same play (2.3 224) and Ovid's *madefactaque sanguine radix* (4.126: "the root soaked up with blood"), while Ovid's *cruentum solum* (4.133-4: "the ground covered with blood") is echoed by the brutally violent atmosphere of the whole drama.

e) 164-6: the gods and the parents grieve over their deaths are deeply moved by the tragic event; the gods will perpetuate the mulberry metamorphosis: the white fruits are truned blood red (125-7) and finally black (165-6); the parents will immortalise the memory of the two lovers, whose ashes will be indissolubly mingled together *una . . . in urna* (166; "in a single urn"): this will be a *monimentum* (161; "memorial shrine") no less than the mulberries *gemini monimenta cruoris* (161; "memorials of their twinned blood").

The two lovers' decision to escape to the world outside the city proves fatal: venturing into the wilderness exposes them to risks unknown to the civilised space of the city, dangers which are here materialised by the wild beast's attack. Such dangers also encompass the loss of self-control and critical judgment: misled by the sign of Thisbe's death, and perhaps also because he feels guilty for being late, Pyramus makes a hasty and irredeemable choice before having definite proof that the wild animal has killed her.

However, the pattern of this peripeteia does not lack analogues in Hellenistic short narratives, even before the Ovidian epyllium. Thanks to the new, more satisfactory dating of the Michigan papyrus fragment to the late first century BC (Stramaglia 2001, 81-2), the anonymous and fragmentary *Pamphylus and Eurydike* should be ascribed to the second half of the first century at the latest (possibly between 52 and 26 BC, therefore presumably earlier than Ovid's *Metamorphoses*). This is when Parthenius (†14 AD), an author of entertainment literature born at Nicaea – now Iznik, in Turkey, not far from the Sea of Marmara – was active. His very short *Love romances* ('Ερωτικὰ παθήματα, literally 'love sufferings') present various stories that terminate in the suicide either of the male protagonist, who blames himself for having unwillingly caused the death of his beloved (or, in any case, of a girl), or of the female protagonist as a consequence of her lover's death, of which she is in no way responsible. More precisely, I am referring to the following tales of masculine and feminine suicide:

> *Leucone and Cyanippus*: Cyanippus kills his jealous wife by mistaking her for a wild beast (this seems to be a recurring motif) and then kills himself.

Anthippe and Cichyrus: Anthippe hides in a bush with an unnamed young boy with whom she has fallen in love. Cichyrus, the king's son, mistaking her for a wild beast, kills her. As soon as he realises his error, Cychyrus faints, is unhorsed, and dies. Yet nothing is known of Anthippe's anonymous lover's fate.

Clite and Cyzicus: Cyzicus dies in fighting the Argonauts and his wife Clite commits suicide.

Arganthone and Rhesus: Rhesus dies in the Trojan war and his beloved Arganthone commits suicide.

The two mythemes variously combine under the common sign of love and death, and even if the protagonists are not lovers, as in the case of Anthippe and Cichyrus, their story may end up being listed among the Greek sources of Ovid's treatment of the Pyramus and Thisbe story. In short, it may be argued that this tragic pattern is not appropriate to the genre of the romance, and may provide the narrative backbone of short tales probably belonging to collections exemplifying the sublimation of various kinds of tragic violence: unintentional violence (Cyanippus, Cichyrus) and social or war violence (Pyramus and Thisbe, and Arghantone and Rhesus, respectively). On the contrary, the Hellenistic romances often make use of the apparent death device in order to set off the action (as in Chariton's *Chaereas and Callirhoe*), trigger meaningful turns (as in the romances by Xenophon of Ephesus and Antonius Diogenes), or simply enrich the plot by interpolating unexpected events (as in Iamblichus' *Babylonian Tales*).[20] This pattern intrinsically belongs to the novella rather than to the romance tradition, and it could not be otherwise, given the typically 'comic' structure of romances with their flair for happy endings in which, in Hegelian terms, the fantastic undergoes "the necessary correction" through the reunion of the lovers and their full social recognition on the community's part.[21]

20 A discussion of these narratives is offered in Avezzù 2016.

21 It is the formula used by Hegel in his *Aesthetics* about the genre of romance: "We see how the fantastic must therefore undergo the necessary correction (*die nötige Korrektion*)" (1955, 2.2.3.2.c; my translation).

A Very Short Coda

As regards the survival of mythical motifs, and the ways in which they often unexpectedly crop up in popular culture, we can smile at the title of a story for seven-year-olds (!), *The Escape of Pyramus and Thisbe* (Fig. 5), which is apparently indebted to the version suggested by Grimal;[22] or at the seducing invitation of a 1907 song by Harris and Robinson, "Wait For Me By the Mulberry Tree": the cover of the score shows (Fig. 6) a night landscape with moon, river, mulberry tree, and a Whartonian Thisbe waiting for her modern Pyramus.

Fig. 5. Martino Menghi, *La fuga di Piramo e Tisbe*, Milano: Mondadori 2006.

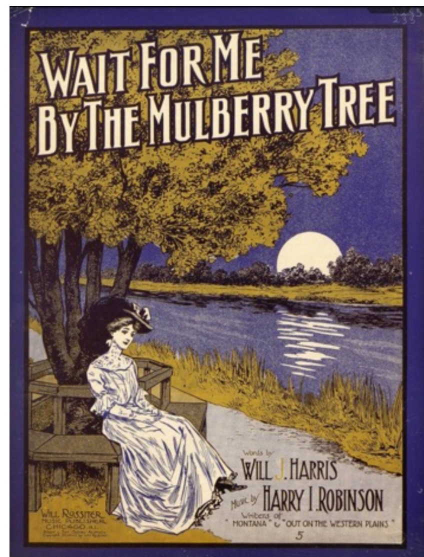

Fig. 6. *Wait For Me By The Mulberry Tree*, words by W.J. Harris and music by H.I.. Robinson, 1907.

22 Cf *supra*, n3.

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