



Interweaving Reality And Fantasy: An Examination Of The Tragicomic Pyramus And Thisbe Interlude In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

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Abstract: William Shakespeare was an English playwright, poet and actor. He is widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and world's greatest dramatist. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is one of Shakespeare's most beloved comedies. The plot involves four Athenian lovers running away to the forest only for Puck the fairy to make both boys fall in love with the same girl. Ultimately, Puck undoes the enchantment, leading to the reconciliation and matrimonial union of both couples. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* borrows many ideas from Roman poet Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, but the story which is of the most obvious importance for the play is that of Pyramus and Thisbe. One of the most striking features of Shakespeare's comedies is that the underplot parodies the theme treated in the main plot. Here, the central theme of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is romantic love. This is ridiculed first in the fairy story – in the foolish infatuation of Titania towards the idiotic Bottom. It is once again parodied in interlude of Pyramus and Thisbe. This paper shall attempt to show that Shakespeare uses this interlude to reinstate many of the important themes and main ideas present within the main storyline. It also demonstrates the importance of knowing one's craft and shows how easily a tragedy can be satirized with a poor performance. While the interlude of Pyramus and Thisbe serves as a comedic reflection of the main plot, it also reinforces its themes and adds a layer of humor to the proceedings.

Keywords: Interlude, Parody, Realism, Romance, Elizabethan Theatre.

A Midsummer Night's Dream is a comedy written by William Shakespeare around 1595. The play is set in Athens and consists of several subplots revolving around the marriage of Theseus, the king of Athens, and Hippolyta, the queen of the Amazons. The main characters are divided into three groups. The first group is constituted by the four human lovers: Demetrius, Helena, Hermia, and Lysander. The second group consists of the fairies, including Titania, the fairy queen; Oberon, the fairy king; and Puck, Oberon's personal assistant fairy. The third group is completed with the inclusion of the human actors, also known as "the mechanicals". The play explores the themes of love, illusion, and the unpredictable nature of desire. All three groups

experience a similar chain of events: first, a problem of some kind; then the problem is made worse in the forest through magic and confusion; but ultimately, the problem gets sorted out in the forest too.

Shakespeare ingeniously incorporates the love story of Pyramus and Thisbe into *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a play-within-a-play. This meta-theatrical device is performed in the final act by a band of Athenian craftsmen, adding a layer of complexity and humor to the overall narrative. The adaptation of this ancient tale not only serves as comic relief but also mirrors and comments on the main plot, enhancing the thematic depth of the play. Pyramus and Thisbe love each other in the defiance of their parents' wishes. They talk through the chink in the wall that separates their houses. This is very similar to the story of Lysander and Hermia in the play. They also love each other despite the opposition of Hermia's father. They propose to elope and make an assignation to meet in moonlight at a particular spot in the woods. Lysander notes, "The course of true love never did run smooth" (Shakespeare 1.1.134). Each detail in the story of their love is parodied in the interlude of Pyramus and Thisbe. Dowden, in his book, writes, "The humorous extravagance of love is laid bare in the interlude for the edification of the pairs of lovers. They look on and laugh; and their laugh is against themselves. In Pyramus and Thisbe they see themselves unconsciously very much as others have seen them" (363).

Pyramus and Thisbe also propose to elope, just like Lysander and Hermia, and make an assignation to meet in moonlight at Ninu's tomb, but here every detail is presented in a humorous way to provoke laughter. Pyramus and Thisbe are represented as kissing each other through a creek in the wall, but while doing so, they kiss merely the lime and not each other. Thisbe says in despair:

O Wall, full often hast thou heard my moans
For parting my fair Pyramus and me.
My cherry lips have often kissed thy stones,
Thy stones with lime and hair knit up in thee. (Shakespeare 5.1.186-190)

The moonlight in which the lovers meet is ridiculed by the introduction of Moonshine. A man, carrying a lantern and bush of thorns represents the silvery moon, which is always associated with romantic love. In order to avoid being misunderstood, he introduces himself by saying, "This lanthorn doth the horned moon present. / Myself, the man i'th' moon do seem to be." (Shakespeare 5.1.234-235). Theseus points out the absurdity of the whole thing when he says, "This is the greatest error of all the rest. The man should be put into the lanthorn; how is it else the man i'th' moon?" (Shakespeare 5.1.239-241). Thisbe comes to the place of assignation, but there, instead of fairies, a lion waits for her. She is frightened away at the sight of the lion, presented by a man, who assures the audience that he is not a real lion, but Snug, the jointer. Theseus observes with a good humor, "A very gentle beast, and of a good conscience" (Shakespeare 5.1.225). Then comes the lover. Pyramus is beaming with joy and hope, but at the sight of blood-stained mantle of Thisbe, his heart sinks. He jumps to the conclusion that Thisbe has been slain by a lion. He cannot live any more, now that "the fairest dame that lived, that loved, that liked, that looked with cheer" (Shakespeare 5.1.286-287) has passed away. Pyramus exhibits his passion and stabs himself:

Thus die I, thus, thus, thus.
 Now am I dead,
 Now am I fled;
 My soul is in the sky.
 Tongue, lose thy light.
 Moon, take thy flight.
 Now die, die, die, die, die. (Shakespeare 5.1.293-299)

Even death becomes funny in the interlude, and provokes laughter instead of tears. Thisbe does not lag behind, and she also stabs herself, saying:

Tongue, not a word.
 Come, trusty sword,
 Come, blade, my breast imbrue.
 And farewell, friends;
 Thus Thisbe ends.
 Adieu, adieu, adieu. (Shakespeare 5.1.335-340)

The tragicomedy ends here, which is meant to burlesque the theme of romantic love.

This clumsy interlude of the Athenian mechanicals sets forth the problem of realism on the stage. What is the correct method of stage representation? Is everything realistic to be presented on the stage? Shakespeare suggests that an attempt at realistic presentation will lead to the absurdities of the Athenian mechanics. These people do not leave anything to the imagination of the audience, but try to represent everything in a realistic manner. Hence the man presenting the wall is plastered, the moonshine carries lantern. This is realistic, but with a vengeance. The interlude thus is meant to parody extreme realism in the matter of stage representation. Lucking says, “This comedy of the Athenian handicraftsmen is an indirect answer to any objections which might be brought against Shakespeare’s attempt to represent the fairy world, and the world of classical romance, which could be so clearly visible before the spectators of an Elizabethan theatre” (147). The theatrical ineptitude of this troupe undermines the seriousness of their subject matter and it results in an ironically comedic performance that delights rather than saddens.

While the plot of the interlude parallels the main plot of Shakespeare’s play, the obvious difference between the two is that the former is a tragedy and the latter is a comedy. Shakespeare manages to play comedy and tragedy against each other in such a way that draws the two stories in a mirrored relationship. “In the interlude of Pyramus and Thisbe, an actual man stands for the moon; another represents wall with plaster on his fingers. Bottom and his crew assume that the spectators of a drama have no imagination, Shakespeare in his fairy dream assumes that they can imagine as poetically real anything beautiful or grotesque which the poet suggests to them” (Dent 118). The brief-yet-tedious scene of young Pyramus and his love Thisbe is a burlesque upon the dramas of the day in which classical subjects were handled with utter want of dignity and with incongruous extravagance of style. The jingling metres, the mania for alliteration, the far-fetched and fantastic epithets, the meaningless invocations, the wearisome repetition of emphatic words – are all ridiculed with a boisterous glee.

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