"Pyramus and Thisbe" as a Play-Within-A-Play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Among the main plot strands of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are the mechanicals who are to play at the wedding of the Athenian king Theseus and his Amazon bride Hippolyta. Their play is an adaptation of the Ovidian story of two doomed lovers, Pyramus and Thisbe, taken from *Metamorphoses*. This essay briefly discusses parallels and contrasts between *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the mechanicals' version of "Pyramus and Thisbe," and Shakespeare's commenting upon theatre through the embedded play.

The mechanicals' play comes in the final act, echoing and altering the resolved main action of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Just as Hermia and Lysander, Pyramus and Thisbe endeavour to flee together to escape the parental opposition to their love. Yet while Hermia and Lysander's courtship ends in a comic resolution of reunion and marriage, the story of Pyramus and Thisbe tragically concludes in a double suicide. On finding Pyramus dead, Thisbe, played by Flute, exclaims, "Asleep, my love? | What, dead, my dove? | O Pyramus, arise!" (*Midsummer* 5.1.316–318). These words parallel Helena's when she finds Lysander sleeping in the wood: "Dead — or asleep? I see no blood, no wound" (*Midsummer* 2.2.107–108). The staging of "Pyramus and Thisbe" suggests a possible tragic scenario, in which it is Hermia, not Helena, who finds Lysander not asleep but dead. Both stories show the interdependancy of the tragic and comic: while tragedy is characterised by brutally withdrawing potential happy endings, comedy has potential tragic events lurking within the plot (Hackett xxx–xxxi; Bragg 35:30–36:02). The enacted "tragical mirth" (*Midsummer* 5.1.61) follows "a comedy of desire fulfilled" (Wiseman 25), thus radiating "a distorted mirror-image of romantic love" (Rudd 118), going along with Lysander's statement "The course of true love never did run smooth" (*Midsummer* 1.1.134).

Despite the tragic ending of "Pyramus and Thisbe," the mechanicals' version of the play is, on the whole, clearly comic. The staged play is almost a burlesque, abound in mispronunciation ("Ninny's tomb"), malapropisms ("odious savours"), confused words ('obscene' for 'unseen'), and doggerel with clichés of "high tragic discourse" (Burrow 121), "monotonous rhythm," "tortured rhyme," and "pompous rhetoric" (Rudd 122–123). The troupe's old-fashioned versification and acting clearly shows their inexperience (Hackett lxvi). As Rudd writes, "[T]he 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" (117). The mechanicals' play seems to be a ludicrous tragicomic version of the classical text that stands out from the surrounding drama. Colin Burrow notes that by trying too hard to elevate the style to suit their noble audience, the actors "sound both socially and stylistically out of place" (121). Accordingly, the mechanicals' earnest attempt at performance and their audience's patronising comments point to particular late Elizabethan theatrical conventions.

Shakespeare makes self-conscious, meta-theatrical comments by showing the process of rehearsals and performance of "Pyramus and Thisbe." Penny Gay states that Shakespeare demonstrates the illusion of theatre by raising the philosophic problem of mimesis in the mechanicals' discussions (47). At first, as Helen Hackett claims, the mechanicals seem to opt for "an earnest literalism" devoid of imagination: "a wall must be represented by a man in plaster and loam; the moon must be represented by either real moon shining in through a window, or an actor playing the Man in the Moon" (lxv–lxvi). However, having actors symbolically play physical objects and explain their function to the audience may in fact be seen as a more sophisticated and comically productive decision (Gay 47). As Hackett herself

observes, the mechanicals' imaginative power makes them fear that the ladies will confuse Snug in costume for a real lion (lxvi). Such issues as the relation of the playhouse to real life or the distinction between reality and artificiality on stage concern the mechanicals so much that they decide to include prologues explaining that the lion and the lovers' suicides are in fact fake.

The staging of "Pyramus and Thisbe" in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is Ovidian not just because of its source, but also because of its extended trope of metamorphosis. Shakespeare's meta-drama shows how the audience witnesses a process of metamorphosis, although not in the Ovidian medium of myth, but on stage (Bate 144). Bate claims that "Shakespeare's capacity to metamorphose Ovid into a different medium is what makes his art *imitatio* of the highest form" (144). By extension, he observes that it is outside of the embedded play that features of true Ovidianism are represented: "a philosophy of love and of change, the operation of the gods, animal transformations, and symbolic vegetation" (132). Thus, it is the Ovidian features that are translated from the embedded play onto the main play itself that make *A Midsummer Night's Dream* such a brilliant *imitatio* of Ovid.

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