

Scripta 14.4: Pyramus and Thisbe

These extracts are taken from Ovid's Metamorphoses Book 4. Ovid retells the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, the Babylonian young lovers who lived in neighbouring houses but who had been forbidden by their parents to marry. Pyramus and Thisbe meet regularly in secret by speaking through a small chink in the wall which divides their gardens. One day, they plan to sneak out and meet properly in the nearby woods.

Unfortunately, Thisbe arrives at the agreed location first; she is terrified by a lion and runs away, dropping her veil by mistake behind her. Pyramus arrives a little later; sees the veil (now mauled by the lion and covered in blood) and assumes Thisbe is dead. Horrified, Pyramus stabs himself. Thisbe returns to find her lover lying mortally wounded on the ground and - grief stricken - she kills herself.

Ovid's playful version of the tragic tale of star-crossed lovers highlights his poetic ability to create humorous melodrama and bathos. Shakespeare used the story to similar effect as a mini-comedy, set within A Midsummer Night's Dream.

Extract 1: Pyramus and Thisbe meet at the wall

Thisbe and Pyramus stand either side of the garden wall, frustrated that they are kept apart but grateful that they can at least speak to each other. Ovid creates a comically farcical image of the two lovers pressed close to the wall, so desperate for contact that they try to catch the other's breath, but talking to the wall, rather than to each other.

Often, when Thisbe had stood on one side, and there - on the other - was Pyramus, and when in turn they had caught the breath from each other's mouth, they used to say, 'Jealous wall, we love each other - why do you stand in our way? Was it such a big thing for you to let us be together, body upon body, or - if this is too much - at least to open up so that we can kiss? We aren't ungrateful to you - we recognise that we are in your debt because at least there is a route for our words to reach our beloved's ears.'

Extract 2: Thisbe reaches the meeting place

Thisbe secretly and daringly leaves the house to find the agreed meeting place. In a moment of poetic melodrama, a lion suddenly appears, her jaws smeared with the blood from a recent kill. Terrified, Thisbe flees the scene to hide in a nearby cave, leaving her veil behind by mistake.

Thisbe cleverly opened the door, slipped out in darkness and deceived her own family. Covering her face, she reached the mound and sat under the tree as agreed. Love made her bold. But - look! - a lioness appears, her foaming jaws smeared with the fresh blood of oxen, looking to satisfy her thirst with the water of the nearby spring. By the light of the moon, Babylonian Thisbe saw the lion at a distance and fled at a terrified run into a dark cave; while she fled, her veil slipped from her back and she left it behind.

**Extract 3: Pyramus dies**

This extract starts with the moment when Pyramus decides to die. The scene is shaped as a moment of grand heroism: Pyramus presents his decision as courageous, and his emotional farewell and direct address to a prop are evocative of Greek tragedy. Ovid achieves humour, however, by combining this with bathos: Pyramus is talking to a flimsy veil (rather than, for example, the grand armour of a great warrior) and - after Pyramus has pulled his sword out again from his guts - Ovid compares the blood to the rather mundane scene of a burst water pipe.

Pyramus lifts Thisbe's veil and takes it with him to the shadow of the tree they'd agreed on, and, as he gave his tears to the familiar garment, as he gave his kisses, he said, 'Take now also the draughts of my blood!' He plunged the sword, which he had been wearing, down into his guts - there was no delay - and, as he died, he pulled it out from the seething wound. When he lay on his back on the ground, gore shot forth, high up into the air, just like when a water pipe breaks because of a fault in its lead, and through the small, hissing crack, it spurts out much water and breaks through the air with its force.

Extract 4: Thisbe weeps for Pyramus

Thisbe returns to the scene and is horrified to see her lover injured. In keeping with the melodrama of the previous scenes, Thisbe reacts with a dramatic outpouring of grief, beating her arms, tearing her hair and covering Pyramus' icy body with kisses. Pyramus opens his eyes briefly and - after one final glimpse of Thisbe - closes them for the last time.

Thisbe had been hanging back, but after she recognised her lover, she wailed loudly, she beat her undeserving arms, she tore her hair, she embraced her lover's body, she filled his wounds as she wept and mixed her tears with his blood; planting kisses on his icy face she shouted, 'Pyramus! What disaster has taken you from me? Pyramus! Answer me! It is your darling Thisbe who calls you; hear me and lift your lolling head!' At the name of Thisbe, Pyramus opened his eyes, weighed down by death and - after he had seen her - closed them again.

- 1) In Extract 1 why do Pyramus and Thisbe describe the wall as jealous?
- 2) Read Extract 2: what makes this scene dramatic?
- 3) Read Extract 3: imagine that you are creating a scene for a play. What directions would you give to the actor playing Pyramus?
- 4) In Extract 4 Thisbe kills herself. What is your reaction to this scene? Do you find it funny or sad, or a mixture of the two?
- 5) The love story of Pyramus and Thisbe is very famous: which bits of the story do you find most memorable and why?