Communication through Intertextuality: Uses of Ovid in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

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Chapter I: Introduction

G.K. Chesterton described *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as, "a psychological study, not of a solitary man, but of a spirit that unites mankind."[1] Although much of his approach to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* otherwise fails to match the depth of modern critical analysis, this observation that the play creates – or recreates – an atmosphere of unity and shared human experience goes some way towards describing the core of Shakespeare's artistry as demonstrated in the play, and partly illustrates my own reason for being interested in it, as the Classical influences throughout are fundamental to this effect. Shakespeare takes inspiration from ancient texts, and makes use of the material to create both characters and plot which are intuitively recognisable and familiar, despite Classical literature's often remote and inaccessible status in the minds of many. In the playwright's own day, Ovid, from whom the bulk of the mythological references are taken, was habitually taught in schools as a basic educational text. However, this relative ubiquity in the classroom does not necessarily mean that ancient literature was vastly more accessible than it is today for a modern audience, not least because the play may have been performed before a variety of audiences with variable levels of education. Today, translations are freely available in many different languages and formats, yet ancient texts retain their connotations of being difficult and obscure. Regardless, Shakespeare uses this medium almost like a paintbrush, to wash over his characters and render them both complex and comprehensible. He makes use of Classical material to create something at once ethereal and fundamentally human: both exotic, in its fantastical removal from the everyday, yet familiar as part of an inherited culture, perhaps half-remembered from school lessons or recognised from other representations in popular culture. It is this rather nebulous combination which first piqued my curiosity to find out not only how Shakespeare made use of Classical material, but also to look at the effect that it has on his audiences. One major variable in determining this effect, both at the end of the 16th century and today, is the level of prior knowledge the audience has of the Classical world and of the sources that Shakespeare uses.

This gives rise to my overall research question, which is "does knowledge of Shakespeare's Classical sources enrich our understanding of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?"

The apparently mythological setting of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Athens does little to mask the Englishness of its soul. The fairies, beside Titania, have folkloric names and characters. Their relationships and social hierarchy are also firmly rooted in English folklore rather than Classical mythology; for example, as Buccola notes, 'As a male monarch in a

[1] In his essay "A Midsummer Night's Dream", published posthumously in obscure circumstances and taken here from the 1972 collection *On Shakespeare*.

realm ruled by a queen, Oberon is something between ruler and ruled.'[2] Titania's strong-willed character is not breaking social conventions as might be assumed by a modern audience – the folklore of the time was matriarchal, and the fairy queen took precedence. '[F]or an early modern audience, fairy land would have been recognized as a domain where the *queen* had exclusive sovereign authority…'[3]

The Classical setting, therefore, seems almost an unconvincing façade, barely disguising the native cultural context. This initially made me question why it would be set there at all. However, it certainly helps to create the overall Classical-style atmosphere, and enables the characterisation which relies on this atmosphere, as I will discuss later. These characters, Shakespeare's most fanciful, speak to us in an intuitive way despite their apparent removal from our own reality. Even in a world of fairy enchantment, the problems and emotions of the lovers and the fairies alike are also recognisably our own. Oberon and Titania fall out over a mythological problem which belonged first to Jupiter and Juno, but they do so with very human childishness – a juxtaposition which itself mirrors the anthropomorphically flawed gods of the ancient poets.

Criticism

The fairy king and queen both accuse each other of similar flaws – deceit, adultery and theft – and admit to them quite openly during their first encounter in Act II, scene i. This honesty regarding their faults is not only comic in its opposition to audience expectations, but provides a touch of ironic realism when compared with the apparent perfection and serenity of the other royal couple, Theseus and Hippolyta. J.L. Calderwood's anamorphic analysis[4] of the play presumes that the same actors would play both couples, adding visual force to this comparison and aligning with the modern psychoanalytic theory that holds Titania and Oberon to be the sexualised projections of Theseus' and Hippolyta's psyches, liberated from social convention. Although Calderwood's fascinating analysis is perhaps not directly relevant to my intertextual approach, it provokes questions about the multiple layers of communication within the play, and on its most basic level affirms the view that, just like the famous anamorphic Holbein painting *The Ambassadors* to which Calderwood refers, Shakespeare's play contains an almost unsettling and serious note within its core which becomes apparent when viewed from the correct angle. The fairies and moonlight give way to an impression of human love which is both fallible and unsatisfying. It is not

[2] Buccola, *Fairies, Fractious Women, and the Old Faith: Fairy Lore in Early Modern British Drama and Culture* (2006) p. 72
[3] Walters, *Oberon and Masculinity in Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2013), p. 1
[4] Calderwood, *A Midsummer Night's Dream: Anamorphism and Theseus' Dream* (1991)

founded on the eternal, objective assurance of a conventional love story, but is as uncertain and fragile as human emotion itself.

This theme of looking at things in a new way is relevant generally throughout the play. I would argue that the presentation of the play through a Classical veneer makes us invest more effort into interpretation while watching it, and allows us to see more clearly what is actually being shown to us. We are able to evaluate each character and their actions with the objective distance granted to us by a certain emotional removal from them, just as certain elements of a painting can become clearer when the viewer steps back rather than leaning closer in. The characters live in the distant, romantic world of ancient legend, yet are familiar enough to be comprehensible.

Amidst the psychoanalytic criticism of the mid-20th century, A. Lewis wrote that, 'we have grown so accustomed to an oft repeated reading that we gloss over other meanings of the words'[5], and goes on to deconstruct some of Theseus' early lines with a much more Freudian and sexual focus than romantic; 'Instead of preserving the restrictions imposed by the sanctity of marriage, Theseus may be the bawdy libertine in a dark comedy of sexual anonymity.' Although this psychoanalytic approach lies outside the remit of this thesis, it demonstrates that examining the play as a complex work with a darker subtext is not a new one. However, examining the ways in which the Classical material contributes to and emphasises this subtext is a different approach; while many studies touch upon Ovid's influence or explain the mythology behind certain elements, most do not focus upon it as a major factor in creating and supporting a dimension of the play which otherwise would be obscured or inaccessible.

Previous decades saw many critics investigating Shakespeare's sources, both near-contemporary and ancient, for example Geoffrey Bullough's comprehensive series of volumes *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*[6], and Kenneth Muir's article on the likely sources of the Pyramus and Thisbe inset play[7], both dating from the 1950s. While these are fascinating in their own right and suggest many interesting points of contact between Shakespeare's works and ancient texts[8], the results of these earlier inquiries often seem to result simply in a demonstration that he consulted multiple sources, and do not

[5] Lewis, *A Midsummer Night's Dream: Fairy Fantasy or Erotic Nightmare?* (1969) p. 252
[6] Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (1958)
[7] Muir, *Pyramus and Thisbe: A Study in Shakespeare's Method* (1954)
[8] Investigation of Shakespeare's sources often leads into the related and hotly contested question of how extensive his Classical reading really was. However, the relevance of that debate is incidental here as Shakespeare clearly referred to Ovid whether in translation or not – though it is my opinion that a reading of the Latin original partly informed his choice of text.

always go much further in terms of interpretation. However, my research is nonetheless related to these studies in taking an intertextual approach to Shakespeare's play.

Approach

My approach to the play throughout this research is intertextual. That is to say, I approach *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with the understanding that, although an original piece of theatrical art, it carries within it the influences and echoes of innumerable other pieces of art, and that this quality of relationality forms my main focus. Intertextuality 'is a term by no means exclusively related to literary works, or even simply to written communication'[9], though within the limits of this thesis and the historical nature of my investigation, I will not be making any more than purely general comments regarding other forms of art.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, intertextual references range from the outright textual parody of Pyramus and Thisbe, to more subtle touches like Titania's listing Theseus' previous lovers in Act II.i. These represent slightly different forms of intertextuality, as the term covers a wide variety of usages. Robert Miola defined three broader categories in his article, 'Seven Types of Intertextuality'[10]. The first category comprises four types, all of which are 'mediated directly through the author'; revision, translation, quotation, and sources. The second category takes one step away from the author's original text, and regards 'traditions', in which 'in which the originary text may never have ever been read by the author at all'. This includes conventions and configurations, and genres. The final and third category 'consists of what any audience brings to a text rather than what the author put in'. This is a very broad category, difficult to define, and only includes one type; paralogues. These are defined as, 'texts that illuminate the intellectual, social, theological, or political meanings in other texts…[which] move horizontally and analogically in discourses rather than in vertical lineation through the author's mind or intention.' When discussing Shakespeare's references to Classical texts, these will fall mostly within the first category, and are largely of the 'sources' type. To give some examples, Pyramus and Thisbe as represented in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* relies on Ovid's myth in the *Metamorphoses* as a 'source proximate'; the later author alters and reimagines the text in his own manner, but the completed work is still explicitly related to the original in fundamental ways. The characters of Theseus and Hippolya could also be said to fit into this definition. However, the character of Titania would be more appropriately described as relating to Ovidian

[9] Allen, *Intertextuality: The New Critical Idiom* (2000). *Introduction* p. 5
[10] Miola, *Seven Types of Intertextuality* (2004). Quotations throughout this paragraph taken from this article, pp. 14-23

mythology as a 'source remote'; there is no one specific model upon which it is cast, but rather it is a composite of multiple influences and ideas, conflated and reinvented into a new form.

I will first make a relatively brief examination of the more general Classical and Ovidian material within the play, focusing on setting elements and the character names in the chapter 'Ovidian Material in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*'. This touches on Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*, from the *Canterbury Tales* written in the late 14th century, as well as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* more generally. In the following chapter, 'Textual and Non-textual Parodies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*', I will look at specific points of intertextuality and their effects, and carry out a more in-depth comparison of Shakespeare's Pyramus and Thisbe inset play with Ovid's myth[11].

As is apparent from my research question, my focus lies with the audience and their perception of the play, although I naturally draw conclusions based on the intertextual nature of the work. The term 'intertextual' necessarily implies a certain relationality of meaning (Allen states, when discussing Roland Barthes, 'every text has its meaning, therefore, in relation to other texts'[12]) which, in my opinion, Shakespeare exploits by 'encoding' his underlying meaning in the more obviously intertextual elements, thereby encouraging us to decode and analyse it. This makes it a 'joint effort' between the playwright and the audience; rather than the ubiquitous linguistic intertextuality described by Barthes[13], Shakespeare employs deliberate and persistent references which require active interpretation by the audience. However, it is not the case that the play is entirely dependent on the hypotext of the *Metamorphoses* for comprehensibility. My argument is not that the play requires a knowledge of Ovid and Classical mythology in order to understand anything of it at all, but that for a reader or audience member who possesses this foreknowledge, there are additional layers of meaning to be recognised and discovered.

I argue that, when viewed not only with the general cultural affinity with the Classical world felt by many in Europe, but in the light of specific knowledge of mythology (and particularly that described in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*), Shakespeare's play offers a comprehensively subversive view of love, human nature and marriage. (Given that it has been widely hypothesised by critics over the generations that *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

[11] In the play, this is at lines 1951-2193, with Ovid's telling of the myth in the Metamorphoses book IV, lines 55-166.
[12] Allen, as above, p. 6
[13] Barthes, *The Death of the Author* (1967)

was written to be performed at a court wedding[14], to undermine the romantic characters and to hint at a rather more ambiguous view of love is certainly subversive.)

The characters' removal from us, by being doubly enclosed in both a dramatic and a mythological space, allows us to watch them with the objective and critical eye of the characters in the last scene watching Pyramus and Thisbe. Presenting what we see as fantastical art rather than reality, while giving us the necessary tools to interpret it as both, enabled Shakespeare to present a play of dual nature. He undermines and even parodies the image of noble love and courtship that seems to be the most central theme, and by the end of the play, most audience members will be left with a clinging sense of unease at Oberon's trickery of Titania, the bewitchment of Demetrius, and the ease with which Theseus ultimately overrides 'the law of Athens [...]which by no means we may extenuate' (I.i, 124-5). But for the spectator who has an understanding of the Ovidian material, this subconscious unease runs throughout the play. It was the apparent Chaucerian contradiction between Theseus, the noble, rational patriarch of Athens and his rather more infamous mythological personality, acknowledged in the opening lines, with

> Hippolyta, I woo'd thee with my sword,
> And won thy love, doing thee injuries; 20

which initially drew my attention to the way a specifically Classical approach to the play opens up its inner parody. For the audience, this begins with the first pieces of information that they are given; the setting, including not only the background which may have been more or less visually suggestive of Athens, but also elements such as costume, and of course the names of the characters who first appear on stage. This observation forms my main argument; throughout, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* presents us with many hints that its appearance of light-hearted fantastical love story is not to be taken at face value, and that its purpose is to cause us to reflect more deeply on the behaviour which we observe on stage. These hints take the form of intertextual references to ancient mythology, mostly Ovid, which often reveal a double or alternative meaning to elements of the play. As a result, an understanding of Ovid's work and Classical mythology in general gives a deeper and more detailed view of the play.

[14] Exactly which wedding this was is not known with certainty, but one candidate is the 1596 marriage of Elizabeth Carey to Thomas, son of Lord Berkeley. The bride was the granddaughter of the Lord Chamberlain, Henry Carey; Shakespeare's theatrical company was the Lord Chamberlain's Men. This point of view is convincingly presented by David Wiles in his book, *Shakespeare's Almanac* (1993).

Chapter II: Names & Setting in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Whether the audience of a play is watching it be performed or reading the text to themselves, in order to understand what is going on, they must pay attention to the characters' names and the play's setting. But in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, characters' names have a far more substantial role than simply differentiating between the characters on stage. Firstly, they fall into two very different registers, so that to even the most casual observer they provide a clear division of class, and set apart the nobility from the common people. The nobility have names taken from Greek myth, although these do not necessarily correlate with their mythological counterparts' personalities or relationships to each other with consistency. The low-class characters have names which draw on traditional English folklore and derive from the Germanic lexicon. For audience members without much familiarity with Greek or Latin, the low-class characters (the 'mechanicals') become far more relatable in this way. They have a first and a last name, following the contemporary English convention; Peter Quince, Francis Flute, Nick Bottom, etc. These gain some of their comic value because they are recognisable. However, the characters that they appear alongside – Hippolyta, Theseus, Hermia – would be rendered ridiculous by this conventional . They have only a single name because they exist in an elevated and rarefied sphere, in which there is only one Hermia and one Theseus, and no further qualification is necessary.

The first two characters to appear before the audience have, perhaps, the most remarkable names, certainly when their mythological context is taken into consideration. The first character to be named on stage is Hippolyta, whom Shakespeare presents as an urbane and relatively conventional princess, engaged to marry Theseus, the Duke of Athens. Although Hippolyta appears from the beginning, the best impression of her character can be taken from the final scene, in Act V in which she exchanges witticisms with Theseus while watching the play-within-a-play presenting the story of Pyramus and Thisbe. She speaks to Theseus with appropriate respect, but also with a confidently affectionate tone – "'Tis strange, my Theseus" (Act V.i, 1) – and seems to embody the ideal noble wife by combining the virtues of intelligence, grace and modesty. Yet her name in Greek means an 'unbridled horse', which is fitting for an Amazonian queen who, as we are told in the very first scene, 'woo'd' with Theseus' sword.

Theseus, meanwhile, seems the epitome of a wise and paternal ruler; the Elizabethan ideal, finding a just compromise to problems, and exercising authority appropriately but with fairness and benevolence. When Egeus comes to him with the problem of Hermia's marriage in I.i Theseus' first recourse is to reason and patience, explaining to Hermia why she is wrong to disobey her father and what the consequences may be if she continues:

> Take time to pause; and, by the nest new moon—
> The sealing-day betwixt my love and me,
> For everlasting bond of fellowship— 90

Upon that day either prepare to die
For disobedience to your father's will,
Or else to wed Demetrius, as he would;
Or on Diana's altar to protest
For aye austerity and single life. 95

Theseus is also a respectful and affectionate future husband to Hippolyta. The presumed violence of her capture, though mentioned in speech, is not otherwise alluded to or reflected in the couple's actions. In fact, the happy wedding between this royal couple is the backdrop to the play's action, and the pinnacle of the final celebrations.

However, to any observer who knows their mythology, Shakespeare's choice of names for the royal couple here seems rather strange. Of course, the play is set in Athens, and so as the great hero of ancient Athens, the choice of Theseus' name is not a very great leap of the imagination. Theseus as a noble duke, reigning with benevolence, is an image which comes directly from Chaucer, though it is has its origins in Theseus' legendary status as the ruler who organised the twelve demes and unified the people of Attica. But just as there is no specific reason to set the play in Athens – the setting is at no point particularly vital to the plot – there is no clear reason to cast Theseus, an infamous serial monogamist even by Classical standards, in the role of a devoted fiancé. One of the best-known letters of Ovid's *Heroides* is written in the voice of Ariadne, a woman not only emotionally but also quite literally deserted by Theseus in one of the more callous acts of any hero's career. Another of the *Heroides* is written by Phaedra, Ariadne's sister and Theseus' later wife. Addressing Hippolytus, Hippolyta's son, she describes how his mother was killed outright by Theseus;

prima securigeras inter virtute puellas
te peperit, nati digna vigore parens;
si quaeras ubi sit—Theseus latus ense peregit... (*Heroides* IV, 117-119)

The fiercest among the axe-wielding maidens bore you, a mother worthy of her son's strength; if you ask where she is – Theseus drove his sword through her side...

This violent behaviour seems totally incompatible with Shakespeare's noble patriarch. But these lines come from Ovid, the source which we see reflected so clearly throughout the play. As well as Ovid, Shakespeare also read Seneca[15], whose plays so greatly informed English dramatists in the Elizabethan age ('Seneca cannot be too heavy, nor Plautus too light', *Hamlet* II. ii), and would have known his tragedy *Phaedra*. That play not only describes the gruesome demise in store for Hippolytus, but also presents Theseus in a less-than-favourable light, leaving his wife at home while he goes with Pirithous to abduct Persephone.

[15] Arkins, *Heavy Seneca: His Influence on Shakespeare's Tragedies* (1995) p. 1

It would seem perverse to ignore such an extreme contrast between the personality of the mythological Theseus, and the way that Shakespeare paints him[16]. When he chooses to, Shakespeare finds character names with no particularly strong resonance, as we see in the cases of Demetrius and Lysander. Rather than a blind imitation of Chaucer or an oversight by the playwright, I argue that the dissonance between the mythological characters of Theseus and Hippolyta and their incarnations on the stage in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* functions as a signal to the audience. We are meant to see both versions of Theseus, one on the stage and one in our mind's eye, and compare them, and this process is how parody is created. The violent, reckless womaniser has been placed into the role of courtly lover and the effect is inherently ridiculous; if we know the history of Theseus' character, we cannot look at him on stage without recalling it. It is difficult to take his solemn proclamation of Athenian law seriously with this in mind. In this way, from the very beginning, the audience who is acquainted with Ovid will question the apparently idyllic scene before them. This, in turn, will allow them greater insight into the subversive subtext of the play, as they are prepared from the outset to think more carefully about what they see.

Further evidence that Shakespeare had Chaucer in mind when writing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* can be seen in the character of Philostrate. Philostrate is the name taken by Chaucer's Arcite when he returns covertly to Athens and takes up a position in Theseus' court under this new identity. Shakespeare's Philostrate is Theseus' Master of Revels, a role which existed in the real Elizabethan court. The Master of Revels was essentially the censor of all plays in London, and exerted almost complete power over Shakespeare's profession. It is easy to imagine that his favour or censure would be something desired and feared respectively by the actors and playwrights of the time. Where censorship occurs, it is almost inevitable that authors will attempt to draw attention to it and undermine it; the character of Philostrate performs that function here, both by making recommendations which are summarily ignored by Theseus in Act V.i, but also by virtue of his name, which is synonymous with an impostor in the well-known literary canon of the time. This effect is highlighted further if the Greek meaning of his name is taken into account, as J.H. Blits points out; "But although his Greek name means 'lover of battle', Philostrate's sole duty is to be Theseus' 'manager of mirth'"[17] (V.i, line 35). This touch of additional ridicule relies upon the Greek name being understood; although the character is not taken directly from Ovid, this is a joke for Shakespeare's more learned audience members.

During the conversation between Titania and Oberon in Act II. i, when they accuse each other of infidelity with both Theseus and Hippolyta respectively, Titania mentions several

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[16] In using the names of Theseus and Hippolyta as an idealised royal couple Shakespeare follows the example of Chaucer, who does the same in The Knight'sTale. His contemporary audience would almost certainly all be familiar with this. Criticism of The Knight's Tale, though fascinating, clearly falls outside the remit of this thesis; however, it is my belief that in emulating Chaucer's noble couple, Shakespeare also reproduces the subversive function the fulfil in Chaucer's text in A Midsummer Night's Dream.

[17] Blits, *The Soul of Athens: Shakespeare's* A Midsummer Night's Dream*,* 2003. *Introduction* p. 1

other names of women that Theseus had loved; Ariadne, Perigouna and Antiope, references which would require a listener to be both more attentive and perhaps more well-read in order to catch. This passage also contains the only specific reference to Hippolyta's mythological character as Queen of the Amazons; Titania describes her with a sneer, as 'your buskin'd mistress and your warrior love' (II. i, 440). These references might be rather easily lost in this argumentative scene, especially during live performance, yet they seem more than a show of knowledge on the playwright's part. They act as subtle intertextual threads, drawing together the Classical characters with their Shakespearean incarnations. In the context of this scene, the premarital infidelities of both Theseus and Hippolyta deliberately remind the audience of their mythological personalities. We are reminded that these characters have more to their stories and 'lives' than we see acted out upon the stage. The actions of Theseus the legendary hero of Athens begin to tinge our perception of Theseus the ideal Elizabethan monarch.

The overall effect of this is the decided subversion, rather than confirmation, of this royal wedding. Here Shakespeare hints to the audience that all may not be as it seems, not only with the fairies in the fantasy realm, but also in the halls of the highest nobility. From there, it is not so great a leap of imagination to apply this idea to the real world – especially given that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was almost certainly performed first at a real wedding.

Equally worthy of attention are the names of Titania and Oberon. Although members of the fairy realm and so not equal in status to the courtly characters, they are king and queen of their realm. As such, they demand a higher register of name than the purely folkloric Puck, Cobweb, Mustardseed and Peaseblossom, and therefore have hybrid names; not taken directly from characters of Classical mythology, but certainly not from the common lexicon either. The word *titania* is used by Ovid as an epithet of Diana, Circe, Leto, and even Hecate; clearly, it refers to 'Titan's daughter', as Golding translates it – interestingly enough, he does not leave the word *titania* untranslated at any point, and so Shakespeare's use of the Latin form implies familiarity with the original – and this epithet can be applied to any daughter of a Titan. However, the character of Shakespeare's Titania possesses several of the attributes most famously belonging to Juno; she is no meek and modest wife, but a fiery, proud fairy Queen whose first introductory mention in the play in Act II. i is in opposition to her husband's whim;

> Take heed the queen come not within his sight; 386
> For Oberon is passing fell and wrath,
> Because that she as her attendant hath
> A lovely boy…
> And jealous Oberon would have the child 391

Like Juno, Titania is not afraid to provoke anger in her husband and act in her own interests. Juno, though not wishing to rebel against Jupiter's supremacy, is a powerful goddess in her own right and a child of the same immortal parents. Titania demonstrates a similar innate independence of action and personality, and deals with her royal husband with even more self-confidence than is attributed to Juno.

The feud between the fairy king and queen, over a beautiful young boy 'stolen from an Indian king' (II. i, 389) is clearly rooted in the story of Ganymede, mentioned by many ancient

authors including Homer and featuring in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* book 10, narrated by Orpheus. In Ovid's version, Juno's anger is provoked by her jealousy, not only because of Jupiter's admiration for the boy's beauty but also because of the fact that he is a Trojan, and named so quite specifically as 'Iliades', highlighting this double insult:

> Nec mora, percusso mendacibus aere pennis
> abripit Iliaden; qui nunc quoque pocula miscet
> invitaque Iovi nectar Iunone ministrat. (*Met.* 10, 159-161)
>
> *Without delay, piercing the air on stolen wings, he [Jupiter] snatched away the Trojan boy; who, even now, mixes and serves the nectar in Jupiter's cup, against Juno's will.*

Titania's anger is much more straightforward. The boy is simply described as 'stolen', without his abducter actually being named, but he quite definitely belongs to her and she resents Oberon's high-handed attempt to take what is hers. However, Juno's habitual jealousy is lacking in Titania; in fact, she rather accuses Oberon of it in II. i, line 450, when he has stated that she is responsible for Theseus' abandonment of so many other women:

> These are the forgeries of jealousy: 450
> And never, since the middle summer's spring,
> Met we on hill, in dale, forest or mead[...]
> But with thy brawls thou hast disturb'd our sport. 456

In keeping with the folklore native to Shakespeare's England, this fairy queen is both willing and able to defend her property. J.L. Calderwood, whose anamorphic reading of the play also relates Titania to Hippolyta and Oberon to Theseus, suggests that Oberon's demand for the child does not represent an actual dispute over physical property, but a desire for 'the gift of Titania's love and obedience'[18], which is not forthcoming in this world of Amazons and fairy queens. This makes the reflection of the story of Ganymede a true mirroring, as the emotional roles are reversed and presented backwards; Oberon-Jupiter eventually resorting to traditionally more feminine methods of trickery and deceit to secure the devotion of Titania-Juno.

The parallels with Juno are well-defined, but do not result in a simple equation of the two characters. The many references to nature made by Titania, one example of which is evident in the passage quoted above, emphasise and support her status as a folkloric fairy queen; she, Oberon and their fairy court live in the woods, in an entirely natural landscape. Her servants Cobweb, Mustardseed and Peaseblossom are named after delicate, small features of this organic context; this diminutive quality of their names is the fairy equivalent of the effect that distinguishes the mechanicals as belonging to the lower class. This setting, not only natural but also wild and devoid of the influence of agriculture, contributes to the association of Titania with Diana, the most directly apparent reference of her name. She deepens this association herself when speaking of the stolen boy's mother:

> His mother was a votaress of my order: 493
> And, in the spiced Indian air, by night,
> Full often hath she gossip'd by my side[...]

[18] Calderwood, as above, p. 415

Which she, with pretty and with swimming gait 500
Following,—her womb then rich with my young squire...

This image recalls the general theme, if not the details, of the story of Callisto told in *Metamorphoses* 2. Titania's reaction to her follower's pregnancy is entirely positive, quite the opposite of Diana's anger with Callisto when she is discovered, but the relationship between the two is very similar. Both Callisto and the unnamed 'votaress' are the favoured companions of the immortals that they follow:

[...]nec Maenalon attigit ulla
gratior hac Triviae. (*Met.* 2, 415-16)

[And] no-one of Maenalus was as dear to Diana as she was.

However, once again, Titania lacks the central trait of the goddess in question – here her commitment to virginity – and so this parallel can be appreciated as part of her character, but does not overtake her completely. She remains a thoroughly hybrid character, drawing her authority and status partly from the Classical goddesses whom she resembles, but remaining within the common sphere of folklore which allows her to display the very human level of psychological vulnerability of which Oberon takes advantage.

Oberon himself, though the fairy king and implicitly the Jupiter to Titania's Juno, does not bear a name of comparable Classical resonance although it is of a similar medium register, in that it derives from a legendary source. The name Oberon appears in a French *chanson de geste* from the 13th century, *Les Prouesses et faits du noble Huon de Bordeaux*, in which the character is already described as a fairy king, and he is also thought[19] to be the same or a similar character as the dwarf Alberich in the German epic *Nibelungenlied*. He is more explicitly folkloric in his origins, and this is evident in his behaviour; it is hard to imagine Jupiter laying aside his thunderbolts and using a herb to trick his wife or to dispense a kind of justice, as Oberon intends to do. However, his servant Puck, or Robin Goodfellow, does present certain aspects associated with Mercury despite his entirely non-Classical name. He acts as a messenger and practical servant, carrying out Oberon's orders, and is by nature shown to be a trickster[20]. He moves quickly – 'I'll put a girdle round about the earth / In forty minutes' (II. i, 548-49), and is the one who actually uses the transformative pansy-juice, to similar effect as Mercury's *caduceus*. This also has power when near the eyes, as Ovid describes in the story of Io. Mercury takes his 'virgam potenti somniferam' (*Met.* 1, 670-71), the 'wand with the power to induce sleep', to elude Argus' guard.

The names of the four lovers belong, as I mentioned, firmly in the Classical sphere, all of them being Greek in origin. However, none of them have a direct (or directly relevant) mythological namesake whom they resemble in any particularly meaningful way; their names seem intended to create the general setting and atmosphere of the Classical world, without referencing any specific characters outside the play. They are part of Shakespeare's creation of

[19] Aydelotte, *A Local Habitation and A Name': The Origins of Shakespeare's Oberon* (2012) p. 1
[20] The use of this term, which has been defined both narrowly and broadly, to describe Puck is discussed by R.C. Evans in his article "'This Sport Well Carried Shall Be Chronicled': Puck as Trickster in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*". (2010)

the fantasy realm, in which fairies live just beyond our perception, and where the heightened imaginations of lovers are, for a while at least, made real and tangible. Their names are in keeping with the fantastical setting of romantic Athens, and provide an accessible level of the exotic to all audience members, with or without any knowledge of mythology.

The one exception to this is Helena. She is the more conventionally beautiful of the two girls, which is appropriate given her namesake, the famous Helen of Troy. When she is introduced in Act I, and until the point at which Puck makes his mistaken application of the love herb, she complains to Hermia repeatedly about the fact that Demetrius, who had previously loved her, is now in love with Hermia. Here she is Helen inverted, the abandoned victim of adultery rather than the adulteress. She even goes so far as to physically pursue Demetrius, telling him in Act II.i,

> I'll follow thee and make a heaven of hell,
> To die upon the hand I love so well. 620

In chasing her beloved Demetrius, she commits a similar type of indiscretion as the mythological Helen, who also left her home at night to follow her lover. But his energetic resistance to her affection, in contrast to Paris, makes this tragic model into comedy.

This also provides a perfect example of love as madness; the same type of *furor* that leads to significantly more tragic consequences for so many characters, when love and reason are entirely separated. In Classical literature this *furor*, or frenzy, is generally the result of divine action; Seneca's Phaedra, for example, is the unfortunate victim of Venus' jealous anger when Hippolytus spurns her for Diana. This idea seems present in the words of Demetrius in Act IV. i, when he tells Egeus of his renewed love for Helena: 'I wot not by what power,— But by some power it is...' (line 1722).

However, Shakespeare's lovers are not theatrically tragic. As R.W. Dent observes: 'When, thanks to Dian's bud, Lysander returns to Hermia, his "true love", the return marks a release from dotage but no return to reason as such, any more than does Demetrius' return to Helena by the pansy-juice. Love's choices remain inexplicable...'[21] However, these inexplicable choices are not punished for their foolishness as they might be in a tragic setting. Hermia rebels against her father's will and suffers no consequences whatsoever, except for a night of emotional turmoil; her decision to run away with Lysander is rewarded by Theseus' permission to marry him, leaving Egeus no alternative but to comply with his daughter's choice. Helena's pursuit of Demetrius is ultimately worthwhile, at least from her perspective, as she does not realise that his affection is due to the pansy-juice.

So, by the end of the play, we are left with three pairs of lovers. Firstly, and above all, we have Theseus and Hippolyta who seem to present us with the ideal image of a harmonious and 'rational' couple, without overexcited passion. But for those who are able to consider them more closely, especially the naming of Theseus, this image is decidedly imperfect. Secondly, we have Hermia and Lysander, whose love for each other seems to be quintessential adolescent infatuation. '[Hermia's] choice is dictated not by her judgment but by her "eyes", by the vision

[21] Dent, *Imagination in A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1964) p. 116.

of Lysander as her love-dictated imagination reports it'[22]. As the lovers will soon observe for themselves in the play-within-the-play, this situation is fertile ground for tragedy. Pyramus and Thisbe, though treated comically by Shakespeare, meet an unhappy end when they defy their parents and pursue love for its own sake, as do so many other characters in literature both ancient and contemporary. Finally, Helena and Demetrius present a third archetype of love. From Helena's perspective, she has won back the heart of the man she loves and everything is as it should be. But the audience knows that Demetrius' love for Hermia at the beginning of the play is his real state. He truly did stop loving Helena, and preferred her friend; at the end of the play, his 'remembered' affection for Helena is the only evidence that the strange events of the previous night happened at all. Although the juice was only applied to his eyes, the two are both equally deceived in their love for each other.

Taking all these elements into account, the happy resolution we think we are presented with at the end of the play can be read as a subversive comment not only on love, but also on marriage. The triple wedding at the end sees Theseus, an infamous abducter and abandoner of women, marry an Amazon queen who, in versions of her myth, is killed by Hercules or the very husband to whom she is married onstage. Alongside them are one couple who have defied social conventions and had their plans to elope legitimised by the monarch, and another who were not a couple at all until the intervention of the fairy king, his mischievous servant, and the folkloric Cupid's arrow – the pansy that carries the same effect. Altogether, for those readers or audience members who are able to understand it, I believe there is a strong subtext which undermines the apparent intentions of the play.

[22] As note 21, p.117.

Chapter III: Textual parodies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Shakespeare's Ovidian and Classical inspiration goes far deeper than his simply making use of names and places from the tradition, important as those are with the subversive implications that they bear. He makes specific references to Classical texts; sometimes in a very clear and obvious way, such as his use of the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, and in other examples with a much lighter hand, taking imagery or phrases which would resonate with those in the audience who knew their provenance, such as in the speech of Titania in Act II sc. i, in which she lists the ill effects of her quarrel with Oberon. This speech has close parallels with Aeacus' description of Juno's spite in *Metamorphoses* VII, as I will demonstrate.

Titania's monologue, Act II sc. i

In this scene, Titania and Oberon have met in the woods and are arguing with each other. Although they are quarrelling about Theseus and Hippolyta – both accusing the other of infidelity, Oberon with Hippolyta and Titania with Theseus – we have already been told that this is not the real reason behind their anger, but that they have fallen out over the 'lovely boy, stolen from an Indian king' (II.i, 389) whom Titania has as part of her retinue, and whom Oberon wants as his own servant.

As W.F. Staton observed, 'such effects of divine bickering are common in Ovid.'[23] In Book VII of the *Metamorphoses*, Aeacus gives an account of the origins of the Myrmidons, and part of the story details how Juno's spite had been destroying the people of Aegina through a plague that began with meteorological changes, and became worse until it spread to the population, killing a huge number of them. As the leaders of the fairy kingdom (at least within the geographical area of the play), Titania and Oberon's quarrel also effects physical disturbances on their environment. Staton pointed out the similarities between this episode in the *Metamorphoses* and Titania's speech in II.i, and states, 'The passages are close enough that I should call the one the probable source of the other'. He quotes Golding's translation as being particularly close to Shakespeare's text, but obviously, Golding's poetic licence only goes so far – it is not so far removed from the Latin as to make it a separate account altogether.

To begin with, just as in Ovid, the negative manifestations of divine strife are meterological in nature. Titania combines the double mentions of wind and fogs into a single phenomenon, observing that,

> Therefore the winds, piping to us in vain,
> As in revenge, have suck'd up from the sea 458
> Contagious fogs; which falling in the land [...]

[23] Staton, *Ovidian Elements in A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1963) p. 169

This is comparable with, but slightly different from, Ovid's,

> principio caelum spissa caligine terras 528
> pressit [...]
> letiferis calidi spirarunt aestibus austri 532
>
> *At first, the air weighed upon the earth in a thick fog…a boiling south wind breathed on us with fatal heat.*

Golding translates these lines as follows;

> [...] First the Aire with foggie stinking reeke
> Did daily overdreepe the earth: and close culme Clouds did make
> The wether faint: [...]
> The warme South windes with deadly heate continually did blow.

Shakespeare makes his winds less hot, coming from the sea, and combines them with the fog, but the result is very similar to the image in the *Metamorphoses*; the idea of even the air turning into something dangerous and malicious, making the land sick, is present in both.

Shakespeare also has Titania mention the rivers, though again in rather more abbreviated terms than Aeacus does; Shakespeare's rivers are simply overflowing and destructive for that reason, rather than being 'infected', as Golding says. Titania briefly mentions that the fogs, turning to rain,

> Have every pelting river made so proud 460
> That they have overborne their continents

Ovid has serpents overrun the country and infect the waterways with poison, as well as the infection coming from the fog;

> constat et in fontis vitium venisse lacusque,
> miliaque incultos serpentum multa per agros
> errasse atque suis fluvios temerasse venenis. 535
>
> *As a result of this [the winds and fog], the infection spread to the springs and lakes, and thousands of snakes slithered through our abandoned fields and polluted our rivers with their poison.*

Golding translated these lines as follows:

> Infected were the Springs, and Ponds, and streames that ebbe and flow.
> And swarmes of Serpents crawld about the fieldes that lay untillde
> Which with their poison even the brookes and running water fillde.

The pollution of the waterways is very clear in Golding's translation; he puts just as much emphasis on it as Ovid does. Shakespeare's omission of it as an effect probably stems from the fact that, although caused by the animosity and disturbance between Titania and Oberon, there is no direct malice at play in the ill effects felt by the country. It comes about as a result of disorder and a lack of regulation; the active spite of Juno is not a factor, and so the poisoning of water would seem rather extreme and unjustified.

This replication of imagery from Ovid in a shorter and briefer mode is consistent throughout Titania's speech. She mentions that,

> The ox hath therefore stretch'd his yoke in vain, 462
> The ploughman lost his sweat [...]
> The fold stands empty in the drowned field, 465
> And crows are fatted with the murrion flock

The image of the ploughman and the ox appears in Ovid, but with a different outcome; Ovid has the oxen collapse from sickness while still working:

> concidere infelix validos miratur arator
> inter opus tauros medioque recumbere sulco; 539
> lanigeris gregibus balatus dantibus aegros [...]
>
> *The unfortunate ploughman is bewildered to see his strong bulls fall to the ground in the middle of their work and lie in the furrow; the wooly flocks of sheep bleat weakly...*

Golding's translation of these lines adds a slightly nuanced weight to the fact that the ploughman's work was not complete:

> The wretched Plowman was amazde to see his sturdie Steeres
> Amid the furrow sinking downe ere halfe his worke was donne.
> Whole flocks of sheepe did faintly bleate [...]

The words 'ere halfe his worke was donne' hints at the frustration and despair that a farmer would feel upon losing such a valuable asset, which also appears in Shakespeare's 'in vain...the ploughman lost his sweat' – a line which otherwise seems to have no source.

A difference here, however, is that Shakespeare's crows scavenge from the bodies of the fallen animals, whereas Ovid makes a point of mentioning that no wild animals or birds will touch the dead, and that the pestilence is therefore spread all the more easily to humans, which also does not happen in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – presumably as mankind has not, in this case, done anything to warrant a punishment.These comparisons are the most direct and clear examples of similarity between the two texts; the imagery of fog, sickly air, a disrupted ploughing scene and dying animals, all mirrored in Titania's speech, suggest that this is indeed a case of

intertextuality. An audience member sufficiently well-read in Ovid is more than likely to notice this similarity and make the connection.

Although this section is not comic, and does not match the obviously satirical context of the Pyramus and Thisbe episode, I would argue that it does still fit into the model of textual parody. Just as the haughty but ultimately ridiculous Titania is aligned with several Classical goddesses, including Juno, the petty dispute with Oberon is compared with the deadly anger of that same goddess. Theseus dismisses the 'fairy toys' that he 'never may believe' (V.i, 1832-33); this is the Classical world and its mythology on a tiny, fairy scale. It becomes parodic by being minimised in this way. We laugh at Bottom's prosaic speech in the middle of the fairy court – 'I shall desire you of more acquaintance, good Master Cobweb: if I cut my finger, I shall make bold with you' (III.i, 1007-8) – yet the transportation of Athens, Theseus, and the affairs of the gods to English woodland produces a similarly incongruous juxtaposition. For Shakespeare's audience educated on the *Metamorphoses*, Titania and Oberon's petty squabble and some bad weather being so deliberately compared with Juno's eternal jealousy undermines both the seriousness of the scene and Titania, the speaker, herself.

There is also a similarity in outcome in that Ovid has Jupiter intervene, as he so often does when Juno's rage becomes out of control. Inevitably, this entails a certain humiliation of Juno, as he moves to protect either his mistress or her descendants. Titania, too, though independent and wilful, is ultimately humiliated and defeated in her argument with Oberon.

Titania's speech in Act II sc. i is set in an already rich tapestry of Classical references; within this scene we are also reminded of the story of Ganymede, and in her defence of her position, her story is reminiscent of the myth of Callisto, who is also featured in the *Metamorphoses*, as I mentioned above. Later, when Titania has left the stage, Oberon instructs Puck to fetch him the herb which he intends to put on Titania's eyes. He describes it as having once been white, but becoming purple as a result of Cupid's arrow mistakenly striking it – somewhat similar an image to the transformation of the mulberry in the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, not mentioned in the later burlesque. These all fit into a certain type of hybrid reference which have caused Shakespeare to be accused of ignorance or carelessness in the past; one of the most infamous is his reference to 'Ariachne' in *Troilus and Cressida*, which seems an accidental conflation of Arachne and Ariadne. Ronan, however, says that, 'Shakespeare is sometimes purposely guilty of anachronism and anatopism in his choice of names, but that they are usually selected with historical and ethnographic correctness'[24], and this type of liberality with source material is something which came much more easily to the writers of the Renaissance. T.M. Baldwin said that, 'And here is the paradox which Shakspere shares with his age. Shakspere never originated anything; literary types, verse forms, plots, etc., etc. And yet he is one of the

[24] Ronan, *The Onomastics of Shakespeare's Works with Classical Settings* (1981) p. 48

most original authors who has ever lived.'[25] All of these half-references, recognisable yet repurposed, fulfil both the role of background colouring and subtle emphasis of points made more forcefully elsewhere. For example, a spectator's recognition of the story of Ganymede, althought not reproduced completely faithfully, brings to prominence the difference between the Titania/Oberon and Juno/Jupiter relationships in the way that it eventually reaches its resolution. These references all serve as constant reminders to the audience that everything must be questioned, even when it seems familiar.

All these allusions in this scene affect the creation of the fairy world for the audience. This is the first time that we see the fairy king and queen, and their argument is clearly intended to be humorous to some extent, with its tit-for-tat accusations of infidelity. The fact that neither seems to be particularly wounded by either the infidelity or the accusation suggests a rather pragmatic approach to marriage, which is also amusing in the context of a royal partnership. It also differentiates Titania from Juno; while there are many parallels, they are not the same character. It might be more accurate to describe Titania as a caricature of Juno, with her most notorious trait reversed.

If, as an audience, we notice all of these things, the seriousness of the quarrel – and, by extension, the credibility of the fairy world – is subverted. It is almost reassuring for the audience, realising that the mischief caused by the fairies cannot be taken too seriously. Of course, this is only obvious to those who realise that these motifs and themes are borrowed from ancient mythology. Titania's pragmatic relationship with Oberon, in which he is the more jealous partner but both blatantly commit adultery, is humorous in any case but only becomes ironic through comparison with Juno and Jupiter. They are perhaps fitting candidates to bless the marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta, a doomed couple in mythology, though Titania and Oberon themselves are reconciled at the end.

If it can be said of any of the couples in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the relationship between the fairy king and queen seems to be Shakespeare's most ideal, and ironically, the most realistic. They know each other well and are individuals with their own personalities; they quarrel, they are unkind, the social order is disrupted, but then they reconcile. Oberon looks at Titania with pity in Act IV sc. i, 'her dotage now I do begin to pity', and although he still takes what he wanted all along, he still speaks to her with tenderness, 'Now, my Titania; wake you, my sweet queen' (IV.i, 1623). Of all the relationships in the play this is surely the most well-rounded and realistic, despite its characters' ethereal nature.

[25] Baldwin, *William Shakespere's Small Latine & Lesse Greeke* (1944) p. 678

Pyramus and Thisbe

The play-within-a-play is the longest and most evident Ovidian reference within *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Therefore, it will be valuable to look at relevant aspects of Ovid's text, as it is the earliest version of the myth that we have and would have been read by Shakespeare – whether through Arthur Golding's 1567 translation, the original Latin, or both[26]. To investigate how closely Shakespeare mirrors Ovid's myth, a comparison of the two texts will then be made[27].

Metamorphoses IV 55-166

Firstly, my underlying point in discussing Shakespeare's presentation of Ovid's myth is to illustrate the idea that it serves a subversive function within his play. Pyramus and Thisbe as told by Ovid is a tragic story on the surface, ending as it does with the double suicide of two lovers. The fact that Shakespeare chose this as his play-within-a-play therefore seems rather incongruous for a wedding, as will be discussed in greater detail below. But why should Shakespeare choose this specific myth, even if tragedy were his specific aim? There are plenty of other tragic love stories throughout the Classical tradition, some similar, and some of which might seem more suitable for a marriage celebration. For example, the story of Hero and Leander is similar, with its double suicide at the end; Orpheus demonstrates the strength of his love for Eurydike by descending to the underworld and never remarrying after her death; Baucis and Philemon are the archetypal happy couple, still so loving and virtuous in their old age that the gods spare them the pain of widowhood by their metamorphosis into trees. There is, however, one aspect of the Pyramus and Thisbe story, and specifically Ovid's original Latin myth, which I believe contributed to Shakespeare's decision to use it in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: it is already satirical by nature. K. Galinsky gives a detailed account of the variations in tone within Ovid's work, specifically within the *Metamorphoses*; he points out 'Ovid's deliberate exaggeration of the lachrymose aspects in the story of Pyramus and Thisbe'[28], and that, unlike the Hellenistic poets, for Ovid 'myth becomes the object of play and artful manipulation'[29]. Given the ways in which Shakespeare made use of other contemporary sources in crafting his inset play parody, it seems very likely that he also picked up on this quality of Ovid's writing.

[26] Though this thesis does not allow the space for discussion of Shakespeare's own Classical knowledge, for my purposes here I adhere to the middle view: that his grammar school education granted him enough proficiency to work with Latin texts, without presuming him to be a scholar. This view was comprehensively presented by Charles & Michelle Martindale in *Shakespeare and the Uses of Antiquity* (1994).

[27] Referring to Shakespeare's version of the myth, I use the text of the second revised edition of the Arden Shakespeare *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1979). Regarding Ovid's Metamorphoses, I refer to the third edition of J. Henderson's text, lines 55 to 166 (1977). Translations are my own.

[28] Galinsky, *Ovid's Metamorphoses: An Introduction to the Basic Aspects* (1975) p. 128

[29] See note 4, p. 1

Kenneth Muir demonstrated[30] that Shakespeare is likely to have drawn on many more contemporary sources in writing his Pyramus and Thisbe, including the translation by Arthur Golding. Some of these other sources listed by Muir as likely to have been read by Shakespeare include, among others, a cartoon depiction of the story, found in several places including Sir Thomas More's 1553 *Dialoge of comfort against tribulacion*; a 'simple and naïve ballad' version from 1584 by a J Thomson; a section of Thomas Mouffet's *Of the Silkewormes, and their Flies,* apparently full of comic potential; and the version that appears in *The Legend of Good Women* by Geoffrey Chaucer.

Muir puts forward the theory that Shakespeare referred to these sources, and perhaps even made use of this particular myth as a result, because of the ridiculousness (deliberate or otherwise) inherent in all of them. This meant that they lent themselves particularly well to a comedic retelling of the myth – a point which, it seems to me, can be extended a little further, to Ovid's own text. Muir admitted that, 'even Ovid's original account is a trifle absurd'[31], though he states a few lines later that the imagery of the burst water pipe as Pyramus' blood sprays violently into the air and over the mulberry tree is, 'more likely to evoke a smile than the emotions Ovid intended to arouse'. I would argue that that is, in fact, exactly the emotion Ovid intended to produce in his reader, and that Shakespeare recognised this fact, not only in this example but throughout the story.

In this episode in the *Metamorphoses*, the imagery and language Ovid employs, particularly in the second half, is generally very reminiscent of heroic epic. The characters speak in dramatic and poetic monologues; Pyramus and Thisbe never have a conversation, except when speaking aloud to themselves with the other not present, or, in Thisbe's case, when Pyramus is already incapable of replying. Though this in itself is not a specific feature of epic, the lengthy passages of stylised speech seem out of place coming from the lips of these childish lovers. Except in their petulant address to the wall, their words are not wasted on anything short of truly tragic declarations. Their relationship is therefore not described in any significant detail, and certainly not with any particularly individual attributes; it seems to be enough to say that they loved each other. Their love, in fact, is entirely generic in its naïvete, and left to the reader's imagination. Yet at the moment of Pyramus' death, *in extremis*, he displays an unexpected degree of psychological depth in blaming himself for the situation:

> 'una duos' inquit 'nox perdet amantes,
> e quibus illa fuit longa dignissima vita;
> nostra nocens anima est. ego te, miseranda, peremi[…]' 110
> sed timidi est optare necem.'

[30] Muir, *Pyramus and Thisbe: A Study in Shakespeare's Method* (1954)
[31] As note 30, p. 42

'Let one night destroy two lovers, of whom she was the most worthy of long life; I am the guilty one. I killed you, wretched girl...but it is cowardly to beg for death.'

He gives a mock-heroic soliloquy and then commits incredibly rash suicide –his death described with all the vividly graphic imagery of Virgil or Homer;

ut iacuit resupinus humo, cruor emicat alte,
non aliter quam cum vitiato fistula plumbo 122
scinditur et tenui stridente foramine longas
eiaculatur aquas atque ictibus aera rumpit.

As he lay stretched out on the ground, his blood spurted high, just as when a pipe is split by a fault in the lead and sends long sprays of water through the small gap, hissing, and slices through the air in an arc.

The phrase 'non aliter quam cum...' is a phrase signalling the introduction of an extended epic simile, a device seen frequently in Virgil's *Aeneid* as well as in the Homeric epics, and instantly recognisable as such to anyone familiar with epic poetry. That the following simile makes a comparison to a burst water pipe – a domestic inconvenience at worst, and hardly a moment of deep tragedy – must surely be intentionally humorous. Ovid is poking fun at the style which he seems to be emulating, his graphically gory description undermined by so prosaic a comparison[32].

The lovers' whispering through the crack in the wall certainly also has the potential for comedy, as Shakespeare so ably demonstrates by animating the wall in his version. Ovid's description contains an example of typical Latin hendiadys;

fissus erat tenui rima, quam duxerat olim, 65
cum fieret, paries domui communis utrique.

There was a small crack in the wall between the two houses, which had happened at some point in the past, when it was being built.

Although this technique of repetition – 'fissus' and 'rima' both refer to the crack in the wall – is often simply convenient in crafting the metre of the line, it is possible that Ovid chose to include the word 'rima' because it has the alternative obscene meaning of female genitalia,

[32] Of course, not all readers have agreed with this view; Niall Rudd, in *Pyramus and Thisbe in Shakespeare and Ovid* (1979) saw no humour in it, deciding that, 'if there is a fault on Ovid's side, it is surely better to assume a small lapse of stylistic judgement than to imagine that the poet is inviting us to laugh at the stricken Pyramus'. It is my opinion, however, that this view results from comparing Ovid's language of parody here with his masterful poetry elsewhere; a "small lapse of stylistic judgement" makes little sense. It seems much more feasible that Ovid wrote the image with full awareness of its humorous effect.

which would punctuate the already somewhat ridiculous image of the lovers kissing their side of the wall in vain.

A few lines later, still referring to this chink in the wall, Ovid says that no-one else had evernoticed its presence –

> quid non sentit amor?
>
> *But what does love not see?*

Though the point is clear, that the lovers were made resourceful by their desperate longing for each other, to anyone familiar with Classical metaphor this line rings rather strange. Love is far more commonly portrayed as blind, whether in literature or visual art. Cupid's image is ubiquitous, with his bow made so much more dangerous by his blindfold, and the proverb that 'love is blind' is repeated around the world even in the present day. This interjection also states the exact opposite of the of the myth's conclusion. Pyramus is blinded by his impulsive emotion and kills himself without a second thought; Thisbe is, in turn, blinded by her love and grief, and does the same without considering anything else;

> 'tua te manus' inquit 'amorque
> perdidit, infelix! est et mihi fortis in unum
> hoc manus, est et amor…' 150
>
> *'It was your own hand and your love that destroyed you, unfortunate boy!' she said. 'My hand is brave enough for the same deed, I have enough love for it too…'*

Thisbe kills herself in a display of tragic love second only in its blindness to Pyramus' suicide; at the very least she knew for certain that her lover was dead before committing herself to death as well. The question, 'quid non sentit amor?' becomes more and more heavily ironic the further we read.

The fact that Pyramus does not even see the body of his supposedly lost love before falling on his sword in such a graphic and melodramatic manner must surely surprise the reader with his rashness, and 'the lovers' alacrity in suicide' is mentioned by Muir as adding to the story's absurdity[33]. It seems almost cartoonish; the character entering the scene, seeing the veil with a presumably rather little amount of blood on it, and immediately being overcome with despair and falling on his sword when his lover is in fact only a few feet away from him. Perhaps this inspired that cartoonist of the 16th century whose work Shakespeare likely saw.

This sense of extreme rashness, even hurriedness, contributes to the rather abbreviated nature of the whole myth. This is partly due to its nature as a short story, narrated in a sequence, but is

[33] Muir, p. 142

nonetheless noticeable enough to contrast with the character's speeches. Except for their grief-stricken monologues, the characters are roughly drawn; their spoken lines at the moment of tragedy briefly, almost abruptly, illuminate and animate them before their respective deaths. It is as though they have been speeding towards their inevitable fate, slowing down only to enact the necessary actions before the reader's eyes. The overall effect is indeed rather absurd.

So it seems that those four words of Ovid's, 'quid non sentit amor?', seemingly no more than a disposable interjection, are an early indication to the reader that all is not as it appears, and that they should not take his story at face value. I would argue that, as well as taking comic inspiration from his other sources for the Pyramus and Thisbe inset play, Shakespeare also looked at the original Latin with a critical eye. He saw the inherent absurdity and comic potential within Ovid's original version of the myth, despite its appearance of simple tragedy, and expanded upon it for his own purposes. He parodies a text which is in itself already satirical, and this functions as a final confirmation – coming as it does in the final act of the play – that, just as we observe how he has treated Pyramus and Thisbe with an uncompromisingly parodic wit, we should be similarly ready to see alternative meanings in the play that we have been watching as an audience.

Shakespeare's Pyramus and Thisbe, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* V.i, 1951-2193

Given Shakespeare's reading of Ovid, it certainly seems plausible that Shakespeare's linguistic ability, as well as his masterful dramatic imagination, allowed him to translate and exaggerate the satirical quality of Ovid's work as well as the basic elements of the story, in order to produce the version we find in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Of course, the two exist in different literary media; Ovid has a single narrator in the daughter of Minyas who tells the story as part of his weaving together of many continuous narratives, whereas Shakespeare has a troupe of self-conscious, comically poor actors to perform the various roles and tell parts of the story in turn. Clearly, the point of the myth's presentation is vastly different between the two scenarios and its transmission in both is therefore equivalently distinct.

Before Shakespeare's play-within-a-play begins, he has two separate introductory passages. The first is a prologue (lines 1951-1960) which is deliberately delivered very badly, as can be seen by the full stops in the middle of the lines, to ensure that the actor performing it will seem to be halting and stumbling over his words: "[...]Our true intent is. All for your delight, / We are not here. That you should repent you, / The actors are at hand..." (lines 1957-59). The unnatural breaks in the lines alter the meaning of the words in a comic way, as seen in the line just quoted, where rather than saying, 'We are not here that you should repent you', the emphasis shifts and he ends up joining two separate phrases; 'That you should repent you, the actors are at hand'.

Theseus, Lysander and Hippolyta comment on the poor delivery immediately afterwards. Although specific to a dramatic performance and therefore without parallel in this part of Ovid's text, these few lines parody the idea of *captatio benevolentiae* inherent in the dramatic prologues of both ancient and contemporary playwrights. Shakespeare makes use of such prologues himself, though not in every instance – *A Midsummer Night's Dream* itself does not include one, though, for example, in his history play *Henry V* a dedicated character named Chorus delivers a poetic prologue[34]. Shakespeare had read Plautus, a writer known for his extensive prologues which make great efforts to ensure the audience's goodwill through various means of persuasion. In the lengthy prologue to the *Amphitruo*, Plautus has Mercury attempt to win the audience's favour by bargaining, as is appropriate for the god of commerce – with which cultic association he opens his speech;

> Ut vos in vostris voltis mercimoniis
> emundis vendundisque me laetum lucris
> adficere atque adiuvare in rebus omnibus
> et ut res rationesque vostrorum omnium
> bene me expedire voltis... 5

> *As you want to make me favourable to your profit in the buying and selling of goods, and want me to help you in all matters, and to facilitate your business and financial matters...*

Jupiter appears as a character in the *Amphitruo*, and so Mercury also points out that the people in the audience owe it to the supreme god to be attentive, playing on the notion that he will be physically present, and his status as a divine character within the play. However, he also appeals to them in a more realistic and knowing way, where he undermines this illusion, without quite stepping out of character. He hints at the fact that, as a slave, the actor playing Jupiter may well be beaten if the play is not well-received; 'Iuppiter / non minus quam vostrum quivis formidat malum', 'Jupiter fears punishment no less than you do' (line 25-6).

Although there is no reason to think that Shakespeare is directly referencing a specific prologue with his short speech to open the Pyramus and Thisbe episode, he is clearly using it both as a parody of the feature in general, and ensuring that his two audiences understand that the following performance will be comic. His prologue to Pyramus and Thisbe contains a direct address to the audience; an attempt at *captatio benevolentiae*, strengthened by similarly informal dramatic tone to that employed by Plautus. The Prologue character speaks to the audience, quite aware of their presence, and so not in soliloquy; he is neither 'in character' nor quite out of it, both self-consciously an actor speaking to his audience, and a character speaking his lines. This technique, almost casual in Plautus, here forcefully realigns the gaze of both the real and on-

[34] Incidentally, the very first line of *Henry V* immediately resonates with any Classicist as a pseudo-invocation; 'O, for a Muse of fire, that would ascend / the brightest heaven of invention'.

stage audiences. Instantly, we are made aware of the theatricality of the scene. The fairytale illusion is shattered and we are now thinking in terms of actors; this one, of course, is a very bad actor.

He also fulfils the practical function of delineating dramatic space. Not only does that help to distinguish the play-within-the-play, to avoid confusion, but it unites the two audiences. We are suddenly aware that his botched lines are directed to us as an audience, as well as to the characters in front of us, and this means that although they remain on-stage, they are temporarily part of the generalised audience with us. When Theseus interjects, 'This fellow doth not stand upon points' (V.i, 1961) he is almost our neighbour in the theatre whispering a comment, and we laugh with him. We also follow his lead and watch with critical eyes.

Once his onstage audience have commented upon this opening address, there is a second introductory speech by the same actor. He introduces the characters and gives a brief synopsis of the plot, between lines 1970-1994. His words, "This man is Pyramus, if you would know; / This beauteous lady Thisby is, certain" (lines 1972-3), and the following humorous introduction of the Wall character, correspond to some extent to Ovid's opening lines to the story, "Pyramus et Thisbe, iuvenum pulcherrimus alter, / altera, quas Oriens habuit, praelata puellis, / contiguas tenuere domos," (55-56); "Pyramus and Thisbe, one an exceptionally handsome youth, the other the most beautiful maiden then living in the East, lived in adjacent houses". Of course, there is an additional point of humour in the play, as the 'beauteous lady' is being played by a workman. Although in Shakespeare's day all the women on stage would have been played by men[35], we can presume that the mechanicals fail rather spectacularly to hide this fact; if the excessive realism of the Wall and the Moonlight is any example, the 'beauteous lady' will be hilariously grotesque.

Following this, the Wall then speaks, telling the audience that the two lovers would speak through the crack and that they had to do so in secret. This takes a rather different and slightly briefer form than Ovid's setting of his scene; he makes it clearer that Pyramus and Thisbe wanted to be married but were not allowed,

tempore crevit amor; taedae quoque iure coissent, 60
sed vetuere patres

with time, love arose; they would have been married too, but their parents did not allow it,

and that their affection continued in secret,

conscius omnis abest; nutu signisque loquuntur, 63

[35] "The theaters of the time employed all male casts, with boys taking the roles of women." Gossett, "Man-Maid, Begone!: Women in Masques" (1988) p. 96

they had no go-between at all; they communicated through nods and signals.

These elements are not made explicit in so many words in Shakespeare's play. A lack of depth characterises his version to a certain extent, although it is generally more noticeable in the emotional passages nearer the end.

Of course, Shakespeare's representation of the wall and the moonlight with actors is comically ridiculous in a visual way that goes beyond Ovid's text. But in both, there is a potential for comic absurdity in the lovers kissing the wall between them and speaking to it; its personification is not so wild a leap as it might first appear in the transformation to comedy. In the *Metamorphoses* the lovers' complaints to the wall are represented as though they speak in unison,

> 'invide' dicebant 'paries, quid amantibus obstas?
> quantum erat, ut sineres toto nos corpore iungi
> aut, hoc si nimium est, vel ad oscula danda pateres? *75*
> nec sumus ingrati...'

> *"Hateful wall," they said, "why do you come between lovers? What a small thing it would be to allow us to embrace each other completely, or, if this is too much, to open for our kisses? But we are not ungrateful..."*

Bottom/Pyramus begins the equivalent complaint in Shakespeare,

> And thou, O wall, O sweet, O lovely wall, 2017
> [...] Show me thy chink to blink through with mine eyne! 2019
> Thanks, courteous wall: Jove shield thee well for this!
> [...] O wicked wall, through whom I see no bliss! 2024
> Curst be thy stones...'

Shortly afterwards at line 2032, Flute/Thisbe says,

> O wall, full often hast thou heard my moans,
> For parting my fair Pyramus and me!

There is a clear similarity here. The wall is directly addressed and personified in both texts, and the comic over-literalisation of it becoming an actual actor on stage seems likely to have been inspired by this feature of Ovid's myth. The wall being appealed to as a being which possesses power over the lovers, and the fluctuating attitude that the lovers take towards it, first negative and then positive in Ovid's case, and the reverse in Shakespeare's version, are also similar features. The melodramatic emotions of Shakespeare's characters add to the hilarity on stage as they address the sentient Wall – who presumably has accompanying facial expressions – with

their alternating hatred and affection, finally attempting to kiss through the crack in his absurd costume. Thisbe says,

> I kiss the wall's hole, not your lips at all, 2045

a pathetic rendition of Ovid's

> [...]partique dedere
> oscula quisque suae non pervenientia contra 80

> *and [they] placed kisses on their side of the wall which did not reach the other side*.

Flute/Thisbe's line also carries within it the same pun as Ovid's use of the word *rima*, with the same obscene innuendo.

The subsequent description of how the lovers plan to secretly leave their houses and meet at Ninus' tomb is, of course, once again rather differently presented by Shakespeare as he relies on his characters' speech for the exposition of the plot. Ovid describes,

> [...]tum murmure parvo
> multa prius questi statuunt, ut nocte silenti
> fallere custodes foribusque excedere temptent, 85
> cumque domo exierint, urbis quoque tecta relinquant,
> neve sit errandum lato spatiantibus arvo,
> conveniant ad busta Nini latenantque sub umbra
> arboris

> *Then first they complained much, in soft whispers, and decided that they would try to slip past their guards and pass through the gates in the dead of night, and leave their homes, and when they had left their home, they would leave the city as well and, so that they would not get lost by walking in the open countryside, they would meet together at the tomb of Ninus and hide in the shade of a tree.*

A small part of this description was already made clear to Shakespeare's audiences in the synopsis presented at the beginning of the passage, including the correct name of Ninus' tomb;

> By moonshine did these lovers think no scorn 1980
> To meet at Ninus' tomb, there, there to woo,

though while the lovers are speaking to each other, Pyramus summarises the plan as,

> Wilt thou at Ninny's tomb meet me straightway? 2046

Bottom/Pyramus' malapropism here (or perhaps Peter Quince's imperfect script) plays on his own lack of education; he has misunderstood the name Ninus and translates it in his head to a

word that he understands. His ‘Ninny’ is also closer to the Latin phrasing ‘ad busta Nini’ than to the nominative form ‘Ninus’, which appears ubiquitously in Arthur Golding’s translation. Without wishing to extend a point too far, it is certainly tempting to imagine that this juvenile wordplay might have been suggested to Shakespeare by seeing the genitive form in the original Latin text. Bottom/Pyramus’ supposed slip is not directly commented upon, and is repeated by Flute/Thisbe shortly afterwards,

> This is old Ninny’s tomb. Where is my love? 2102

A joke like this seems to serve an inclusive function for those in the audience who do not already know the story, or are less used to ancient vocabulary. Just as the many intertextual references make those who understand them feel included as part of an elite group, this simple joke produces the same effect for those who might be feeling rather more lost in the mythological story; enabling them to laugh at the Classical material instantly removes a barrier. This is not only excellent comic writing (and a direct parody of the original text), but a good way to ensure that this less well-read section of the audience is just as engaged by what they are seeing as anyone else.

The next entrance of a character in Shakespeare’s play-within-a-play follows a short dialogue between Theseus, Hippolyta and Demetrius who again make fun of the production. The lion appears, and makes a direct plea to his onstage audience not to be afraid of him, because,

> [...] I, one Snug the joiner, am
> No lion fell, nor else no lion’s dam;
> For, if I should as lion come in strife
> Into this place, ‘twere pity of my life. 2070

The onstage audience immediately respond with witty remarks. This omits Ovid’s short description of Thisbe travelling to the tomb over three and a half lines, and immediately parodies the appearance of the lioness, whose timid entrance as played by Snug is the direct opposite of the Latin,

> venit ecce recenti
> caede leaena boum spumantis oblita rictus 97
>
> *But look! A lioness is coming, her mouth covered with the blood of cattle recently killed,*

and certainly not translating Ovid's emphatic positioning of the word 'caede' at the beginning of line 97. Interestingly, Arthur Golding's 1567 translation, which Shakespeare knew[36], places the mention of blood at the end of the preceding line to the word lioness;

> But see the chaunce, there comes besmerde with blood
> About the chappes a Lionesse[37].

The horror of Thisbe's sudden realisation of danger was therefore not lost in the wording of Golding's translation. Even if we assume Shakespeare to have relied mostly upon the English version, it seems that he deliberately undermined this particular moment of tension and shock in order to heighten the parodic effect.

As well as the timid lion and the wall, Shakespeare's mechanicals also bring the moonlight itself to life, a character at whose expense Demetrius, Theseus, Hippolyta and Lysander exchange witticisms and interrupt the play several times. In the Latin, the moonlight is only mentioned once, with

> quam procul ad lunae radios Babylonia Thisbe 99
> vidit…

From far away, Babylonian Thisbe sees her [the lioness] by the rays of the moon.

This sudden mention of the light makes the imagery more vivid for the reader, but is hardly an integral part of the scene. Yet Shakespeare makes such a feature of his personified moonlight, we cannot fail to examine him closely. Although he fulfils another role in the over-literal burlesque for comic value, the parallel to be drawn from Ovid's text is not to Shakespeare's Pyramus and Thisbe, where the Moonlight seems irrelevant, but in fact to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* itself, in which moonlight is an almost ubiquitous presence.

As we have seen, Thisbe arrives first in both versions; this is a fundamental part of the story, and it is maintained in Shakespeare's version accordingly. She speaks to herself, repeating Bottom/Pyramus' mistake as already mentioned, and her brief moment onstage is comic – she immediately flees upon hearing the lion, though the sound that he makes is written at line 2103 as 'Oh – ', seeming to imply that it is not exactly intimidating. This roar, however tame, is actually still more aggressive than Ovid's lion, which does not notice Thisbe at all and seems to tear her veil essentially on a whim;

[36] Attested throughout Shakespearean scholarship, this fact is nicely referenced by A.B. Taylor's introduction to his *Shakespeare's Ovid: The Metamorphoses in the Plays and Poems*; 'One other large factor in Shakespeare's use of the *Metamorphoses* was the premier Elizabethan translation of the poem by Arthur Golding.' (2001) p. 2
[37] Golding, W. *Metamorphoses*, lines 107-108

ut lea saeva sitim multa conpescuit unda,
dum redit in silvas, inventos forte sine ipsa 103
ore cruentato tenues laniavit amictus

When the fierce lioness has quenched her thirst with much water, then she returns to the woods, and by chance finds the delicate cloak without Thisbe herself, and tears at it with her bloodied mouth.

The sense the reader has at this point while reading Ovid's tale is, clearly, of relief; the threat of a bad ending seems to have passed, and the inevitable moment of metamorphosis has not yet been revealed. However, Shakespeare's two audiences have already been told how the story will end. Even if the lion were not so comic, there would be very little dramatic tension here. Demetrius says, 'Well roared, lion', and, 'And then came Pyramus' (lines 2105 & 2111) before Pyramus enters. This audience already knows what happens, either because they were told at the beginning, or because of prior knowledge of the myth; they comment on the actors' behaviour and speak directly to them, and so it is clear that for them, the humour is the main point of the play.

Pyramus then enters, and while Ovid has Thisbe leave her hiding place and search for him, Shakespeare follows Pyramus for a couple of lines and has him address the moon. But after a few lines, the same thing happens: Pyramus discovers the blood-stained and torn veil belonging to Thisbe, and presumes her to be dead.

'But stay – O spite! –
But mark, poor knight,
What dreadful dole is here! 2120
Eyes, do you see?
How can it be?
Oh dainty duck! Oh dear!
Thy mantle good,
What, stain'd with blood? 2125
Approach, ye furies fell!
O fates, come, come,
Cut thread and thrum;
Quail, crush, conclude, and quell!'

Even if we take for granted the humorous meter and bathetic phrasing ('Oh dainty duck!' is certain to raise a smile in the audience), here Pyramus discovers the veil and, by appealing to the Furies, begs for death as his counterpart in the *Metamorphoses* does. However, there is a fundamental difference in his reaction, as Shakespeare's Pyramus does not blame himself for

Thisbe's death but rather the lions, and addresses the Furies rather than wishing for the lions to come back and kill him too. Ovid has him say,

> [...]'una duos' inquit 'nox perdet amantes,
> e quibus illa fuit longa dignissima vita;
> nostra nocens anima est. ego te, miseranda, peremi, 110
> in loca plena metus qui iussi nocte venires
> nec prior huc veni. nostrum divellite corpus
> et scelerata fero consumite viscera morsu,
> o quicumque sub hac habitatis rupe leones!
> sed timidi est optare necem.'

> *'Let one night destroy two lovers, of whom she was the most worthy of long life; I am the guilty one. I killed you, wretched girl, I who sent you at night to come to this place full of danger, and did not come here myself first. Tear my body and devour my guilty flesh with your savage jaws, oh lions who live beneath this cliff! But it is cowardly to beg for death.'*

Shakespeare's Pyramus has had the selfless and noble traits removed from his character here. It is not that he is malicious, but rather that he reacts in a more childish and observational way – almost as though he is a part of the audience rather than a character – and does not question how the supposed accident came about, nor feel responsible. This is more or less necessary to ensure the full parody of the character. Ovid's Pyramus may still contain elements of melodrama and react in a stylised way (referring to his 'scelerata viscera', his 'guilty flesh', and showing an awareness of heroic moral ideals, with his observation, 'sed timidi est optare necem', 'but it is cowardly to beg for death'), but the hints of ridiculousness in his character are far more subtle; it is much more difficult to laugh at him when he blames himself. Omitting this detail allows Shakespeare's Pyramus to speak lines such as, 'Oh dainty duck! Oh dear!', and even though he still goes on to commit suicide, the sting of his self-loathing has been removed, as well as the more emotionally mature motive behind his death. It must be presumed by the audience that he kills himself simply out of despair, as he offers no real reasoning in his speech.

When Ovid's character kills himself he is rather laconic at the actual moment of death, simply exclaiming, 'accipe nunc...nostri quoque sanguinis haustus!', 'now also receive my blood to drink!' (118-119), in a continuation of the theme of noble, heroic suicide. His use of the plural form, *nostri*, also contributes to the serious tone; this is a poetic idiosyncrasy which acts as a marker of higher register language. On the other hand, Bottom/Pyramus speaks at length in the same stanza form as he did when discovering the veil, which sounds childish, insincere, almost mocking to Anglophone ears:

> '[...]Come, tears, confound;
> Out, sword, and wound

The pap of Pyramus: 2140
Ay, that left pap,
Where heart doth hop: –
Thus die I, thus, thus, thus!
Now am I dead, 2145
Now I am fled;
My soul is in the sky:
Tongue, lose thy light!
Moon, take thy flight![...]
Now die, die, die, die, die.' 2151

There is no following description of his blood staining the mulberry tree, as the metamorphosis is not central in Shakespeare's version.

Thisbe speaks in the same stanza style when she enters and sees Pyramus dead. Pyramus' dying speech contains the word 'pap', which would raise a smile from an Elizabethan audience as it would be more appropriate when referring to a female breast, but Thisbe's lines are even more ridiculous, for example,

'[...]Speak, speak. Quite dumb?
Dead, dead? A tomb
Must cover thy sweet eyes.
These lily lips, 2175
This cherry nose,
These yellow cowslip cheeks,
Are gone, are gone:
Lovers, make moan:
His eyes were green as leeks...'

Having already referred earlier to her own 'cherry lips' at line 2034, this description – with its unfortunate comparison between his eyes and vegetables – is obviously a satirical way to treat the tragic scene. Both speeches here do not take either lines or any easily visible inspiration from the actual words contained in the *Metamorphoses*, except from Thisbe's appeal for him to speak to her,

Pyrame, responde! Tua te carissima Thisbe
nominat; exaudi vultusque attolle iacentes! 144

'Pyramus, answer! It is your most beloved Thisbe calling you; listen, and lift your heavy head!'

Interestingly, Thisbe also calls on the Fates in Shakespeare's version, whereas in Ovid she addresses her parents and those of Pyramus, and the mulberry tree whose changed berries are to

bear witness to their tragic deaths. The fact that both Bottom/Pyramus and Flute/Thisbe make reference to the Fates, who play no part in the *Metamorphoses* version, point to a certain facility with common Classical themes on Shakespeare's part; the image of them cutting their thread is referenced twice, once by each character, at lines 2128 and 2185-86 respectively. At this point Shakespeare's play ends, as the onstage audience exclaim hastily, 'No epilogue, I pray you; for your play needs no excuse' (Theseus, line 2201). In the *Metamorphoses* the story has a somewhat more rounded ending, as once Thisbe has stabbed herself Ovid briefly confirms that her final wishes were fulfilled. She is buried with Pyramus, and the mulberry tree maintains its altered colour as a memorial to their tragic deaths:

> Vota tamen tetigere deos, tetigere parentes:
> nam color in pomo est, ubi permaturuit, ater, 165
> quodque rogis superest, una requiescit in urna.
>
> *However, her prayers reached the gods, and reached her parents:*
> *For the colour of the fruit, when it has ripened, is nearly black,*
> *And what remained from the funeral pyre rests in a single urn.*

Shakespeare's Pyramus and Thisbe are certainly recognisable as burlesque distortions of the characters found in Ovid, although they are already inherently comic. As in all comedy, the source material must be visible in order for the joke to be effective. For those who knew the *Metamorphoses*, this text would surely be the one that first sprang to mind, regardless of other more contemporary allusions.

Pyramus & Thisbe in Shakespeare's play

So having compared the two, what is the result? It has long been accepted by critics (R.W. Dent and P.N. Siegel[38] among others) that the Pyramus and Thisbe inset play and its performance fulfils a metatheatrical and reflexive function within the play as a whole. This metatheatrical feature of the main characters *watching* a play as well as simultaneously performing one is very noticeable; the real audience is consciously observing a stage audience watch a play. Since Lionel Abel first used the term 'metatheatre' in 1963 as a way to define a type of drama in opposition to tragedy[39] there have been many other attempts to pin down the concept. Thomas Rosenmeyer stated in a 2002 essay,

> What matters is [...]the underlying idea that a piece of metatheater is by definition or concomitantly a variety of commentary, and that both the play and the characters and the playwright, and ultimately the audience, share in that critical pursuit.[40]

[38] Siegel, *A Midsummer Night's Dream and the Wedding Guests* (1953)
[39] Abel, *Metatheatre: a new view of dramatic form* (1963)
[40] Rosenmeyer, *Metatheatre: An Essay on Overload* (2002) p. 99

A commentary is exactly what Shakespeare's characters are offering, both to each other and the audience. The example of Shakespeare's onstage audience watching the mechanicals' play forms an instructional example for Shakespeare's 'real' audience; as we see the actors on stage criticise and make fun of the play they are watching, we are invited to do the same. In this final scene of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare seems to be giving a confirmation of what we may have suspected all along: that we should be critical, even sceptical, of what we see before us. 'Not only Bottom's play, but his audience as well, invites comparison with Shakespeare's.'[41]

In the same passage, Dent describes the Pyramus and Thisbe play as, '[...]a foil to the entire play of which it is a part'. This effect works on several levels. Bottom's incarnation as Pyramus on the stage before Theseus is by far the less ridiculous of his two transformations, yet the former – his magical transfiguration into the ass for Titania to dote on – happened within what we are supposed to think of as the theatrical reality. His characterisation of Pyramus forces us to think critically of him as an actor, and so disrupts the suspension of our disbelief in general, and prompts us to question what we have already seen. Bottom/Pyramus is only the clearest example of this, however. As Jeffrey Netto points out,

> [...]By virtue of this kind of interpolated mirror-imaging of the play at large by a single reflexive element within it, various subtleties that are all too easily overlooked in the overall production might suddenly find clearer expression when reflected[...][42]

The outcome of the lovers' story is surely the alternative ending for Shakespeare's lovers; had everything not been put right by morning – if this were not a comedy – their bewitched passions could quite easily have led them down a similarly destructive path. The tragic ending comes about as the result of unchecked and unmoderated 'imagination', as Dent would put it; emotions allowed to grow out of the control of reason. However, not all of this was due to Puck's mishap with the pansy juice. Helena and Demetrius finish the play in a different romantic situation to the way that they began it; her 'imagination' and high emotions, though played on near the beginning for comic effect, are arguably the most sensible of all. We are told that she was loved by Demetrius, and then abandoned for Hermia – it is, in fact, quite reasonable that she should be in a confused and emotional state, and only human that she should still be in love with Demetrius. But before the fairies interfere, he no longer loves her. That is his 'natural' state. The fact that their story ends with their marriage, under the influence of the pansy juice, is a major factor in my argument that Shakespeare intended to put across a rather more subersive view of marriage than might otherwise be apparent. This is a loose thread which leaves a sense of unease, rather than completion, in the final scene.

Everything seems to work out happily in the end in spite of the lovers; though all but Demetrius have their initial wishes fulfilled, their behaviour in the woods does much more to

[41] Dent, *Imagination in A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1964), p.124
[42] Netto, *Intertextuality and the Chess Motif: Shakespeare, Middleton, Greenaway* (2005) p. 217

harm than to help their relationships. They have a happy ending to their night of misadventure because of outside influence – as a direct result of those fairy forces[43] dismissed by the rational Theseus, who is supposedly their model as a noble and honourable lover and husband. Egeus accuses Lysander of something approaching the supernatural; 'This man hath bewitch'd the bosom of my child' (I.i, 31).

Yet at the end of the play, what are the lovers, particularly Demetrius, if not still 'bewitch'd'? They have chosen their partners based on fallible, emotional decisions; Hermia still cannot be persuaded 'to choose love by another's eyes' (I.i, 146). This bewitchment is all that stands between them and Pyramus and Thisbe. The placement of the mechanicals' play, immediately following the announcement of the engagements, only makes this clearer. Despite the dream-like fairytale perfection which the lovers seem to enjoy in their romantic story, there is an underlying sense of unease and tension. Just because they are happy in the moment does not guarantee that they will remain so; Hermia, for example, escaped all of the terrible punishments for disobeying her father with which she was threatened in the first Act, and will marry the man that she chose with her 'eyes'. Within the first scene, Hermia's eyes are referenced (either by herself or others) multiple times, mostly in the context of her love. The type of love between her and Lysander is consistently presented as something relatively superficial; the product of impression and variable emotion. Seeing Pyramus and Thisbe as simply a glimpse of what might have been, yet happily is not, is too simplistic. Shakespeare's lovers still have the possibility of tragedy before them, not because of lionesses or mistaken suicides, but because of their very human and mundane flaws. Once the romantic whirlwind of the woods is over, reality will eventually set in.

Within the play as a whole, the contrast between the orderly, serene and rational court in Athens and the chaotic events that take place under the moonlight in the wooded grove where the fairy king 'keeps his revels' (II.i, 385) is clearly defined. In the Pyramus and Thisbe scene, the acting and staging is comically bad, not only to provide immediate slapstick humour but to contrast with the rest of the play, and to make us think about the production of the theatrical illusion itself. In his previously quoted article, Siegel takes the imagery of the moonlight;

> The contrast between the crude literalism of a man with a lantern representing moonshine of the Pyramus-Thisbe scene and the poetic magic of the moon-drenched

[43] The idea of love being caused by potions, bewitchment or spells was common in contemporary literature and the Elizabethan imagination – it makes appearances in some of Shakespeare's other works, for example in Othello, where Desdemona's father accuses Othello of having bewitched her into eloping with him. But, as in Othello, it is by no means portrayed as a necessarily benign force, or used with only pure intentions.

imagery of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* itself [...] is a daring virtuosity calling attention to itself at the close of its performance.[44]

The fact that Shakespeare makes a comedic feature of the moonlight does not refer to a parallel in Ovid's text, unlike his personified wall and lion. It is self-referential, burlesquing his own play. We laugh at the poor ridiculous Moonlight with his lamp, but his appearance on the stage serves as an invitation to us to appreciate the ridiculousness rather more gracefully hidden within the rest of *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* Just as we have to work hard and exercise our patience to endure the bumbling of the mechanicals, and to imagine that the wall is just a wall and the moonlight is only moonlight, without a face – conversely, we have to work hard to see the rest of the play for what it truly is.

There is also perhaps a certain self-conscious attempt by Shakespeare to emphasise the quality of his work – Dent quotes Biron in *Love's Labour's Lost* and points out, "'tis some policy / to have one show worse' than his own offering" (p.123), but that is surely not the main point of the farce. The comparison between it and the rest of the play adds another layer of irony to the Pyramus and Thisbe episode; if this story is an ancient myth, yet is treated so irreverently and satirically, then the 'moon-drenched' scenes we have just been watching may also be deconstructed and thought of more critically too.

[44] See note 41, p. 143

Chapter IV: Conclusion

Throughout this thesis I have been attempting to investigate the question, 'does knowledge of Shakespeare's Classical sources enrich our understanding of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?' To ask this question at all presumes that a knowledge of the ancient source material will affect our perception of the play to a certain extent, and given the overtly Classical elements in the text, I feel that this is a fair assumption.

I wanted to research this question in part because, when I began to look at the literature, I found that many scholars in the past had discussed Shakespeare's use of Classical material but did not seem to delve very deeply into the effect that this has on his audiences. It has been interesting to examine the choices made by the playwright in terms of ancient literature, and the ways in which he uses it.

The first of these choices, leading to my first conclusion, is that Shakespeare makes consistent use of imagery, themes, character names or traits, and other references to the Classical world, particularly referencing elements which may be found in Ovid. Although obvious, this is the foundation upon which the rest of my conclusions are built; the author employs the Classically-inspired material in an overt and consistent way. The presentation of these references so strongly and consistently in the foreground of the play means that, as an audience, we cannot ignore them. Vital elements of the play are rooted in Classical references; the character names and the setting being two of these elements, as I have discussed. This leads us to the conclusion that this overt and comprehensive intertextuality is of fundamental importance to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a whole.

This is the point at which the hypothetical audience may be said to divide. For whatever reason, be it cultural difference, age, or a simple lack of exposure to Classical mythology, there will almost certainly be a section of the audience for whom the many references provide only a backdrop, a certain colouration of atmosphere, and nothing more. This is certainly one of their functions, as I mentioned earlier. The setting of the play in Athens, the Greek and Latin names of the characters, and often (though not always) visual effects such as costume all contribute to an 'exotic' and self-consciously fictional atmosphere which harmonises, at least at first glance, with the appearance of fairies and magic on the stage. So even to the uncritical viewer, all this serves a definite dramatic function. However, there will naturally be a large section of the audience who recognise, to a greater or lesser degree, all of these references and can recall the texts which they evoke. At this point, the individual's level of knowledge regarding Shakespeare's ancient sources will define exactly how much they are able to perceive, but the overall effect is that when we are able to make these intertextual connections, we understand more about the characters

and about the action within the play than we otherwise might. As I hope I have demonstrated above, the specific allusions to mythology do not support the romantic, moonlit fairytale that the play might seem to present to the casual or uncritical viewer. Rather, they emphatically highlight elements such as adultery, deceit, the naivete of love, and a highly cynical view of marriage. All of these elements are still visible for those who do not understand the references, to a certain degree. But this subtext becomes a consistently subversive undercurrent throughout when the play is viewed in the light of the mythological source material.

This hypothetical viewer, the 'implied audience', who is able to decode this subtext, is given a confirmation of their suspicions in the final act. As I stated in my chapter on character names, Theseus and Hippolyta stand out particularly as intriguing choices for characterisation – even when we take into account Geoffrey Chaucer's almost identical usage two centuries before. I mention this example simply because it is among the first that the audience may notice in the play. Beginning with this and continuing throughout, these subversive hints have been given to the audience, and are finally confirmed in the newlyweds' reactions to the Pyramus and Thisbe inset play. By watching the now-familiar characters themselves watch a play, the real audience remembers their own position as outsiders looking in. Though the illusion of the theatre could be said to have doubled, it is also simultaneously shattered. The parallels between the viewer and the characters on stage could not be drawn with more clarity – and, through those characters' critical comments on Peter Quince's production, the real audience is guided and encouraged to think critically about the production of Shakespeare.

Pyramus and Thisbe itself, as a textual parody, serves both to confirm the allusions to a more cynical subtext in this metatheatrical way, and also as a parody of Shakespeare's own play. Though Ovid's ill-fated lovers end their melodramatic story with an overabundance of tragedy whereas Shakespeare's characters in the larger play end in marriage, the inset episode serves as a distorted mirror rather than simply a cautionary tale. The irrationality of the lovers and the way that their final choices perpetuate this irrationality is commented on by R.W. Dent; 'Love's choices remain inexplicable, and the eventual pairings are determined only by the constancy of Helena and Hermia in their initial inexplicable choices.'[45] It could be said that the difference in outcome between Pyramus and Thisbe and Shakespeare's lovers is down to pure chance; the lioness is the turning point for the first, and the pansy juice for the latter. Certainly, they do nothing to deserve their fate any more or less than Ovid's characters. With the theatrical illusion so weakened, and the voices of the male characters and Hippolyta suggestively criticising the

[45] Dent, *Imagination in A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1964) p. 116

play-within-the-play, we are invited to look beyond the fairies and the moonlight, so grotesquely parodied by Robin Starveling, and consider what we see in human terms.

In drawing this empathetic portrait of imperfect humanity, Shakespeare follows Ovid's example in a more intuitive way than can be derived simply from his words' likeness to those in Arthur Golding's *Metamorphoses*; in blending together erudition and simpler comedy he becomes an almost anti-Callimachean author, deliberately making use of the popular in order to communicate a subtler point. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is able to function as a comprehensible dramatic work regardless of whether its audience appreciates it in its entirety, but there is a wealth of meaning to be found when seen from the intertextual vantage point between Shakespeare and Ovid.

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