Ovid's Pyramus and Thisbe: Lamentable New Comedy

While Ovid's *Amores* and *Ars Amatoria* occasionally appropriate the conventions of New Comedy, *Metamorphoses* more frequently toys with tragic tropes (Curley, 2013; Currie, 1981). Book 3 relates the Theban tragedies, and the opening of Book 4 appears to continue the tragic mode when the daughters of Minyas refuse to worship Bacchus (god of theater, inter alia). One of the Minyads narrates the story of Pyramus and Thisbe (4.55-166), which Ovid describes as a *fabula* (4.53), a drama. Its brutally tragic ending has obscured the extent to which the narrator develops her *fabula* with features reminiscent of New Comedy. This paper argues for the influence of the *palliata* on Pyramus and Thisbe, and concludes that Shakespeare celebrates the generic ambiguity of Ovid's tragicomedy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where the rude mechanicals translate the script of Pyramus and Thisbe into a drama of "very tragical mirth" (5.1.57).

The cast and plot of Pyramus and Thisbe promise an episode from the *palliata*: young lovers in neighboring houses cannot join because of parental prohibition; the couple expresses their feelings in a paraclausithyron; a clever idea will circumvent the main obstacle to unite them. However, their secret assignation goes horribly wrong and foils comic expectations, partly because exotic Babylon is not a Greek *polis* and partly because the lovers ignore or misconstrue New Comic conventions. Perhaps because Thisbe herself is *callida* (4.93), they do not seek help from a *servus callidus*; instead, they themselves devise a foolish plan. Rather than simply knock through the obstructing *paries* (cf. *Miles Gloriosus*), or use disguise to arrange a meeting within the city, the couple ventures beyond Babylon's *muros*. Outside the safety of the city, they seek no life-affirming Shakespearean Green World, but a cemetery in a desert, a mise-en-scène for tragedy. Their rendezvous is not facilitated by a helpful *lena* but thwarted by a savage *leaena*

(perhaps not coincidentally the name of the bawd in *Curculio*). Pyramus misapprehends the recognition token of Thisbe's mantle and kills himself.

Although Niklas Holzberg (1988) drew attention to some comic motifs in the Pyramus and Thisbe episode, Alison Keith's otherwise excellent discussion of generic influences focuses solely on elegy, romance, and tragedy (2002). Keith's earlier study (2001) demonstrates how puns and anagrams link *amor* ("love"), *mors* ("death"), *mora* (both "mulberries" and "delay"), and *haimoroa* ("flowing blood"), thereby affiliating the tale with Alexandrian aetiology and Roman erotic elegy. We might add another pun, namely *morus* ("fool," foolish"). This Latin calque of Greek *mōros* is unique to Plautus, who generates puns worthy of Ovid, such as: *amor…mores hominum moros et morosos facit* (*Trinummus* 669). Echoes of *morus* in *Metamorphoses* encourage the listener to assimilate the foolish behavior of the young lovers with the *palliata*: what fools these mortals be!

Some have lambasted Ovid for a lapse of taste in describing the death of Pyramus with the simile of the burst conduit. But we should see this as the internal narrator's—not Ovid's—lack of control or taste in the mixing of genres. When the Minyad's *fabula* pivots from comedy to tragedy, her diction remains grotesquely comical. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* provides an intertextual parallel for a competent poet (Shakespeare) mocking a narrator's (Peter Quince) or performer's (Nick Bottom) failure to follow a genre's conventions. Quince, carpenter and aspiring dramatist, proclaims to his actors that: "Our play is 'The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe'" (1.2.11-12). One may deride Quince's dramaturgical naiveté and shoddy Latin, in this instance for construing Ovid's *fabula* as "comedy," via a contemporary definition found in Cooper's Latin *Thesaurus* (Taylor, 2003). And yet, his title provides a perceptively accurate epitome of the Minyad's tale as a comedy turned tragic. When

the overzealous Bottom embellishes the death of Pyramus, his bathos redirects what should be tragic back toward the comic. This might recall the Minyad's awkwardly un-tragic presentation of Pyramus' death, and it may be no coincidence that both storytellers are weavers (Burrow, 2013). The mechanicals' play activates the New Comic elements implicit in *Metamorphoses*. Wondrously, their interlude befits the outer play's unions of Hermia and Lysander, Helena and Demetrius, Hippolyta and Theseus, by affirming that Ovid's *fabula* was indeed a most lamentable New Comedy.

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