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Jewish Theatres

Edited by Piero Capelli

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DAVID LUCKING*

Stony Limits and Envious Walls: Metamorphosing Ovid in *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Abstract

This paper examines the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, which entered the European literary tradition by way of the fourth book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, as it informs *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The discussion of the manner in which Ovid's tragic tale haunts these Shakespearean works involves a consideration of the specular relation existing between the two plays that, among other things, also helps to explain some of the apparently anomalous elements in each. Attention is given to the manner in which Shakespeare's works reflect the influence not only of the Ovidian original but of the different versions of the tale elaborated by Chaucer and Golding, and in particular to the emblematic image of the wall which, variously developed by his predecessors, plays a crucial role in both of Shakespeare's plays.

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare; Ovid; Chaucer; Golding; *Metamorphoses*; *Romeo and Juliet*; *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

1.

It sometimes happens that what might be classified merely as sources for Shakespeare's plays are in fact invoked so pointedly by the works themselves as effectively to constitute implicit intertexts in relation to which, in greater or lesser measure, the dramas deriving from them define their imaginative coordinates and elaborate their own meanings. In such instances the sources may be viewed not solely in genealogical terms as historical antecedents or creative influences only, but as elements operating actively within the text and functioning as essential components of its overall structure of significance. Such is the case with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and more particularly with the story of Pyramus and Thisbe contained within that rich and variegated compendium of mythological narratives, as they relate to two plays which are generally recognized to be closely affiliated with and even complementary to one another, these being *Romeo and*

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Juliet and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.¹ It is some of the ways in which this story makes its presence felt in these two works, and the web of relationships that is thereby woven between them – a skein of reciprocal allusion which is perhaps denser and more intricate than might appear at first sight – that it will be my purpose to examine in the following pages.

Even at the level of plot, the analogies between Ovid's story and the two Shakespearean plays are striking. The tale concerns two young people, living in adjoining dwellings in the city of Babylon, whose burgeoning love for one another is impeded by the opposition of their parents. In Ovid it is not specified that there is any actual antagonism between the families of the two lovers, and neither is any other reason given for the fact that they are not permitted to marry, but nonetheless the parents are adamant in their refusal to consent to a union between their children. Notwithstanding this opposition, however, the two young people contrive to hold whispered conversations with one another through a narrow crack in the wall separating their two houses, and one day arrange a nocturnal tryst near the tomb of Ninus situated outside the city. Thisbe is the first to arrive at the assignation, but is forced to conceal herself when a lioness appears on the scene with her mouth dripping with blood from a recent kill. In the haste of her flight she drops her mantle,² and the lioness rends this garment and smears it with blood before vanishing. Pyramus arrives, sees the tracks of the lioness and the torn and bloodied mantle, and infers from this evidence that Thisbe has been devoured by a wild beast while awaiting him. Overwhelmed by despair, he stabs himself with his sword, and Thisbe, emerging from her hiding place in time to see her lover die, also dispatches herself by means of the same weapon.

Numerous commentators have pointed out the relevance of this tragic little tale to that of *Romeo and Juliet*. Kenneth Muir mentions that even before the composition of Shakespeare's tragedy the resemblance between

¹ Frank Kermode describes *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as "a twin of *Romeo and Juliet*, a treatment of what is fundamentally the same story but this time in a comic mode" (2001, 59), while Brian Gibbons observes that the two plays constitute "a kind of diptych, portraying the attraction and repulsion of opposites . . . in opposed modes, of tragedy and comedy" (1993, 31). Other critics have remarked on the specular relation between the two plays.

² This is Arthur Golding's translation of Ovid's "*amicus*" (Ovid 2000, 89), which Shakespeare also adopts in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (5.1.271). Others translate the word as "cloak" (e.g. Frank Justus Miller in Ovid 1977, 185, 187), and Chaucer renders it as "wimpel" (1969, 370). If, as some commentators argue, a sexual significance is to be read into the bloodying of the garment (Taylor 2004, 56), then "veil" might be the more adequate translation, one that would chime with Ovid's use of the word "*velamina*" on two occasions in the story (Ovid 1977, 184, 186). See A.B. Taylor's note in Taylor 2004, 64, note 16.

the stories had been noticed by George Pettie, whose *Petite Pallace of Pettie his Pleasure* was published in 1576 or shortly thereafter, and so might conceivably have been read by Shakespeare himself. Muir quotes Pettie's observation "that sutch presinesse of parentes brought *Pyramus and Thisbe* to a wofull end, *Romeo and Julietta* to untimely death" (2005, 68). Other critics have gone even further, and argued not only for an analogy but for an actual genealogical connection between Shakespeare's work and its Ovidian predecessor. One editor of *Romeo and Juliet*, Brian Gibbons, discussing the version by Luigi Da Porto which influenced Matteo Bandello and through him Arthur Brooke's *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet* – the poem which is the most obvious immediate source of Shakespeare's play – suggests that Da Porto's "ending ... may be influenced by the story of Pyramus and Thisbe in Ovid" (1993, 35), and that it is by this route that the tale found its way into *Romeo and Juliet*. But the theory has a long lineage, and is one that has not failed to provoke its fair share of dissent. If in the nineteenth century the pioneering student of folklore Thomas Keightley asserted that "the remote original is the tale of Pyramus and Thisbe in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, from which an Italian writer named Luigi da Porto made a tale" (1867, 32), the editor of Brooke's *Romeus and Juliet* J.J. Munro specifically takes issue with the view that Pyramus and Thisbe is the "ultimate source of the Romeo legend", remarking that "this theory of absolute relationship with one ancient story is hardly tenable ... and the fact that the simple theme of two distressed lovers would call forth the same type of story in different minds, may explain some of the similarity" (1908, x). Munro's objection raises an important point concerning the methodology of source studies, the fact that the existence of an analogy does not necessarily imply that of a relation of direct influence. What tells against his rather perfunctory dismissal of the Pyramus and Thisbe story as a source, however, is the fact that Shakespeare himself calls attention to it, both obliquely in *Romeo and Juliet*, and more directly in that other play which might in various respects be seen as a kind of pendant to this tragedy, namely *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Keightley is of course simplifying drastically when he asserts that Da Porto elaborated his tale from the original in the Pyramus and Thisbe episode, because the evolutionary trajectory of the story was considerably more convoluted than this. Nonetheless the idea that this episode lies in the background of *Romeo and Juliet*, as it self-evidently does in that of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as well, remains entirely valid.

Before going any further a qualification must be registered. To affirm that Pyramus and Thisbe story in the *Metamorphoses* constitutes an "ultimate source", to use Munro's phrase, or even a "remote original", to use Keightley's, is of course a gross simplification, because Ovid's tale is it-

self almost certainly an elaboration of an antecedent narrative, reshaped to conform to the pattern of ceaseless metamorphosis which the Roman poet perceived as operating throughout the cosmos. According to Peter E. Knox, although “the story of Pyramus and Thisbe ... is known from no extant literary sources earlier than Ovid ... he must have found it in some text now lost”, the tale seeming to have descended from a myth originating in the Greek East (2014, 38). Knox elsewhere discusses a mosaic located in the remains of a second or third century A.D. villa on Cyprus, depicting the story of Pyramus and Thisbe but appearing to refer to another tradition than the Ovidian, and suggests that this work “opens the possibility that Ovid learned of a local Cilician myth which he adapted to his own purposes” (1989, 328). According to this reconstruction, in other words, Ovid himself is no more than another link in a chain of transmission by which a story of originally Eastern provenance, apparently featuring deities associated with a river and a stream (Knox 1989, 319; Keith 2001, 309), entered into the European tradition. Since the Ovidian version of the Pyramus and Thisbe narrative is in chronological terms the earliest literary exemplification of the story that has actually come down to us, however, and as it is the earliest with which Shakespeare himself may reasonably be supposed to have been acquainted, it is this version that we must take as a point of reference.

There can be no question that Shakespeare knew Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* extremely well, both in the original Latin and in the translation that had been published in 1567 by Arthur Golding, and that echoes of these works reverberate throughout his own.³ That one of the Ovidian stories which particularly caught Shakespeare’s attention was that of Pyramus and Thisbe is evidenced by the fact that he specifically alludes to it in several of his plays. The *Metamorphoses* is not, of course, the only literary work in which he could have read this story, although he would have known very well that it is the Roman poem which is its *locus classicus*. John Gower offered a version of the tale in his *Confessio Amantis*, a poem which Shakespeare consulted when writing his portions of *Pericles*, and there are a number of others.⁴ Among these is the rendition, entitled “The Legend of Thisbe of Babylon”, included in Chaucer’s *The Legend of Good Women*, a curious collection of stories in which the author ostensibly seeks to vindicate the su-

³ For Shakespeare’s debt to Ovid, see for instance Highet 1985, 203-7, Taylor 2000, Bate 2000, and Bate 2001.

⁴ Muir provides an extensive survey of some of the versions of the Pyramus tale extant in Shakespeare’s time and, arguing that “Shakespeare had read several versions of the Pyramus story” (1954, 142), identifies a number of possible verbal borrowings from these sources to be found in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. A revised version of this discussion is to be found in Muir’s later book *The Sources of Shakespeare’s Plays* (2005, 68-77).

perior moral qualities of women, but does so with a satirical glint in his eye that may have given Shakespeare a cue for his own treatment of the tale in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. As is the case with other stories contained in this collection, Chaucer explicitly cites Ovid (whom he identifies as Naso) as his fount of information (1969, 368), though he takes significant liberties with his source when it suits his purposes. Although so eminent an authority in matters pertaining to Shakespearean sources as Kenneth Muir maintains that in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* "Shakespeare took very little from Chaucer's version of the story, the only one which was not in some way ludicrous" (2005, 72), it seems to me that, as I shall be arguing as we proceed, Chaucer's retelling of the tale may in fact have exerted a significant influence not only on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* but on *Romeo and Juliet* as well, and that this influence may help to account for some of the apparently anomalous elements to be found in each.

Although explicit references to the story of Pyramus and Thisbe in Shakespeare's works are relatively few, they are not the less telling for that reason. A particularly vivid instance is found in *Titus Andronicus*, in which we find the lines "So pale did shine the moon on Pyramus / When he by night lay bathed in maiden blood" (2.3.231-2).⁵ Examined from the perspective of the present discussion, the tableau thus evoked of the moon casting its pallid glow over the lifeless bodies of the unfortunate lovers is of particular interest, inasmuch as the detail of the moon illuminating the scene on the night of the tragic tryst between Pyramus and Thisbe is one that is mentioned only in passing by Golding, whereas Chaucer draws deliberate attention to it when he remarks that "The mone shoon, men mighte wel y-see" (1969, 370). This is a circumstance that becomes significant in view of the anxiety evinced by the artisans enacting the Pyramus and Thisbe interlude in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that ways and means be found "to bring the moonlight into a chamber; for you know, Pyramus and Thisby meet by moonlight" (3.1.46-7), since it suggests that Shakespeare is at this point thinking of Chaucer's retelling of Ovid at least as much as of Golding's translation. In *Titus Andronicus*, incidentally, a drama in which a volume of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* physically materializes on the stage and plays a crucial role in advancing the action, several of the personages not only purposely model their conduct on stories found in the *Metamorphoses*, but oblige other characters to do the same, so that in

⁵ With the exception of those to *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, all references to Shakespeare's works throughout this article are to the single volume *Arden Shakespeare Complete Works* (Shakespeare 2001). References to *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are to the editions of the play edited by Brian Gibbons and Harold F. Brooks respectively (Shakespeare 1997; Shakespeare 2006).

this case there is inevitably and demonstrably a correspondence between events in the drama and the Ovidian source.⁶ This is something that might, though in less overt form, constitute a precedent for later works as well.

Another mention of the Pyramus and Thisbe story is to be found in *The Merchant of Venice*, when Jessica, reviewing the sad catalogue of love affairs terminating in disaster or betrayal that may be premonitory of her own future life with Lorenzo, recalls that “In such a night / Did Thisbe fearfully o’ertrip the dew, / And saw the lion’s shadow ere himself, / And ran dismayed away” (5.1.6-9). In this case as well the story of the Babylonian lovers is invoked, together with others that are also to be found in Chaucer’s works, as a prototype of doomed love. What from the point of view of the present discussion is perhaps more immediately pertinent, however, is the fact that the tale is expressly alluded to in *Romeo and Juliet*, when Mercutio mockingly remarks that in comparison with Rosaline, with whom Romeo believes himself to be in love, “Thisbe [is] a grey eye or so, but not to the purpose” (2.4.43-4). These are words that may be construed as an intentional hint on Shakespeare’s part, signalling the existence of an imaginative link between this play and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. For it is of course in this latter work, written about the same time as *Romeo and Juliet* and sharing some of its themes and image patterns, that the Pyramus and Thisbe story is most deliberately invoked, much of the play revolving in fact around the preparations being mounted by a group of Athenian artisans to present a theatrical rendition of the tale at a wedding feast.

2.

I have mentioned the fact that Shakespeare was familiar with Golding’s translation of Ovid, as is amply attested by the numerous echoes of Golding’s words to be found in his works.⁷ And a number of commentators, including myself, have argued that this translation is explicitly referenced,

⁶ For more on this see for instance Waith 1957, West 1982, Hunt 1988, Hardy 1997, Maslen 2000, and Lucking 2012, 43-61. Janice Valls-Russell considers the question of whether the figure of Bassianus in *Titus Andronicus* might be modelled on that of Ovid’s Pyramus in 2010, 75.

⁷ Most notably, perhaps, he draws upon Golding’s version as well as upon the original text in Prospero’s valediction to his magic in the final act of *The Tempest* (5.1.33-50). For discussions of how elements of both the original work and its translation are blended in this passage, see Muir 2005, 3-4, and Bate 2000, xlii. For examples from the Sonnets and elsewhere of passages “transmuted from Ovid through the Golding translation”, see Hight 1985, 204-7, this quotation from page 205.

and in some measure also parodied, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.⁸ But, as I have already suggested, there is reason to believe that Chaucer's retelling of Ovid's story in *The Legend of Good Women* also contains elements that may have influenced Shakespeare, and that this influence extends to *Romeo and Juliet* as well. First of all, there is a certain analogy between the ways the stories of doomed passion are introduced in "The Legend of Thisbe of Babylon" and *Romeo and Juliet* respectively. Chaucer's tale begins with the words:

At Babiloine whylom fil it thus,
 The whiche toun the queen Semiramus
 Leet dichen al about, and walles make
 Ful hye, of harde tyles wel y-bake.
 Ther weren dwellinge in this noble toun
 Two lordes, which that were of greet renoun.
 (1969, 368)

This may be compared with the opening lines of the Prologue to *Romeo and Juliet*: "Two households both alike in dignity / (In fair Verona where we lay our scene)" (1-2). Both works begin with a specification of the name of the town where the drama is enacted, and both mention two families residing within that town which enjoy elevated social status, before proceeding to depict the plight of their respective children whose love is thwarted by the familial influences to which they are subject. This expository strategy, proceeding from the general to the specific, is very different from that of Golding, who like Ovid himself does not expressly identify the town by name in his exordium, and who instead of mentioning the parental figures at the outset immediately focuses on the "two yong folke" who are "in houses joynde so nere / That under all one roofe well nie both twaine conveyed were" (Ovid 2000, 88).⁹ For the sake of comparison with Shakespeare's more immediate, and more generally acknowledged, source in *Romeus and Juliet*, it might be mentioned that Brooke also begins with an invocation of the name of the town: "There is beyond the Alps, a town of ancient fame, / Whose bright renown yet shineth clear: Verona men it name" (1908, 1). But it is not until line 25 that he gets around to mention-

⁸ See for instance Forey 1998, Willson 1969, and Lucking 2011. Muir points out that the references in Quince's Pyramus and Thisbe playlet to Thisbe's "mantle", and to the "cranny" in the wall separating the lovers, seem to derive from Golding (2005, 69).

⁹ Cf. the opening of the tale in the *Metamorphoses*: *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.* (Ovid 1977, 182)

ing the two rival households: "There were two ancient stocks, which Fortune high did / Above the rest, indued with wealth, and nobler of their race . . . Whose praise, with equal blast, Fame in her trumpet blew" (2). If it is true as Munro argues that Brooke wrote *Romeus and Juliet* with Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* in mind (1908, lii-liv), it seems no less likely that Shakespeare wrote *Romeo and Juliet* as much under the influence of *The Legend of Good Women* as of Brooke's poem.

There are other interesting points of contact between *Romeo and Juliet* and Ovid's story of Pyramus and Thisbe, some of which may betray processes of association operating in Shakespeare's mind. One such convergence may be found in the rather odd image Capulet uses to describe Juliet's profuse weeping, which he mistakenly imputes to her grief at her cousin Tybalt's death: "How now, a conduit, girl?" (3.5.129). As it happens, there are only seven instances of the word "conduit" in Shakespeare's plays, and one in *The Rape of Lucrece*, and in the majority of these cases the use of the word is literal, referring to the channels or pipes through which water or other fluids are conveyed. Strictly speaking, the image of a conduit is not entirely felicitous as applied to Juliet's weeping, and only really makes sense if Capulet is supposed to be imagining his daughter's eyes as being the spouts from which the contents of a pipe are discharged, as is the case when Antigonus in *The Winter's Tale* describes a figure in a dream whose "eyes / Became two spouts" under the stress of an emotion (3.3.25-6). Comparison might be made however with the phrase "As from a conduit with three issuing spouts", used by Marcus to describe Lavinia's blood pouring from her wounds in *Titus Andronicus* (2.4.30), a simile which, as has several times been noted, recalls Ovid's equally graphic description of Pyramus's death in the *Metamorphoses*.¹⁰ It has been suggested that Shakespeare might have borrowed Capulet's image from Brooke's poem, in which Juliet assures her mother at one point that "my painéd heart by conduits of the eyne / No more henceforth, as wont it was, shall gush forth dropping brine" (Shakespeare 1993, 190 n.; Brooke 1908, 67). This might well be so, but it seems likely as well that the playwright is once again remembering Golding's Ovid, in which the following rather bizarre comparison is used to describe the force with which Pyramus's blood spurts from his body after he has stabbed himself with his sword:

As when a Conduite pipe is crackt, the water bursting out
Doth shote it self a great way off and pierce the Ayre about.
(Ovid 2000, 148-9)

¹⁰ Waith 1957, 47. See also Bate's note in his edition of *Titus Andronicus* (Shakespeare 1995, 188 n.). Bate goes on to point out the "Ovidianism of the whole of [the] speech" in which these lines are found, something he also comments on in 2001, 111-12.

And he may also be recalling the story of Thisbe in *The Legend of Good Women*, in which Chaucer employs the identical image: “The blood out of the wounde as brode sterte / As water, whan the conduit broken is” (1969, 370). What is to be noted is that whereas Ovid invokes the image of a broken conduit to describe how Pyramus’s blood sprays a nearby mulberry tree and transforms the colour of its fruit from white to deep purple, this being the metamorphosis he specifically has in mind in this story, and whereas Golding follows suit in his translation of the tale, Chaucer dispenses with these gory details and therefore has no need of so vivid an image as that of a fractured pipe streaming forth water. Yet he too renders Ovid’s phrase “*fistula plumbo*” (1977, 186) as “conduit”, and this may help to explain why, though in a very different context, it appears in *Romeo and Juliet* as well.¹¹

3.

It would perhaps not be too much of an exaggeration to suggest that the image of water gushing from a broken conduit, which I have argued may plausibly have been carried over to *Romeo and Juliet* from Golding and Chaucer, may bear some imaginative relation to the situation whereby the passion of two young people bursts the constraints imposed upon them by their elders, though only at the cost of the death of the lovers.¹² If this is so, then it is closely bound up with another element found in both *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* which can be related to Ovid’s tale of Pyramus and Thisbe. This, unpromising as it might seem at first glance, is the image of the wall. We have seen that in the Pyramus and Thisbe story, as it is narrated in Ovid, and retold by Chaucer and by Golding, a detail that assumes particular importance is that of the partition dividing two dwellings which, interposing itself physically as a barrier between the young lovers, also emblemizes the social impediments standing in the way of their union. Something that is worth observing in this con-

¹¹ It should perhaps be mentioned that the image of blood issuing from the spouts of wounds does not invariably evoke the word “conduit” in Shakespeare’s mind. In *Julius Caesar* Calpurnia dreams of a statue of her husband “Which like a fountain with an hundred spouts / Did run pure blood”, an image which Decius Brutus recalls in his reference to the statue “spouting blood in many pipes” (2.2.77-8, 85).

¹² It might be noted that *Antony and Cleopatra* contains numerous instances of the image of passion as something that “overflows the measure” (1.1.2) and generally breaks the trammels of a culturally imposed discipline. For an interesting account of the metaphorical schema recurrent in this play based on the image of a container unable to hold the “liquids of passionate love, martial courage, and grief”, see Freeman 1999, this quotation from page 446.

nection is that the wall motif is in fact introduced from the very beginning of Ovid's story, when the city walls encircling Babylon are described in a manner that might reveal symbolic associations in the mind of the Roman author himself. Following in Ovid's footsteps, Chaucer relates that Semiramus [sic] had constructed around the city "walles . . . Ful hye, of harde tyles wel y-bake" (1969, 368), while Golding describes the town, not entirely elegantly, as a place "of whose huge walles so monstrous high and thicke / The fame is given Semyramis for making them of bricke" (Ovid 2000, 88). It seems reasonable to suggest that it is these massive and presumably impregnable walls, demarcating the perimeter of the town and isolating it from what Chaucer describes as the "the felde . . . so brode and wyde" (1969, 369), that appear again in microcosmic form in the partition separating the dwellings inhabited by Pyramus and Thisbe. The implication would seem to be that the wall which delineates the boundaries of the town as an urban entity also defines the contours of the social and interpersonal relations existing within its precincts, including the prohibition upon the two young people's love imposed by their parents. This wall, which figures what Giuseppe Mazzotta describes as "the proximity and separation to which the two young lovers are doomed" (1986, 155), is riven however by a narrow fissure that permits the lovers to exchange furtive whispers with one another, and it is through this crack that they make their pact to escape beyond the boundaries of the city and so abandon the world of walls altogether. Ironically, however, the place they choose for their assignation is a tomb and therefore associated with death, as Mazzotta also points out:

This is, in effect, the double focus of the romance: they live contiguously but are barred by a wall their houses have in common; their nearness engenders love, but they are kept apart by their parents' prohibition; through the chink in the wall each of them throws kisses that can never reach the other side. Yet, impelled by desire, the two agree to elope at night and choose Ninus' tomb as their meeting place. The irony is transparent, for as they name Ninus' tomb the lovers unwittingly make the place of death the point of destination of their desire.
(1986, 155)

Now as it happens the image of the wall is prominent in both *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. These are in fact the two plays in the Shakespearean canon with the highest incidence of the word "wall" in the singular form, there being, not counting scene directions and speech-headings, no fewer than twenty-nine occurrences in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and eight in *Romeo and Juliet*. Except for *Edward III*, which is only Shakespearean in part, no other play contains more than three instances of the word. Although the word "wall" is not explicitly used in

this connection, Romeo effectively breaches the confines of the Capulet residence when he irrupts into the feast being held there, and this trespass overtly implicates walls and what they emblemize in what follows. It may be inferred from the text itself that the second act of *Romeo and Juliet* opens in a street flanking the wall of Capulet's orchard, since Benvolio obligingly supplies the information that Romeo "ran this way and leapt this orchard wall" (2.1.5), and the idea is pursued in the ensuing scene. Asked how he managed to enter her father's garden, since "The orchard walls are high and hard to climb" (2.2.63), Romeo poetically if somewhat implausibly responds that "With love's light wings did I o'erperch these walls, / For stony limits cannot hold love out" (2.2.66-7), to which he adds that he was directed in these exertions by love which "lent me counsel, and I lent him eyes" (2.2.81). This latter declaration implicitly alludes to the commonplace that love is blind, but it is also tempting to perceive in it yet another reminiscence of the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, in which it appears that love, far from being sightless, is endowed with an acuity of vision peculiar to itself. In his version of the story Chaucer observes that although the cleft in the wall dividing the houses of the two young lovers is so narrow as almost to be invisible, "what is that, that love can nat espy?" (1969, 369), while in his rendition of the *Metamorphoses* Golding translates Ovid's question "*quid non sentit amor?*" (1977, 182) as "what doth not love espie?" (Ovid 2000, 88). The resemblance between these two formulations of the idea that lovers' eyes have the power to detect the least vulnerability in the barriers standing between them, incidentally, is so close as to suggest that Golding too was familiar with Chaucer's tale and might have been influenced by it.

There are a number of other references to walls in *Romeo and Juliet* that could lend themselves to extended discussion in terms of their role as emblems of division and enclosure, and at the same time as boundaries to be erased or overcome. As in Ovid, walls demarcate the city as an urban entity at the same time as they define social relationships within it, not excluding those of an antagonistic character. Thus the Capulet servant Sampson's fatuous boast at the beginning of the play that "I will / take the wall of any man or maid of Montague's" (1.1.10-11), spawns a number of further jests on the subject of acts of violence potentially involving walls, Sampson brashly declaring that in the event of an altercation with the rival household "I will push Montague's men from the wall, and thrust his maids to the wall" (1.1.15-17). The Nurse recalls an occasion when she was sitting with the infant Juliet "under the dovehouse wall" when an earthquake struck and caused that wall to tremble (1.3.27). Perhaps significantly, this is an event that takes place the day following another incident that seems – at least according to the ribald commentary on it supplied by the

Nurse's husband – to presage Juliet's future sexual maturation (1.3.38-44), a development that will challenge the dominion of confining walls both in her own life and in that of Romeo. The same nurse will later be bidden to wait "behind the abbey wall" in order to take delivery of the rope ladder that will enable Romeo to breach once more the walls of the Capulet house, this time by way of Juliet's window (2.4.183), and by consummating his marriage with Juliet breach also the social barrier dividing the two lovers. Once again, it is tempting to suspect subterranean associations operating in the mind of the poet if not a deliberate symbolic strategy on his part.

In Ovid's story Thisbe, having abandoned the walled city of Babylon in order to encounter her lover, is compelled to take refuge in a cavern when she catches sight of the lioness. It is while she is thus concealed within the stone walls of what Golding describes as "a darke and yrkesome cave" (Ovid 2000, 89) that Pyramus arrives and, misconstruing the significance of the bloodstained mantle, slays himself. Analogously, if the force of love seems for a while to have enabled Romeo to penetrate the barriers, both physical and social, that divide him from Juliet, walls reassert the power they wield in human affairs as Shakespeare's play proceeds. Having killed Tybalt, and learning that the Prince has banished him from his native city, Romeo despondently remarks that "There is no world without Verona walls" (3.3.17). At the same time that walls once again interpose themselves as barriers separating him from Juliet, he recognizes that beyond those walls his life can have no meaning. But this is not all. Friar John fails to deliver the letter addressed to Romeo that has been entrusted to him by Friar Laurence because the "searchers of the town", suspecting that a house he is visiting harbours plague, "Seal'd up the doors and would not let us forth" (5.2.8, 11), sequestering him within the confines of the building and obliging him to abort his journey to Mantua. The consequence of this setback is that Romeo is not informed that what has been proclaimed as Juliet's death is merely part of an elaborate stratagem devised by the friar, so that when, in defiance of the Prince's edict of exile, he passes through the walls of Verona one final time it is with the intention of putting an end to his own life. The last wall standing between himself and Juliet is that of the Capulet monument, whose gate he pries open with the defiant exclamation "Thus I enforce thy rotten jaws to open" (5.3.47). Romeo has earlier asserted that "Stony limits cannot hold love out", and so it proves to be in this case as well, but the violation of confines comes at a price, and when Friar Laurence arrives at the tomb where Romeo has just killed Paris one of the first things he notices is the blood "which stains / The stony entrance of this sepulchre" (5.3.140-1). The figurative wall dividing the "two households" of the Montagues and the Capulets may disintegrate at the

moment of their reconciliation, but it is at the cost of their children having been immolated as the “Poor sacrifices of our enmity” (5.3.303), with the ironic consequence that those same households are destined to extinction. And if no walls stand between the lovers themselves at the conclusion of the play, it is only because they are both immured within the “palace of dim night” that is Juliet’s tomb (5.3.107), having crossed together the final boundary dividing life from death.

4.

The image of the wall figures no less prominently in the play which, as has several times be mentioned in the course of this discussion, can profitably be read in tandem with *Romeo and Juliet*, this being *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. In this case, however, it appears in the form of travesty, a modulation of tone which is not however entirely original with Shakespeare. If in Ovid’s story the image of Pyramus and Thisbe whispering to one another through a nearly invisible crack in a wall is emblematic of what Mazzotta describes as “the proximity and separation to which the two young lovers are doomed” (1986, 155), it is interesting to compare the manner in which Golding and Chaucer develop this detail, and to speculate on which of the two might have exerted the greater influence on Shakespeare’s treatment of it. In Golding the lovers at first reproach the wall for dividing them from one another, and subsequently express their gratitude for the fact that it at least makes possible their whispered exchanges, in accents that are on the whole subdued:

O thou envious wall (they sayd) why letst thou lovers thus?
 What matter were it if that thou permitted both of us
 In armes eche other to embrace? Or if thou thinke that this
 Were overmuch, yet mightest thou at least make rouse to kisse.
 And yet thou shalt not finde us churles: we thinke our selves in det
 For this same piece of courtesie, in vouching safe to let
 Our sayings to our friendly eares thus freely come and goe.
 (Ovid 2000, 88)

Talking to walls might seem a somewhat eccentric activity to engage in under any circumstances, but apart from this there is nothing notably ludicrous in Golding’s description, which does not in fact stray very far from the original.¹³ In Chaucer however we have something that comes

¹³ Although C.L. Barber refers to the “top-heavy personification which in Golding makes the wall into a sort of stubborn chaperon” (1990, 153 n.), Golding is actually respecting the tone of Ovid’s own lines, which run thus: “*invide*” *dicebant* “*paries, quid*

very near to burlesque, and it is a burlesque which anticipates that of the Pyramus and Thisbe sketch in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

And every day this wal they wolde threte,
 And wisshe to god, that it were doun y-bete.
 Thus wolde they seyn – “allas! Thou wikked wal,
 Through thyn envye thou us letttest al!
 Why nilt thou cleve, or fallen al a-two?
 Or, at the leste, but thou woldest so,
 Yit woldestow but ones lete us mete,
 Or ones that we mighte kissen swete,
 Than were we covered of our cares colde.
 But natheles, yit be we to thee holde
 In as muche as thou suffrest for to goon
 Our wordes through thy lyme and eek thy stoon.
 Yit oghte we with thee ben wel apayd.”
 (1969, 369)

Whereas Golding remains fairly close to the Ovidian original in tone as well as content, Chaucer boisterously expands the comic potentialities latent in the lovers' habit of blaming the wall for their woes, having them castigate the barrier that stands between them in the most vehement terms before acknowledging that it does after all permit them to converse with one another and is therefore entitled to a measure of gratitude. As James W. Spisak suggests, “such apostrophe was surely an inspiration for Shakespeare to make his Wall ‘sensible’” (1984, 206), for in all essential respects this is how the wall is treated in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as well. In Shakespeare's comedy, indeed, just to make the situation as ridiculous as possible, what is described as “that vile wall which did these lovers sunder” (5.1.131) is not an inert stage property, as Capulet's orchard wall in *Romeo and Juliet* presumably is, but an animate being played by a human actor who not only walks on and off the stage but also pronounces a number of lines of his own.¹⁴

As is congruent with the sentience with which it has been endowed,

amantibus obstas? / quantum erat, ut sineres toto nos corpore iungi / aut, hoc si nimium est, vel ad oscula danda pateres? / nec sumus ingrati: tibi nos debere fatemur, / quod datus est verbis ad amicas transitus auris.” (1977, 182-4)

¹⁴ With reference to the wall that Romeo scales in *Romeo and Juliet*, M.C. Bradbrook observes that “it is interesting to note the very obvious parody of this same orchard wall in the rustics' play of *Pyramus and Thisbe*” (1932, 39). Commenting on this remark, Barber suggests that Snout's objection in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that “You can never bring in a wall” (3.1.61), as the Pyramus story requires, “certainly seems a likely by-product of Shakespeare's having recent experience with the difficulty” (1990, 153 n.).

Pyramus at first addresses this wall in ingratiating terms intended to secure it as an ally, but changes register entirely when it fails to oblige him as fully as he expects:

And thou, O wall, O sweet, O lovely wall,
 That stand'st between her father's ground and mine;
 Thou wall, O wall, O sweet and lovely wall,
 Show me thy chink, to blink through with mine eyne!
 [*Wall stretches out his fingers.*]
 Thanks, courteous wall: Jove shield thee well for this!
 But what see I? No Thisbe do I see.
 O wicked wall, through whom I see no bliss,
 Curs'd be thy stones for thus deceiving me!
 (5.1.172-9)

Although the courtesy attributed to the wall might originate with Golding's reference to "this same piece of courtesie" (Ovid 2000, 88), the "wicked wall" aspersion would, as Muir suggests, seem to derive from Chaucer (2005, 72-3). The words with which Shakespeare's Thisbe addresses the wall might also betray a Chaucerian reminiscence:

O wall, full often hast thou heard my moans,
 For parting my fair Pyramus and me!
 My cherry lips have often kiss'd thy stones,
 Thy stones with lime and hair knit up in thee.
 (5.1.186-9)

The reference to "stones with lime and hair" has no parallel in Golding's translation, nor for that matter in the Ovidian original, but may well hark back, as Douglas Bush points out, to Chaucer's allusion to "thy lyme and eek thy stoon" (1931, 146).

Nor is this the only indication in Thisbe's speech that Shakespeare may be thinking more of Chaucer than of Golding. Whereas Golding describes how the lovers, having terminated their whispered conversations, "eche gave kisses sweete / Unto the parget [plaster] on their side" (Ovid 2000, 89), Chaucer less delicately states that "The colde wal they wolden kisse of stoon" (1969, 369), and it would seem to be this that is echoed in Shakespeare's "My cherry lips have often kiss'd thy stones". Shakespeare indeed out-Chaucers Chaucer in the verve with which he renders Ovid into English, investing his words with a ribald secondary meaning of which his predecessor is innocent (see Partridge 1968: 121, s.v. "stone"). Pursuing this somewhat salacious vein, when Shakespeare's Pyramus entreats Thisbe to "kiss me through the hole of this vile wall", Thisbe responds "I kiss the wall's hole, not your lips at all" (5.1.198-9), words that are once again

susceptible to a bawdy construction (see Partridge 1968: 121, s.v. “hole”). It is because they are frustrated in their efforts to fulfil their passion for one another while the wall remains so obdurately present that the two young people make arrangements for what is potentially a more gratifying encounter beyond the city gates, while Wall, having discharged his part in the playlet and become irrelevant, “away doth go” (5.1.203). The scene now shifts to the tomb situated outside the city precincts to which the lovers have agreed to repair and where they will meet their fate. In their case as well, though only in parody, the repudiation of walls and what they signify will lead to death.

5.

It has often been noted that the sketch based on the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, with its depiction of a pair of lovers who are thwarted in their desire to wed and who elope into the forest beyond the confines of their city, reflects on the plot of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a whole.¹⁵ What is less frequently accorded the attention it warrants are the implications of Bottom's brief commentary on the interlude at its conclusion: “the wall is down that parted their fathers” (5.1.337-8). The question that arises in connection with this remark is that of whose fathers, precisely, are being referred to. While Bottom's words obviously have some relevance to the story of Pyramus and Thisbe that has just been enacted, inasmuch as it is a physical wall that separates the dwellings occupied by the families of the two lovers, it is relevance of a very circumscribed kind.¹⁶ The detail about it being ‘fathers’ who are divided seems to imply that there is an antagonism between the lovers’ parents of which the dividing wall is an emblem, whereas neither in the sketch nor in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a whole is there any suggestion that enmity between families plays any part in the drama whatsoever. Indeed, the only parent who has any role in the

¹⁵ Marjorie Garber observes for instance that “as presented by Peter Quince and his players, ‘Pyramus and Thisbe’ is nothing less than the countermyth of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – the thing that did not happen, the tragedy encapsulated within the comedy and reduced to a manageable, bearable, and laughable fiction” (2005, 233-4). For a detailed discussion of the relevance of the Pyramus and Thisbe story to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, see Rudd 2000.

¹⁶ If the emendation proposed by Brooks is correct, then Bottom's words may hark back to Theseus's remarks upon Wall's departure that “Now is the mure rased between the two neighbours” (5.1.204; see Shakespeare 2006, 159-62). Even if this is accepted, however, there seems no reason to assume that the word “neighbours” refers to anyone other than Pyramus and Thisbe themselves, in which case the conjectural emendation does not solve the problem posed by Bottom's words.

play is Hermia's father Egeus, whose motive for obstructing the marriage of his daughter to the man she loves is that he has another matrimonial project in mind for her. In the Pyramus and Thisbe sketch that is presented at Theseus's palace too no fathers are mentioned, and although Quince's original casting for the play does include Pyramus's father and both of Thisbe's parents these personages have been quietly suppressed before the final performance (1.2.56-9). But if it has only limited application to the interlude and to the play of which it is a part, Bottom's observation that "the wall is down that parted their fathers" does have a very close bearing on *Romeo and Juliet*, which concludes with the reconciliation of the two families whose strife has been responsible for the tragedy of the two young lovers of that play, and with the promise on the part of the grieving and penitent fathers to commission statues commemorating their children that will lie side by side (5.3.297-303).¹⁷ As Amy J. Riess and George Walton Williams argue,

the barrier between feuding parents – not in Ovid, not in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, not in 'Pyramus and Thisby' – must allude to a situation that the audience would have recognized: the 'Pyramus and Thisby' playlet deconstructs the wall of *Romeo and Juliet* hostility and ends with *Romeo and Juliet* reconciliation.¹⁸

(1992, 215)

Though Wall merely departs from the scene once he has done his duty in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it is in *Romeo and Juliet* that a metaphorical wall dividing the two households manifestly though belatedly crumbles.

This is one of a number of occasions in which *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and more particularly the Pyramus and Thisbe sketch contained within it, seems to make sly reference to *Romeo and Juliet*. It has sometimes been maintained that the interlude is, as Samuel B. Hemingway argued over a century ago, "a burlesque not only of the romantic tragedy of love in general, but of *Romeo and Juliet* in particular" (1911, 80), as if Shakespeare was recoiling from the excessive sentimentality he had himself indulged in, perhaps in deference to the tastes of a paying public greedy for heady emotionalism, in that other play. But there are signs, too, that the game of oblique reference might not be operating in one direction only, and that it is as much *Romeo and Juliet* that is echoing *A Mid-*

¹⁷ It is Capulet who uses the verb "lie" (5.3.302), which suggests that the effigies are intended to surmount a sarcophagus or tomb rather than stand erect. If this is the case, then the surviving parents of Romeo and Juliet are fulfilling the dying wish expressed by Thisbe that, as Chaucer puts it, "in o grave y-fere we moten lye" (1969, 371).

¹⁸ Barber makes a similar point (1990, 152 n.).

summer Night's Dream as the reverse.¹⁹ The fact that Mercutio, in his astonishing Queen Mab speech, is as A.D. Nuttall puts it "allowed to imagine the as yet unwritten *Midsummer Night's Dream*" (2007, 108) is an obvious case in point, but I wish to conclude this discussion with an instance that is more immediately pertinent to the story of Pyramus and Thisbe whose reverberations we have been tracing here. For some readers at least, one of the most incongruous moments in *Romeo and Juliet* is that following the discovery of the inanimate body of Juliet on the morning she is supposed to marry Paris. The audience is of course aware that Juliet is not really dead, but only slumbering under the effects of Friar Laurence's potion, but no one upon the stage except for the friar himself is possessed of such knowledge. As Juliet's family converge upon the scene they embark upon a curious series of antiphonal laments which, while taking their inspiration from Brooke, go much further than him. Capulet informs Paris that Death has "lain with" Juliet (4.5.36), and although there may be some covert irony to be discerned in the implicit association between the personified figure of Death and Romeo himself, and in the assimilation of the principles of Eros and Thanatos that is reflected in such an association, the description of the girl as "Flower as she was, deflowered by him" seems a trifle too mannered for a man in the throes of grief (4.5.37). What is interesting is that the image of death as deflowering is also found in the Pyramus and Thisbe sketch in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, when Pyramus says that "lion vile hath here deflower'd my dear" (5.1.281), the sexual connotations of the word being plainly ridiculous in this latter context. As Riess and Williams point out, the word "deflower" is a "revamping of Golding's word 'Devour'", from which it might be inferred that Shakespeare "changed 'devour' to 'deflower' so that Pyramus could echo Capulet", and that "the inappropriateness of the usage in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* argues strongly that the appropriate usage preceded in *Romeo and Juliet*" (1992, 217).

This is a plausible line of argument, but what is perhaps to be questioned is the extent to which the usage of the word in *Romeo and Juliet* is indeed to be regarded as appropriate, for the fact is that the entire se-

¹⁹ This is not the place to go into the vexed issue of the relative chronology of the two works. Different editors and commentators have expressed varying opinions about whether *Romeo and Juliet* preceded *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or whether the reverse is the case. Suffice it to say that, as Harold F. Brooks puts it, "what cannot be doubted, whichever play is the earlier, is the close relationship between them" (2006, xlv). It is perhaps worth adding that before they were actually printed in the respective quarto versions of each (1597 in the case of the first quarto of *Romeo and Juliet*, and 1600 in that of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), it is perfectly possible that either or both could have been modified in the light of the other.

quence of dirges that follows the discovery of Juliet's apparently lifeless body borders dangerously on the farcical. Capulet himself is propelled by the force of his conceit about Death the dark bridegroom to the brink of absurdity:

Death is my son-in-law, Death is my heir.
 My daughter he hath wedded. I will die,
 And leave him all: life, living, all is Death's.
 (4.5.38-40)

It seems improbable that we are to take this entirely seriously, and any temptation to do so would be undercut by the Nurse's contribution to the succession of lamentations uttered by those gathered about the body of Juliet. For after Lady Capulet has railed against the "Accurs'd, unhappy, wretched, hateful day!" (4.5.43), the Nurse, not to be outdone, launches into her own variation on the theme:

O woe! O woeful, woeful, woeful day.
 Most lamentable day. Most woeful day
 That ever, ever I did yet behold.
 O day, O day, O day, O hateful day.
 Never was seen so black a day as this.
 O woeful day, O woeful day.
 (4.5.49-54)

While it may be the aqua-vitae she has called for that most immediately prompts this inspired outburst (4.5.16), what should not be overlooked is that the Nurse's words have a striking parallel in the passage in the Pyramus and Thisbe sketch in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in which Pyramus, approaching the wall through which he is to speak to Thisbe, pronounces the following lines:

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!
 (5.1.168-71)

Although Pyramus's words might seem to be a travesty of the Nurse's diatribe, the fact is that the Nurse's words are already so ludicrous in themselves as to make parody superfluous. What appears more likely instead is that it is the Nurse's words which – whether through recollection or anticipation – are echoing those uttered by Pyramus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. If such is the case then what we are observing, once again, is not only a verbal link between the two plays, and what amounts to being a

tacit invitation to read each in the light of the other, but a deliberate signal embedded in *Romeo and Juliet* that lying in the background of that play as well is the Ovidian story of star-crossed lovers that inspires the theatrical efforts of Peter Quince and his companions.

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