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Romeo and Juliet and its Intertexts

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Abstract

It sometimes happens that texts generally categorized as sources for a Shakespearean play are in fact so overtly invoked by the work itself that they should be regarded not only as genealogical antecedents or imaginative influences but as implicit intertexts in relation to which it elaborates its own meanings. Such is the case with some of the works inspiring *Romeo and Juliet*, and in particular with the story of Pyramus and Thisbe contained in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. This tragic little tale is frequently cited as being that from which *Romeo and Juliet* ultimately derives, and what is of considerable interest in this connection is that it is also explicitly referenced in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a play that might in certain respects be read as a comic pendant to Shakespeare's Veronese tragedy and indeed as a kind of intertext in its own right. The story of Pyramus and Thisbe is however one that has appeared in a variety of guises in the course of the centuries, and to the degree that these versions are also echoed in *Romeo and Juliet* they too might be considered to constitute intertexts in the broadest sense of the term.

Key Words – Shakespeare; Ovid; Chaucer; Golding; *Romeo and Juliet*

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I

Among the various more or less recondite matters that are customarily addressed in any self-respecting introduction to a critical edition of a Shakespearean play is the issue of what may reasonably be presumed to be its sources. What were the works preceding that play that can plausibly be adduced as having contributed to supplying its plot line, and its gallery of characters, if not necessary its thematic concerns, its patterns of imagery, or its symbolic reverberations? If it can be demonstrated that Shakespeare went so far as actually to borrow distinctive words or phrases from the sources that are identified, so much the better. Although nowadays writers can get into a considerable amount of trouble for appropriating material from other authors, Shakespeare is largely exempt from criticism on this score, and indeed is usually praised in the most fulsome terms for the skill he exhibits in improving on the originals. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, to cite one representative example, there are numerous borrowings – including borrowings of a purely linguistic character – from Sir Thomas North's translation of Plutarch's *Life of Marcus Antonius*. One celebrated passage, describing Cleopatra as she is being conveyed up the River Cydnus on a barge (II.ii.191-205)[1], is derived in large part from North (Plutarch 1579: 981), although the original prose is rendered into powerfully evocative blank verse that confers upon the lines a cadence and an atmosphere all their own. The mental image we are often invited to summon up by those discussing this process of transposition is that of Shakespeare sitting at a desk with a volume of North open on his left and his manuscript on his right, methodically transcribing from his source but at the same adding idiosyncratic embellishments that stamp it with the hallmark of his own genius[2]. But what such a process amounts to, as almost everyone agrees, is not plagiarism, as it would doubtless be condemned as being today, but the highest expression of transformative creativity, and the product that emerges from it is considered to be authentic Shakespeare and not adulterated North. As James Shapiro remarks in connection with the Cydnus passage, «Shakespeare utterly transforms North's translation by infusing it with hyperbolic and eroticized language, turning his stirring rendering of Plutarch's report into poetry capable of registering the paradox and allure at the heart of Cleopatra's appeal» (Shapiro 2015: 239-240). Such an image of the alchemical craftsman at his labours is without question a fascinating one, and provides valuable insight into how Shakespeare's imagination functioned. What is to be noted however is that this is only scratching the surface of how Shakespeare manipulates his sources for his own ends.

Even in such cases as that of Shakespeare's obvious debt to Plutarch in writing *Antony and Cleopatra*, of course, things are a great deal more complicated than they might at first appear. As the example I have just cited indicates, although Shakespeare may well have had some competence in reading Greek, the version of Plutarch he routinely consulted for his historical information was in fact North's translation, which had been published in 1579. North's translation, however, was not directly from the Greek of Plutarch, but from the French of Jacques Amyot, the first edition of whose *Vites des Hommes Illustres*

[1] With the exception of those to *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, all references to Shakespeare's works throughout this article are to the single volume *Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*: Shakespeare, ed. Proudfoot et al. (2001). References to *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are to the editions of the play edited by Brian Gibbons and Harold F. Brooks respectively: Shakespeare, ed. Gibbons (1993); Shakespeare, ed. Brooks (2006).

[2] For an account of how Shakespeare would have imbibed from an early age the «grammar school techniques of composition, and in particular the emphasis on rhetorical elaboration or copiousness», learning to «read a "source" and embellish it, expand upon it», see Bate (1997: 10).

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appeared in 1559. If we go even further back into the dark backward and abysm of time, as Shakespeare's Prospero memorably puts it, we discover that Plutarch also had his sources, and that these had theirs. At one point in his biography of Mark Antony, for instance, Plutarch quotes his own grandfather Lampryas, who once related to him an anecdote he had heard from a certain physician named Philotas concerning a conversation he had had with one of Marcus Antonius's cooks in Alexandria (Plutarch, trans. North 1579: 982). Shakespeare himself was so struck by this anecdote that he makes indirect reference to it in *Antony and Cleopatra*, when Enobarbus describes some of the extravagant banquets he has partaken of in Egypt (II.ii.187-191). Cooks, physicians, grandfathers, historians, translators both French and English, and finally Shakespeare himself—the line of transmission is a long and sometimes meandering one, and not always easy to disentangle. It is only to be expected that, at each stage along this twisted chain of transmission, things will be added or subtracted, interpretations will be ventured which become integral to the story, and so forth. So what exactly is the source, in the etymological sense of being the originating spring from which all subsequent elaborations derive? Is it the most immediate work or document which the author is known to have consulted, or the less clearly delineated matrix of works and documents from which that source stemmed which he may not have been personally acquainted with at all, or the tangled skein of folklore, myth, and anecdotal tradition out of which these earlier sources may themselves ultimately have emerged?

There are many sources of a historical as well as literary character that Shakespeare is known to have consulted, of course. Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* is one of them. Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles*, which Shakespeare referred to on a regular basis while writing his English history plays (and also his Scottish play *Macbeth*), is another. When we compare those sources with what Shakespeare makes of them, we often learn a great deal about the workings of Shakespeare's own mind. Sometimes what we learn is not particularly edifying, at least for those inclined to believe in the untainted purity of Shakespeare's artistic motives. In his account of Macbeth's career, for example, Holinshed describes the historical figure of Banquo as being every bit as ambitious and treacherous as Macbeth himself. But since Shakespeare's patron James I believed himself to be descended from Banquo Shakespeare deemed it expedient to sanitize the figure and transform him into a model of probity. This was a purely pragmatic decision on Shakespeare's part, because it would never do to offend his king by impugning the rectitude of his ancestor. Something similar happened in the case of Falstaff, who in Shakespeare's *Henry IV* was originally named Sir John Oldcastle after the Lollard leader who had been executed for rebelling against King Henry V. Since a descendent of the original Oldcastle was a powerful figure at Queen Elizabeth's court, and apparently took considerable umbrage at Shakespeare's taking his ancestor's name in vain, the dramatist prudently rebaptized his character so as not to invite unnecessary trouble (Honan 1998: 222). Furthermore, he even advertised the fact that this is what he had done, for in the quarto edition of Henry IV, Part 2 there is a humorous epilogue containing the words: «Falstaff shall die of a sweat, unless already a be killed with your hard opinions; for Oldcastle died a martyr, and this is not the man» (30-32).

But sometimes Shakespeare manipulates his sources for reasons other than the mere need to avoid affronting the delicate sensibilities of those in positions of power. There are occasions for instance in which he renders characters and events more mysterious and inscrutable by adding or eliminating or otherwise adapting elements that were to be found in his sources. As one critic writes, «whenever Shakespeare takes a story from someone

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else [...] he usually starts by removing any clear motive underlying the action», the consequence of this excision being that he «opens his characters' actions and omissions to a variety of different readings» (Fahmi 2010: 130). A case in point is that of the figures of Julius Caesar and of his assassin Brutus in the play *Julius Caesar*. In the course of history Brutus has been variously represented as a hero of Republicanism who participated in the assassination of Caesar solely in order to forestall the resurgence of tyranny in Rome, which is essentially how Plutarch saw him, and as a traitor who perfidiously betrayed a man who had been a friend and generous benefactor to him, which is what Dante perceived when he consigned him to the deepest circle of hell in the *Inferno*. It might be expected that Shakespeare would make his own interpretative predilections more evident in a play treating the assassination of Julius Caesar and its aftermath, but the dramatist is actually rather elusive on the subject. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a sensitive and astute critic of Shakespeare, was puzzled as to why Shakespeare did not make it clearer that Caesar was objectively a menace to the Roman Republic when Plutarch, his main source, had been explicit about the matter. «Had he not passed the Rubicon? Entered Rome as a conqueror? Placed his Gauls in the Senate?», Coleridge asks (Coleridge, ed. Foakes 1989: 178). Coleridge understood that Shakespeare's failure to mention such details means that Brutus's motives in participating in the conspiracy against Caesar become much less easy to discern, and rather bemusedly wonders «What character did Shakespeare mean *his* Brutus to be?» (Coleridge, ed. Foakes 1989: 178). What Coleridge apparently did not consider was the possibility that such apparent sins of omission were in fact deliberate on Shakespeare's part, that they constituted in effect an element in his creative strategy. The possibility is that he did not *want* Brutus's motives to be clear-cut, precisely because he was interested in the unfathomable aspects of human behaviour and in the essential murkiness of personality, as well as in the fact that history can take unpredictable turns for reasons that cannot always be identified.

Now this raises some interesting questions, because at least some of those before whom Shakespeare's company played would have known their Plutarch as well as Shakespeare himself, as they would have known other sources of which the playwright availed himself. If we assume that members of Shakespeare audience were aware of the discrepancy between Shakespeare's sources and what he made of them, and if we assume even further that Shakespeare intended them to be aware of the discrepancy, then the matter of the relation between source and artistic product is complicated still further. There are occasions indeed in which deliberate departures from his source are something that Shakespeare himself signals in his plays, and here things become even more interesting. In such cases the source is to be seen not merely as a genealogical antecedent of the play but as an active presence within it, as something contributing to the overall meaning of the work, something which is to all intents and purposes an implicit intertext in relation to which the work in question establishes its own meanings. *King Lear*, for instance, is broadly based on an anonymous earlier play, entitled *King Leir*, which was well known in Shakespeare's time and had even been printed, but it completely reverses the fundamentally optimistic conclusion of that earlier work to give us the terrifyingly bleak drama we know. That does not mean, however, that the playwright allows the spectator to lose sight of the previous work. On the contrary, as if to remind his audience of that earlier play, and to draw attention to how he deliberately frustrates the positive impetus that drives its concluding scenes, Shakespeare has one of his characters ask at one of the most agonizing moments of *King Lear*: «Is this the promised end?» (V.iii.261).

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The answer is that what the play gives us is emphatically not the promised end, and that is the point. But to understand that point we must know what the promised end is.

What we should remember is that a source, if it is known either directly or indirectly, creates a set of expectations in the mind of the spectator or reader of Shakespeare's plays, expectations that can be played upon creatively by the dramatist for purposes of his own. The expectations can be fulfilled in some cases, thereby confirming the interpretative predispositions of the viewer, or they might be flouted more or less blatantly to profoundly disconcerting effect. Of course, Shakespeare's audience was extremely heterogeneous in terms of its cultural background, and so the expectations would have varied from individual to individual. Some of those attending a play at the Globe, or at the Curtain or the Theatre somewhat earlier, would have had little or no knowledge of such sources as Plutarch or Holinshed at all. Others, such as Inns of Court students for instance, would have possessed an educational background enabling them to recognise at least some of these sources. When the play was performed at other venues such as that of the Court or a private mansion, then a significant proportion of the audience could be expected to recognize such sources. But there are other plays whose plot outlines and dramatis personae would have been familiar even to a less erudite public, because they were already circulating in forms that were more or less accessible to any person who could read and even, through the medium of hearsay, to those who could not. Such is the case with *Romeo and Juliet*.

II

What then were the sources of *Romeo and Juliet*? Most commentators agree that the most immediate source of the play is Arthur Brooke's *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet*, published in 1562. As Brooke himself announces on his title page, the story was «written first in Italian by Bandell», that is by Matteo Bandello, who had included the story of «Giulietta e Romeo» in the second volume of his *Novelle* of 1554. Also derived from Bandello was the story of the lovers in the second volume of William Painter's *Palace of Pleasure*, which appeared in 1567. Although Shakespeare may well have consulted this latter retelling of the tale, and taken from it some of the details he used in his own work, its influence upon *Romeo and Juliet* is less striking than that of Brooke's poem. Given its importance it is worth expending some attention on Brooke's work, before going on to what is the real subject of this discussion, and that is what I propose to do now.

Notwithstanding the disparagement cast upon it by its detractors, *Romeus and Juliet* is by no means an ineffective poem, and judiciously abridged, and if one really has nothing else to do, makes for congenial reading even today. Whether one actually enjoys it or not, however, in perusing the poem one can perceive immediately the catalysing effect it had on Shakespeare's imagination. It is remarkable just how much of Shakespeare's play is directly taken from, or indirectly inspired by, this poem. Just for a start, the so-called «argument» prefaced to the poem, a sonnet anticipating in broad outline the story that is to follow, is probably what gave Shakespeare his idea for the prologue to *Romeo and Juliet*. Not only the plot outline of Shakespeare's play, most of the characters and some of the incidental details it incorporates, and many of the lexical and phraseological elements to be found within it, but also the germs of themes that would be developed more fully in the tragedy are already present in Brooke. In both works, for instance, much

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of the dramatic tension derives from the seemingly paradoxical situation of loving an enemy. If Shakespeare's Juliet, having met and fallen in love with Romeo, will remark on the irony of the circumstance that «Prodigious birth of love it is to me / That I must love a loathed enemy» (I.vi.137-140), Brooke's Juliet has already asked: «What hap have I […] to love my fathers foe?» (Brooke, ed. Munro 1908: 14). Shakespeare develops the idea much further than Brooke, relating it to the Petrarchan convention of depicting a beloved woman in pseudo-martial terms as a fair enemy that must be conquered, to the emotional dilemma described in one of the most celebrated poems of Catullus as *Odi et amo*, and to the oxymoronic conjunction of opposite terms that is a dominant poetic device in *Romeo and Juliet*, but the essence of the notion is nonetheless already clearly discernible in Brooke. The idea of time as having a subjective dimension independent of the regularly cadenced rhythms of the clock and the calendar, as contracting and dilating under the effects of intense emotion, is another notion that the two works have in common, although, once again, Shakespeare makes much more of it. «Sad hours seem long», observes Shakespeare's Romeo (I.i.159), and when the lovers are separated Juliet tells Romeo that «I must hear from thee every day in the hour, / For in a minute there are many days» (III.v. 44-45). But Brooke has already informed us that for his Romeus, waiting for Juliet in the friar's cell, «Each minute seemed an hour, and every hour a day» (Brooke, ed. Munro 1908: 28), while as his lovers wait for nightfall when they can at last consummate their passion «each hour seems twenty year» (Brooke, ed. Munro 1908: 31). Another common feature in the two works is their interest in the reversibility of binary oppositions. After Juliet's simulated death in *Romeus and Juliet* Brooke makes considerable poetic capital out of the idea of things mutating into their opposites, as all the preparations made for Juliet's wedding are converted into those for her funeral:

> Now is the parents' mirth quite changéd into moan,
> And now to sorrow is returned the joy of every one;
> And now the wedding weeds for mourning weeds they change,
> And Hymene into a dirge;—alas! it seemeth strange:
> Instead of marriage gloves, now funeral gloves they have,
> And whom they should see marriéd, they follow to the grave.
> The feast that should have been of pleasure and of joy,
> Hath every dish and cup filled full of sorrow and annoy. (Brooke, ed. Munro 1908: 93)

Shakespeare takes Brooke's idea and puts it into Capulet's mouth, in a speech concluding with a resonant line that constitutes, in effect, a metatheatrical commentary on the dynamic of the entire play of which it is a part:

> All things that we ordained festival,
> Turn from their office to black funeral;
> Our instruments to melancholy bells,
> Our wedding cheer to a sad burial feast,
> Our solemn hymns to sullen dirges change,
> Our bridal flowers serve for a buried corse,
> And all things change them to the contrary. (IV.v.84-90)

As I have argued at length elsewhere, the process by which things are transformed into their opposites is a mechanism operating throughout the whole of *Romeo and Juliet* (Lucking 1997). Not only does Shakespeare seem to have taken his cue for this from Brooke, but he evolved an entire poetic strategy on the basis of this pattern. If Brooke

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explains this dynamic in terms of the reversals that Fortune effects in human affairs, Shakespeare links it to the paradox mentioned earlier of love growing out of hate, as well as other symbolic reversals such as those of light emerging from darkness, too early being too late, comedy turning into tragedy, and so forth.

Interested as he was in the way in which events and personages can be seen in radically different perspectives, Shakespeare would perhaps have been struck by another aspect of Brooke's work, and that is the dichotomy of outlook it exhibits. Brooke's preface, addressed «To the Reader», attempts to justify the poem that is to follow in moralistic terms. Even an example of wicked behaviour can be edifying, he claims, since it illustrates the wages of sin:

> And to this end, good Reader, is this tragical matter written, to describe unto thee a couple of unfortunate lovers, thralling themselves to unhonest desire; neglecting the authority and advice of parents and friends; conferring their principal counsels with drunken gossips and superstitious friars (the naturally fit instruments of unchastity); attempting all adventures of peril for th' attaining of their wished lust; using auricular confession, the key of whoredom and treason, for furtherance of their purpose; abusing the honourable name of lawful marriage to cloak the shame of stolen contracts; finally by all means of unhonest life hasting to most unhappy death. This precedent, good Reader, shall be to thee, as the slaves of Lacedemon, oppressed with excess of drink, deformed and altered from likeness of men both in mind and use of body, were to the free-born children, so shewed to them by their parents, to th' intent to raise in them an hateful loathing of so filthy beastliness. Hereunto, if you apply it, ye shall deliver my doing from offence and profit yourselves. (Brooke, ed. Munro 1908: lxvi)

Some readers have been so impressed by this pious statement of intent that their understanding of the poem is entirely conditioned by it. A case in point is the following remark concerning Brooke's poem contained in the *Oxford Companion to Shakespeare*:

> Brooke's poem is mainly on the side of the lovers' parents, moralising against «dishonest desire» and disobedience: his Juliet, for example, is a «wily wench» who takes pleasure in deceiving her mother into thinking she prefers Paris to Romeo, and the lovers' deaths are represented as righteous punishment for their own sins. (Davies 2005: 399)

This is so completely off the mark that one suspects that the author of this claim has made little effort to read Brooke's poem on its own terms, but preferred instead to accept at face value the solemn professions of didactic intent enunciated in his preface. If the implication of these preliminary avowals is that Romeo and Juliet get what they deserve, this is not the stance that the poem itself seems to be taking. In the poem the love of Romeus and Juliet is not described as mere lust, and the physical passion that undoubtedly does draw them together is described with sympathy rather than with condemnation. The fact is that the author takes a certain amount of bashful pleasure in describing the amours of the young people, and confesses himself indeed to be envious of their joys, as he suggests that the gods themselves are. Nor does the author moralise against the disobedience to which the lovers, and Juliet in particular, resort. Such moralising as there is – and Friar Laurence is particularly wearisome when he is attempting to cheer Romeus up after he has been banished from Verona – is not of a particularly righteous tenor. If it is true that the word «wily» is applied not once but several times to Juliet's machinations,

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and once even to Romeus, there are no pejorative associations attaching to the word. The tradition of New Comedy is full of instances of young people having to circumvent their parents for the sake of fulfilling their romantic aspirations, and our imaginative sympathies are generally enlisted on behalf of such efforts. Shakespeare usually follows suit in his own romantic dramas. When Miranda violates her father's strictures by divulging her name to Ferdinand in *The Tempest*, for instance, what appears to be an act of disobedience is tolerantly accepted by Prospero himself as an inevitable step in the process by which his project of bringing about a union between the two young people can be realized (III.i.36-37).

Not only in the matter of plot and dramatis personae, then, but also in thematic elements it elaborates and in the sympathies it both evinces and elicits, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is a good deal closer to *Romeus and Juliet* than it is sometimes represented as being. But if Brooke's poem is one source for *Romeo and Juliet*, there are others. An excellent account of some of these, no less valid today than when it was produced more than a century ago, is that provided by J.J. Munro in the introduction to his edition of Brooke's poem. In analysing the poem, Munro identifies two major components, the first being «the separation of two lovers by some obstacle», and the second «their ruin brought about by an error which one holds in regard to the other, or by a misfortune, which, happening to one, the other shares» (Munro 1908: x). Munro argues for his own genealogy of the Romeo story in Boccaccio's *Filocolo*, based in its turn on the medieval romance of Floris and Blanchefleur, and on the story of Troilus and Cressida as it too was retold by Boccaccio in his *Filostrato.* As Munro puts it, «It seems probable that these two stories, told by Boccaccio, passed, with others, into popular tales and gave rise to the legends which culminated in Romeo, and which, in their literary expression, came again under the direct influence of Boccaccio» (Munro 1908: xv). The tales to which Munro refers were circulated by Salernitano and Da Porto and Bandello, who introduced a further element that Munroe identifies as the «subterfuge of the sleeping potion, and the burial of the heroine in the sepulchre» (Munro 1908: xvii), which as a literary motif can be traced back to the first or second century *Ephesiaca* by Xenophon of Ephesus. The Romeo and Juliet story, then, is a fusion of what Munro calls «the Separation and Potion romances» which derive from different origins (Munro 1908: xix). As Munro demonstrates, the story was well known before Shakespeare transformed it, and at least as regards the English audience it is of course Brooke's poem which is responsible for its popularity. But Munro also postulates the existence of another work, possibly the play to which Brooke himself refers in his preface, that is now lost (Munro 1908: xliv ff). Brooke himself would have been much influenced by this work, as he was by Chaucer's *Troilus and Cressyde*.

What is somewhat curious about Munro's wide-ranging and impressively erudite discussion is that a work he does not take greatly into consideration as a possible source, although it had already been proposed by a number of commentators, is the story of Pyramus and Thisbe found in the fourth book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Yet the similarities with Shakespeare's play are striking. The tale concerns two young people, living in adjoining dwellings in the city of Babylon, whose burgeoning love for one another is impeded by the opposition of their parents. In Ovid it is not specified that there is any actual antagonism between the families of the two lovers, and neither is any other reason given for the fact they are not permitted to marry, but nonetheless the parents are adamant in their refusal to consent to a union between their children. Notwithstanding this opposition, however, the two young people contrive to hold whispered conversations

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with one another through a narrow crack in the wall separating their two houses, and one day arrange a nocturnal tryst near the tomb of Ninus situated outside the city. Thisbe is the first to arrive at the assignation, but is forced to conceal herself when a lioness appears on the scene with her mouth dripping with blood from a recent kill. In the haste of her flight she drops her mantle[3], and the lioness rends this garment and smears it with blood before vanishing. Pyramus arrives, observes the tracks of the lioness and the torn and bloodied mantle, and infers from this evidence that Thisbe has been devoured by a wild beast while awaiting him. Overwhelmed by despair, he stabs himself with his sword, and Thisbe, emerging from her hiding place in time to see her lover die, also dispatches herself by means of the same weapon.

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

[3] This is Golding's translation of Ovid's «*amictus*» (Ovid, ed. Nims 2000: 89), which Shakespeare also adopts in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (V.i.271). Others translate the word as «cloak» (e.g. Ovid, trans. Miller 1951: 185, 187), and Chaucer renders it as «wimpel» (Chaucer, ed. Skeat 1969: 370). If as some commentators argue a sexual significance is to be read into the bloodying of the garment (Taylor 2004: 56), then «veil» might be the more adequate translation, one that would chime with Ovid's use of the word «*velamina*» on two occasions in the story (Ovid, trans. Miller 1951: 184, 105). See Taylor's note in Taylor (2004: 64, note 16).

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as well, remains entirely valid, and it is the manner in which some of the literary descendants of Ovid's tale make their presence felt in these works that will be explored in the remainder of this discussion.

III

Before going any further a qualification must be repeated which, in general terms, has already been made. To affirm that Pyramus and Thisbe story in the *Metamorphoses* constitutes an «ultimate source», to use Munro's phrase, or even a «remote original», to use Keightley's, is of course a gross simplification, because Ovid's tale is itself almost certainly an elaboration of an antecedent narrative, reshaped to conform to the pattern of ceaseless metamorphosis which the Roman poet perceived as operating throughout the cosmos. According to Peter E. Knox, although «the story of Pyramus and Thisbe […] is known from no extant literary sources earlier than Ovid […] he must have found it in some text now lost», the tale seeming to have descended from a myth originating in the Greek East (Knox 2014: 38). Knox elsewhere discusses a mosaic located in the remains of a second or third century A.D. villa on Cyprus, depicting the story of Pyramus and Thisbe but appearing to refer to another tradition than the Ovidian, and suggests that this artefact «opens the possibility that Ovid learned of a local Cilician myth which he adapted to his own purposes» (Knox 1989: 328). According to this reconstruction, in other words, Ovid himself is no more than another link in a chain of transmission by which a story of originally Eastern provenance, apparently featuring deities associated with a river and a stream, entered the European tradition[4]. Since the Ovidian version of the Pyramus and Thisbe narrative is in chronological terms the earliest literary exemplification of the story that has actually come down to us, however, and as it is the earliest with which Shakespeare himself may reasonably be supposed to have been acquainted, it is this version that we must take as a point of reference.

There can be no question that Shakespeare knew Ovid's *Metamorphoses* extremely well, both in the original Latin and in the translation that had been published in 1567 by Arthur Golding, and that echoes of these works reverberate throughout his own[5]. Jonathan Bate, speculating about the probable contents of Shakespeare's personal library, surmises that «his most prized books were his copies of Golding's translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and North's translation of Plutarch's *Lives*», and adds that «it is a fair assumption that as well as the stout English version of Golding, the book chest would have contained a Latin Ovid» (Bate 2008: 145). That one of the Ovidian stories which particularly caught Shakespeare's attention was that of Pyramus and Thisbe is evidenced by the fact that he specifically alludes to it in several of his plays. The *Metamorphoses* is not, of course, the only literary work in which he could have read this story, although he would have known very well that it is the Roman poem which is its *locus classicus*. John Gower offered a version of the tale in his *Confessio Amantis*, a poem which Shakespeare consulted when writing his portions of *Pericles*, and there are a number of others[6]. Among

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[4] Knox (1989: 319); Keith (2001: 309). For an engaging discussion of the origin of the Pyramus and Thisbe story in myths involving watercourses, see Avezzù (2022: 54-57). Also relevant to this issue is Stramaglia (2001: esp. 98-102).

[5] For Shakespeare's debt to Ovid, see for instance Highet (1985: 203-207), Taylor (2000), Bate (2000), and Bate (2001).

[6] Muir provides an extensive survey of some of the versions of the Pyramus story extant in Shakespeare's time and, arguing that «Shakespeare had read several versions of the Pyramus story», identifies a number

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

Although explicit references to the story of Pyramus and Thisbe in Shakespeare's works are relatively few, they are not the less telling for that reason. A particularly vivid instance is found in *Titus Andronicus*, in which we find the lines «So pale did shine the moon on Pyramus / When he by night lay bathed in maiden blood» (2.3.231-232). Examined from the perspective of the present discussion, the tableau thus evoked of the moon casting its pallid glow over the lifeless bodies of the unfortunate lovers is of particular interest, inasmuch as the detail of the moon illuminating the scene on the night of the tragic tryst between Pyramus and Thisbe is one that is mentioned only in passing by Golding, whereas Chaucer draws deliberate attention to it when he remarks that «The mone shoon, men mighte wel y-see» (Chaucer, ed. Skeat 1969: 370). This is a circumstance that becomes significant in view of the anxiety evinced by the artisans enacting the Pyramus and Thisbe interlude in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that ways and means be found «to bring the moonlight into a chamber; for you know, Pyramus and Thisby meet by moonlight» (3.1.46-47), since it suggests that Shakespeare is at this point thinking of Chaucer's retelling of Ovid at least as much as of Golding's translation. In *Titus Andronicus*, incidentally, a drama in which a volume of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* physically materializes on the stage and plays a crucial role in advancing the action, several of the personages not only purposely model their conduct on stories found in the *Metamorphoses*, but oblige other characters to do the same, so that in this case there is inevitably and demonstrably a correspondence between events in the drama and the Ovidian source[7]. This is something that might, though in less overt form, constitute a precedent for later works as well.

Another mention of the Pyramus and Thisbe story is to be found in *The Merchant of Venice*, when Jessica, reviewing the sad catalogue of love affairs terminating in disaster or betrayal that may be premonitory of her own future life with Lorenzo, recalls that «In such a night / Did Thisbe fearfully o'ertrip the dew / And saw the lion's shadow ere himself / And ran dismay'd away» (V.1.6-9). In this case as well the story of the

of possible verbal borrowings from these sources to be found in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Muir 1954: 142). A revised version of this discussion is to be found in Muir's later book *The Sources of Shakespeare's Plays* (Muir 2005: 68-77).

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

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Babylonian lovers is invoked, together with others that are also to be found in Chaucer's works, as a prototype of doomed love. What from the point of view of the present discussion is perhaps more immediately pertinent, however, is the fact that the tale is explicitly alluded to in *Romeo and Juliet*, when Mercutio mockingly remarks that in comparison with Rosaline, with whom Romeo believes himself to be in love, «Thisbe [is] a grey eye or so, but not to the purpose» (II.iv.43-44). These are words that may be construed as a deliberate hint on Shakespeare's part, signalling the existence of an imaginative link between this play and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. For it is of course in this latter work, written about the same time as *Romeo and Juliet* and sharing some of its themes and image patterns, that the Pyramus and Thisbe story is most fully developed, much of that play revolving in fact around the preparations being mounted by a group of Athenian artisans to present a theatrical rendition of the tale at a wedding feast.

That there is an almost specular relation between *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has often been remarked on by critics, Frank Kermode going so far as to argue indeed that the latter is «a twin of *Romeo and Juliet*, a treatment of what is fundamentally the same story but this time in a comic mode» (Kermode 2001: 59). Both works constitute variations on the theme of how «quick bright things come to confusion», as one character puts it in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (I.i.149), and although they carry the originating idea to radically different conclusions, these conclusions contain the germs of their opposites as well. *Romeo and Juliet* appears at points to reflect the mood of its counterpart, with its elaboration of material that seems more appropriate to a comic scenario than a tragic one. And notwithstanding the comic vein in which it is written, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is for its own part traversed by a dark stream of tragic implication which, though deflected on the level of the primary plot strands of the work, nonetheless finds displaced expression in a play-within-a-play based on the story of Pyramus and Thisbe that seems deliberately to recall and to mock the somewhat sentimental pathos pervading the conclusion of *Romeo and Juliet*. Margerie Garber observes that «as presented by Peter Quince and his players, "Pyramus and Thisbe" is nothing less than the countermyth of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – the thing that did not happen, the tragedy encapsulated within the comedy and reduced to a manageable, bearable, and laughable fiction», and at the same time that «if *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has many points in common with *Romeo and Juliet*, the plot of "Pyramus and Thisbe" *is*, in effect, the plot of *Romeo and Juliet*» (Garber 2005: 233-234). It is in consequence of this relationship of complementarity between the two plays, developed on the thematic as well as the situational and verbal planes, that Gibbons suggests that they might be viewed as «a kind of diptych, portraying the attraction and repulsion of opposites [...] in opposed modes, of tragedy and comedy» (Gibbons 1993: 31), that they might in other words be seen as linked to one another in ways which have a significant bearing on the meaning of each. It is the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, deriving from Ovid but elaborated by subsequent writers as well, which provides not only a bridge between the two works but also a framework within which both can be seen[8].

I have mentioned the fact that Shakespeare was familiar with Golding's translation of Ovid, as is amply attested by the numerous verbal echoes of Golding's words to be found in his works[9]. And a number of commentators, myself included, have argued that this

[8] On the relation between *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and the Pyramus and Thisbe story see for instance Brooks (2006: xlii-xlv).

[9] Most notably, perhaps, he draws upon Golding's version as well as upon the original text in Prospero's valediction to his magic in the final act of *The Tempest* (V.i.33-50). For discussions of how elements of

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translation is explicitly referenced, and in some measure also parodied, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*[10]. But, as I have already suggested, there is reason to believe that Chaucer's retelling of Ovid's story in *The Legend of Good Women* also contains elements that may have influenced Shakespeare. First of all, there is a certain analogy between the ways the stories of doomed passion are introduced in «The Legend of Thisbe of Babylon» and *Romeo and Juliet* respectively. Chaucer's tale begins with the words:

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

This may be compared with the opening lines of the Prologue to *Romeo and Juliet*: «Two households, both alike in dignity / In fair Verona where we lay our scene» (1-2). Both works begin with a specification of the name of the town where the drama is enacted, and both mention two families residing within that town which enjoy elevated social status, before proceeding to depict the plight of their respective children whose love is thwarted by the familial influences to which they are subject. This expository strategy, proceeding from the general to the specific, is very different from that of Golding, who like Ovid himself does not expressly identify the town by name in his exordium, and who instead of mentioning the parental figures at the outset immediately focuses on the «two yong folke» who are «in houses joynde so nere / That under all one roofe well nie both twaine conveyed were» (Ovid, ed. Nims 2000: 88). For the sake of comparison with Shakespeare's more immediate, and more generally acknowledged, source in *Romeus and Juliet*, it might be mentioned that Brooke also begins with an invocation of the name of the town: «There is beyond the Alps, a town of ancient fame, / Whose bright renown yet shineth clear: Verona men it name» (Brooke, ed. Munro 1908: 1). But it is not until line 25 that he gets around to mentioning the two rival households: «There were two ancient stocks, which Fortune high did / Above the rest, indued with wealth, and nobler of their race … Whose praise, with equal blast, Fame in her trumpet blew» (Brooke, ed. Munro 1908: 2). If it is true as Munro argues that Brooke wrote *Romeus and Juliet* with Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* in mind, it seems no less likely that Shakespeare wrote *Romeo and Juliet* as much under the influence of *The Legend of Good Women* as of Brooke's poem.

I earlier mentioned that Brooke's Romeo anticipates Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in its interest in the distinction between subjective and chronological time. It is perhaps worthy of note that Chaucer too evinces such an interest in that part of *The Legend of Good Women* dedicated to the story of Thisbe. Once his lovers have decided to rendezvous outside the town time seems to slow down almost to a halt as they anxiously await the appointed hour:

both the original work and its translation are blended in this passage, see Muir (2005: 3-4), and Bate (2000: xlii). For examples from the Sonnets and elsewhere of passages «transmuted from Ovid through the Golding translation», see Highet (1985: 204-207, this quotation 205).

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

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> This covenant was affermed wonder faste;
> And longe hem thoughte that the sonne laste,
> That hit nere goon under the see adoun. (Chaucer, ed. Skeat 1969: 369)

In his translation of Ovid Golding is much more perfunctory, contenting himself with the parenthetical observation «And so daylight (which to their thought away but slowly goth)» (Ovid, ed. Nims 2000: 89) to render Ovid's «*et lux, tarde discedere visa, praecipitatur aquis, et aquis nox exit ab isdem*» (Ovid, trans. Miller 1951: 184). In Chaucer's version, moreover, as in *Romeo and Juliet*, time is implicated in the final tragedy that befalls the two lovers. Shakespeare's Romeo will arrive at the Capulet monument moments before Juliet is due to revive from her induced slumber, and will kill himself in the conviction that she is dead. Chaucer's Pyramus will commit suicide after persuading himself that it is his own late arrival that is responsible for what he erroneously believes to be Thisbe's death:

> And I so slow! allas, I ne hadde be
> Here in this place a furlong-wey or ye! (Chaucer, ed. Skeat 1969: 370)

This is somewhat more emphatic than is Golding's rendition of Ovid, in which Pyramus blames himself because he «Did cause thee in the night to come, and came not here before» (Ovid, ed. Nims 2000: 90), which is very close to Ovid's «*ego te, miseranda, peremi, / in loca plena metus qui iussi nocte venires / nec prior huc veni*» (Ovid, trans. Miller 1951: 105). The ironic point, of course, is that as in the case of Romeo when he views the apparently inanimate body of Juliet, Pyramus is wrong about his lover's being dead, and that had he been less precipitous in ending his own life his story would not have concluded in tragedy.

There are other interesting points of contact between *Romeo and Juliet* and Ovid's story of Pyramus and Thisbe, some of which may betray processes of association operating in Shakespeare's mind. One such convergence may be found in the rather odd image Capulet uses to describe Juliet's profuse weeping, which he mistakenly imputes to her grief at her cousin Tybalt's death: «How now, a conduit, girl?» (III.v.129). As it happens, there are only seven instances of the word «conduit» in Shakespeare's plays, and one in *The Rape of Lucrece*, and in the majority of these cases the use of the word is literal, referring to the channels or pipes through which water or other fluids are conveyed. Strictly speaking, the image of a conduit is not entirely felicitous as applied to Juliet's weeping, and only really makes sense if Capulet is supposed to be imagining his daughter's eyes as being the spouts from which the contents of a pipe are discharged, as is the case when Antigonus in *The Winter's Tale* describes a figure in a dream whose «eyes / Became two spouts» under the stress of an emotion (III.iii.25-26). Comparison might be made however with the phrase «As from a conduit with three issuing spouts», used by Marcus to describe Lavinia's blood pouring from her wounds in *Titus Andronicus* (II.iv.30), a simile which, as has several times been noted, recalls Ovid's equally graphic description of Pyramus's death in the *Metamorphoses*[11]. One editor of *Romeo and Juliet* suggests that Shakespeare might have borrowed the image from Brooke, in which Juliet assures her mother at one point that «my painéd heart by conduits of the eyne / No more

[11] Waith (1957: 47). See also Bate's note in his edition of *Titus Andronicus* (Shakespeare, ed. Bate 1995: 188 n.). Bate goes on to point out the «Ovidianism of the whole of [the] speech» in which these lines are found, something he also comments on in Bate (2001: 111-112).

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henceforth, as wont it was, shall gush forth dropping brine» (Shakespeare, ed. Gibbons 1993: 190 n.; Brooke, ed. Munro 1908: 67). This might well be so, but it seems likely as well that the playwright is once again remembering Golding's Ovid, in which the following rather bizarre comparison is used to describe the force with which Pyramus's blood spurts from his body after he has stabbed himself with his sword:

> As when a Conduite pipe is crackt, the water bursting out
> Doth shote it self a great way off and pierce the Ayre about (Ovid, ed. Nims 2000: 148-149)

And he may also be recalling the story of Thisbe in *The Legend of Good Woman*, in which Chaucer employs the identical image: «The blood out of the wounde as brode sterte / As water, whan the conduit broken is» (Chaucer, ed. Skeat 1969: 370). What is to be noted is that whereas Ovid invokes the image of a broken conduit to describe how Pyramus's blood sprays a nearby mulberry tree and converts the colour of its fruit from white to deep purple, this being the metamorphosis he specifically has in mind in this story, and whereas Golding follows suit in his translation of the tale, Chaucer dispenses with these gory details and therefore has no need of so vivid an image as that of a fractured pipe streaming forth water. Yet he too renders Ovid's phrase «*fistula plumbo*» (Ovid, trans. Miller 1951: 186), or «lead pipe», as «conduit», and this may help to explain why, though in a very different context, it appears in *Romeo and Juliet* as well.

IV

It would perhaps not be too much of an exaggeration to suggest that the image of the broken conduit, which I have argued might plausibly have been carried over to *Romeo and Juliet* from Golding and Chaucer, might bear some imaginative relation to the situation whereby the passion of two young people bursts the constraints imposed upon them by their elders, though only at the cost of the death of the lovers[12]. If this is so, then it is closely bound up with another element found in both *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* which can be related to Ovid's tale of Pyramus and Thisbe. This, unpromising as it might seem at first glance, is the image of the wall. We have seen that in the Pyramus and Thisbe story, as it is narrated in Ovid, and retold by Chaucer and by Golding, a detail that assumes particular importance is that of the partition between two dwellings which, interposing itself physically as a barrier between the two lovers, also emblemizes the social impediments standing in the way of their union. Something that is worth observing in this connection is that the wall motif is in fact introduced from the very beginning of Ovid's story, when the city walls encircling Babylon are described in a manner that might reveal symbolic associations in the mind of the original author himself. Following in Ovid's footsteps, Chaucer relates that Semiramus had constructed around the city «walles [...] Ful hye, of harde tyles wel y-bake» (Chaucer, ed. Skeat 1969: 368), while Golding describes the town, not entirely elegantly, as a place «of whose huge walles so monstrous high and thicke / The fame is given Semyramis for making them of

[12] It might be noted that *Antony and Cleopatra* contains numerous instances of the image of passion as something that «overflows the measure» (I.i.2) and generally breaks the trammels of a culturally imposed discipline. For an interesting account of the metaphorical schema recurrent in this play based on the image of a container unable to hold the «liquids of passionate love, martial courage, and grief», see Freeman (1999: 446).

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bricke» (Ovid, ed. Nims 2000: 88). It seems reasonable to suggest that it is these massive and presumably impregnable walls, demarcating the perimeter of the town and isolating it from what Chaucer describes as the «the feldes […] so brode and wyde» (Chaucer, ed. Skeat 1969: 369), that appear again in microcosmic form in the partition separating the dwellings inhabited by Pyramus and Thisbe. The implication would seem to be that the wall which delineates the boundaries of the town as an urban entity also defines the structure of the social and interpersonal relations existing within its precincts, including the prohibition upon the two young people's love imposed by their parents. This wall, which figures what Giuseppe Mazzotta describes as «the proximity and separation to which the two young lovers are doomed» (Mazzotta 1986: 155), is riven however by a narrow fissure that permits the lovers to exchange furtive whispers with one another, and it is through this crack that they make their pact to escape beyond the boundaries of the city and so abandon the world of walls altogether. Ironically, however, the place they choose for their assignation is a tomb and therefore associated with death, as Mazzotta also points out:

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

Now as it happens the image of the wall is prominent in both *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* These are in fact the two plays in the Shakespearean canon with the highest incidence of the word «wall» in the singular form, there being, not counting scene directions and speech-headings, no fewer than 29 occurrences in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and eight in *Romeo and Juliet*. Except for *Edward III*, which is only Shakespearean in part, no other play contains more than three instances of the word. Although the word «wall» is not explicitly used in this connection, Romeo effectively breaches the confines of the Capulet residence when he irrupts into the feast being held there, and this trespass overtly implicates walls and what they emblemize in what follows. It may be inferred from the text itself that the second act of *Romeo and Juliet* opens in a street flanking the wall of Capulet's orchard, since Benvolio obligingly supplies the information that Romeo «ran this way and leapt this orchard wall» (II.i.5), and the idea is pursued in the ensuing scene. Asked how he managed to enter her father's garden, since «The orchard walls are high and hard to climb» (II.ii.63), Romeo poetically if somewhat implausibly responds that «With love's light wings did I o'erperch these walls, / For stony limits cannot hold love out» (II.ii.65-66), to which he adds that he was directed in these exertions by love which «lent me counsel, and I lent him eyes» (II.ii.80-81). This latter declaration implicitly alludes to the commonplace that love is blind, but it is also tempting to perceive in it yet another reminiscence of the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, in which it appears that love, far from being sightless, is endowed with an acuity of vision peculiar to itself. In his version of the story Chaucer observes that although the cleft in the wall dividing the houses of the two young lovers is so narrow as almost to be invisible, «what is that, that love can nat espy?» (Chaucer, ed. Skeat 1969: 369), while in his rendition of the *Metamorphoses* Golding translates Ovid's question «*quid non sentit amor?*» (Ovid, trans. Miller 1951: 182) as «what doth not love espie?» (Ovid, ed. Nims

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2000: 88). The resemblance between these two formulations of the idea that lovers' eyes have the power to detect the least vulnerability in the barriers standing between them, incidentally, is so close as to suggest that Golding too was familiar with Chaucer's tale and might have been influenced by it.

There are a number of other references to walls in *Romeo and Juliet* that could lend themselves to extended discussion in terms of their role as emblems of division and enclosure, and at the same time as boundaries to be erased or overcome. As in Ovid, walls demarcate the city as a social entity at the same time as they define social relationships within it, not excluding those of an antagonistic character. Thus the Capulet servant Sampson's fatuous boast at the beginning of the play that «I will / take the wall of any man or maid of Montague's» (I.i.10-11), spawns a number of further jests on the subject of acts of violence potentially involving walls, Sampson brashly declaring that in the event of an altercation with the rival household «I will push Montague's men from the wall, and thrust his maids to the wall» (I.i.15-17). The Nurse recalls an occasion when she was sitting with the infant Juliet «under the dovehouse wall» when an earthquake struck and caused that wall to tremble (I.iii.27). Perhaps significantly, this is an event that takes place the day following another incident that seems – at least according to the ribald commentary on it supplied by the Nurse's husband – to presage Juliet's future sexual maturation (I.iii.38-43), a development that will challenge the dominion of confining walls both in her own life and in that of Romeo. The same nurse will later be enjoined to wait «behind the abbey wall» in order to take delivery of the rope ladder that will enable Romeo to breach once more the walls of the Capulet house, this time by way of Juliet's window (II.iv.183), and by consummating his marriage with Juliet breach also the social barrier dividing the two lovers. Once again, it is tempting to suspect subterranean associations operating in the mind of the poet if not a deliberate symbolic strategy on his part.

In Ovid's story Thisbe, having abandoned the walled city of Babylon in order to encounter her lover, is compelled to take refuge in a cavern when she catches sight of the lioness. It is while she is thus concealed within the stone walls of what Golding describes as «a darke and yrkesome cave» (Ovid, ed. Nims 2000, 89) that Pyramus arrives and, misconstruing the significance of the bloodstained mantle, slays himself. Analogously, if the force of love seems for a while to have enabled Romeo to penetrate the barriers, both physical and social, that divide him from Juliet, walls reassert the power they wield in human affairs as the play proceeds. Having killed Tybalt, and learning that the Prince has banished him from his native city, Romeo despondently remarks that «There is no world without Verona walls» (III.iii.17). At the same time that walls once again interpose themselves as barriers separating him from Juliet, he recognizes that beyond those walls his life can have no meaning. But this is not all. Friar John fails to deliver the letter addressed to Romeo that has been entrusted to him by Friar Laurence because the «searchers of the town», suspecting that a house he is visiting harbours plague, «Seal'd up the doors and would not let us forth» (V.ii.8, 11), sequestering him within the confines of the building and obliging him to abort his journey to Mantua. The consequence of this setback is that Romeo is not informed that what has been proclaimed as Juliet's death is merely part of an elaborate stratagem devised by the friar, so that when, in defiance of the Prince's edict of exile, he passes through the walls of Verona one final time it is with the intention of putting an end to his own life. The last wall standing between himself and Juliet is that of the Capulet monument, whose gate he pries open with the defiant exclamation «Thus I enforce thy rotten jaws to open» (V.iii.47). Romeo has earlier asserted that «Stony limits cannot hold love out», and so it proves to be in this case as

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well, but the violation of confines comes at a price, and when Friar Laurence arrives at the tomb where Romeo has just killed Paris one of the first things he notices is the blood «which stains / The stony entrance of this sepulchre» (V.iii.140-141). The figurative wall dividing the «two households» of the Montagues and the Capulets may disintegrate at the moment of their reconciliation, but it is at the cost of their children having been immolated as the «poor sacrifices of our enmity» (V.iii.303), with the ironic consequence that those same households are destined to extinction. And if no walls stand between the lovers themselves at the conclusion of the play, it is only because they are both immured within the «palace of dim night» that is Juliet's tomb (V.iii.107), having crossed together the final boundary dividing life from death.

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

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

Talking to walls might seem a somewhat eccentric activity to engage in under any circumstances, but apart from this there is nothing notably ludicrous in Golding's description, which does not in fact stray very far from the original. In Chaucer however we have something that comes very near to burlesque, and it is a burlesque which anticipates that of the Pyramus and Thisbe sketch in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

> And every day this wal they wolde threte,
> And wisshe to god, that it were doun y-bete.
> Thus wolde they seyn—«allas! Thou wikked wal,
> Through thyn envye thou us lettest al!
> Why nilt thou cleve, or fallen al a-two?
> Or, at the leste, but thou woldest so,
> Yit woldestow but ones lete us mete,
> Or ones that we mighte kissen swete,
> Than were we covered of our cares colde.
> But natheles, yit be we to thee holde
> In as muche as thou suffrest for to goon

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> Our wordes through thy lyme and eek thy stoon.
> Yit oghte we with thee ben wel apayd.» (Chaucer, ed. Skeat 1969: 369)

Whereas Golding remains fairly close to the Ovidian original in tone as well as content, Chaucer boisterously expands the comic potentialities latent in the lovers' habit of blaming the wall for their woes, having them castigate the barrier that stands between them in the most vehement terms before acknowledging that it does after all permit them to converse with one another and is therefore entitled to a measure of gratitude. As James W. Spisak suggests, «such apostrophe was surely an inspiration for Shakespeare to make his Wall "sensible"» (Spisak 1984: 206), for in all essential respects this is how the wall is treated in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as well. In Shakespeare's comedy, indeed, just to make the situation as ridiculous as possible, what is described as «that vile wall which did these lovers sunder» (V.i.131) is not an inert stage property, as Capulet's orchard wall in *Romeo and Juliet* presumably is, but an animate being played by a human actor who not only walks on and off the stage but also pronounces a number of lines of his own[13].

As is congruent with the sentience with which it has been endowed, Pyramus at first addresses this wall in ingratiating terms intended to secure it as an ally, but changes register entirely when it fails to oblige him as fully as he expects:

> And thou, O wall, O sweet, O lovely wall,
> That stand'st between her father's ground and mine!
> Thou wall, O wall, O sweet and lovely wall,
> Show me thy chink, to blink through with mine eyne!
> *[Wall stretches out his fingers.]*
> Thanks, courteous wall: Jove shield thee well for this!
> But what see I? No Thisby do I see.
> O wicked wall, through whom I see no bliss!
> Cursed be thy stones for thus deceiving me! (V.i.172-179)

Although the courtesy attributed to the wall might originate with Golding's reference to «this same piece of courtesie» (Ovid, ed. Nims 2000: 88), the «wicked wall» aspersion would, as Muir suggests, seem to derive from Chaucer (Muir 2005: 72-73). The words with which Shakespeare's Thisbe addresses the wall might also betray a Chaucerian reminiscence:

> O wall, full often hast thou heard my moans,
> For parting my fair Pyramus and me!
> My cherry lips have often kiss'd thy stones,
> Thy stones with lime and hair knit up in thee. (V.i.186-189)

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

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

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Nor is this the only indication in Thisbe's speech that Shakespeare may be thinking more of Chaucer than of Golding. Whereas Golding describes how the lovers, having terminated their whispered conversations, «eche gave kisses sweete / Unto the parget [plaster] on their side» (Ovid, ed. Nims 2000: 89), Chaucer less delicately states that «The colde wal they wolden kisse of stoon» (Chaucer, ed. Skeat 1969: 369), and it would seem to be this that is echoed in Shakespeare's «My cherry lips have often kiss'd thy stones». Shakespeare indeed out-Chaucers Chaucer in the verve with which he renders Ovid into English, investing his words with a ribald secondary meaning of which his predecessor is innocent (see Partridge 1968: 121, s.v. «stone»). Pursuing this somewhat salacious vein, when Shakespeare's Pyramus entreats Thisbe to «kiss me through the hole of this vile wall», Thisbe responds «I kiss the wall's hole, not your lips at all» (5.1.198-199), words that are once again susceptible to a bawdy construction (see Partridge 1968: 121, s.v. «hole»). It is because they are frustrated in their efforts to fulfil their passion for one another while the wall remains so obdurately present that the two young people make arrangements for what is potentially a more gratifying encounter beyond the city gates, while Wall, having discharged his part in the playlet and become irrelevant, «away doth go» (5.1.203). The scene now shifts to the tomb situated outside the city precincts to which the lovers have agreed to repair and where they will meet their fate. In their case as well, though only in parody, the repudiation of walls and what they signify will lead to death.

V

It has often been noted that the sketch based on the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, with its depiction of a pair of lovers who are thwarted in their desire to wed and who elope into the forest beyond the confines of their city, reflects on the plot of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a whole[14]. What is less frequently accorded the attention it warrants are the implications of Bottom's brief commentary on the interlude at its conclusion: «the wall is down that parted their fathers» (V.i.337-338). The question that arises in connection with this remark is that of whose fathers, precisely, are being referred to. While Bottom's words obviously have some relevance to the story of Pyramus and Thisbe that has just been enacted, inasmuch as it is a physical wall that separates the dwellings occupied by the families of the two lovers, it is relevance of a very limited kind[15]. The detail about it being *fathers* who are divided seems to imply that there is an antagonism between the lovers' parents of which the dividing wall is an emblem, whereas neither in the sketch nor in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a whole is there any suggestion that enmity between families plays any part in the drama whatsoever. Indeed, the only parent who has any role in the play is Hermia's father Egeus, whose motive for forbidding the marriage of his daughter to the man she loves is that he has another matrimonial project in mind for her. In the Pyramus and Thisbe sketch that is presented at Theseus's palace too no fathers are mentioned, and although Quince's original casting for the play does include Pyramus's father and both of Thisbe's parents these personages have been quietly

[14] For a detailed discussion of the relevance of the Pyramus and Thisbe story to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, see Rudd (2000).

[15] If the emendation proposed by Harold F. Brooks is correct, then Bottom's words may hark back to Theseus's remarks upon Wall's departure that «Now is the mure rased between the two neighbours» (V.i.204; see Shakespeare, ed. Brooks 2006: 159-162). Even if this is accepted, however, there seems no reason to assume that the word «neighbours» refers to anyone other than Pyramus and Thisbe themselves, in which case the conjectural emendation does not solve the problem posed by Bottom's words.

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suppressed before the final performance (I.ii.56-59). But if it has only limited application to the interlude and to the play of which it is a part, Bottom's observation that «the wall is down that parted their fathers» does have a very close bearing on *Romeo and Juliet*, which concludes with the reconciliation of the two families whose strife has been responsible for the tragedy of the two young lovers of that play, and with the promise on the part of the grieving and penitent fathers to commission statues commemorating their children that will lie side by side (V.iii.297-303). As Amy J. Riess and George Walton Williams argue, «the barrier between feuding parents – not in Ovid, not in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, not in "Pyramus and Thisby" – must allude to a situation that the audience would have recognized: the "Pyramus and Thisby" playlet deconstructs the wall of *Romeo and Juliet* hostility and ends with *Romeo and Juliet* reconciliation» (Riess and Williams 1992: 215)[16]. Though Wall merely departs from the scene once he has done his duty in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it is in *Romeo and Juliet* that a metaphorical wall dividing the two households manifestly though belatedly crumbles.

This is one of several occasions in which *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and more particularly the Pyramus and Thisbe sketch contained within it, seems to make sly reference to *Romeo and Juliet*. It has sometimes been maintained that the interlude is, as Samuel B. Hemingway argued over a century ago, «a burlesque not only of the romantic tragedy of love in general, but of *Romeo and Juliet* in particular» (Hemingway 1911: 80), as if Shakespeare was recoiling from the excessive sentimentality he had himself indulged in, perhaps in deference to a paying public greedy for heady emotionalism, in that other play. To some extent he would have found inspiration for such a travesty in some of the stylistic idiosyncrasies and downright solecisms of Golding's translation of the *Metamorphoses* although, as I have been arguing, there is also reason to suspect that he may be casting a sidelong glance at Chaucer's *The Legend of Thisbe*, which notwithstanding its ostensibly tragic subject matter does not resist the temptation to lurch on occasion into near farce. But if Shakespeare had *Romeo and Juliet* in mind when he wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* and embedded deliberate indications in the latter that this was the case, it is also true that there are elements in *Romeo and Juliet* that would seem to pertain more to the world of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* than to their own[17]. There are, for instance, a number of references to dream, and to the relation between dream and reality, something that – as its very title announces – is an abiding preoccupation in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as well. As they are about to enter the Capulet house in which he will encounter Juliet for the first time Romeo confesses to his companions that he feels apprehensive about the escapade because «I dreamt a dream to-night» (I.iv.49). Romeo does not clarify what his dream was about, but the implication of his words is that it was somehow ominous in tenor, and if this is so then it is in some ways prophetic of the tragic events that are to ensue. As he himself says, dreamers sometimes «dream things true» (I.iv.52). Later, while waiting for Juliet to reappear at her window, he begins to fear that «Being in night, all this is but a dream, / Too flattering sweet to be substantial» (II.ii.140-141). Romeo's ambivalent belief that dreamers might «dream

[16] Barber makes a similar point (Barber 1990: 152 n.).

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

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things true», but at the same time that dreams may flatter, is ironically echoed towards the end of the play when, shortly before tidings are brought to him of Juliet's supposed death, he remarks that «If I may trust the flattering truth of sleep / My dreams presage some joyful news at hand» (V.i.1-2). But what is without question the most curious of these allusions to dream is the extraordinary – though in terms of its context perfectly gratuitous – monologue about Queen Mab in which, as Hemingway points out, the description of the fairies' midwife «has the exquisite delicacy and daintiness of the descriptive passages of the *Dream*, but it is not an integral part of *Romeo and Juliet*» (Hemingway 1911: 80). Harold F. Brooks suggests that «the diminutive fairies peopled Mercutio's imagination before, more boldly, Shakespeare asked his audience to imagine them peopling the scene itself» (Brooks 2006: xlv), and A.D. Nuttall that «Mercutio is allowed to imagine the as yet unwritten *Midsummer Night's Dream*» (Nuttall 2007: 108). But it is perhaps to be wondered whether things are quite as simple as this.

For some readers at least, one of the most incongruous moments in *Romeo and Juliet* is that following the discovery of the inanimate body of Juliet on the morning she is supposed to marry Paris. The audience is of course aware that Juliet is not really dead, but only slumbering under the effects of Friar Laurence's potion, but no one upon the stage except for the friar himself is possessed of such knowledge. As Juliet's family converge upon the scene they embark upon a curious series of antiphonal laments which, while taking their inspiration from Brooke, go much further than him. Capulet informs Paris that Death has «lain with» Juliet (IV.v.36), and although there may be some covert irony to be discerned in the implicit association between the personified figure of Death and Romeo himself, and in the assimilation of the principles of Eros and Thanatos that is reflected in such an association, the description of the girl as «Flower as she was, deflowered by him» seems a trifle too mannered for a man in the throes of grief (IV.v.37). What is interesting is that the image of death as deflowering is also found in Pyramus and Thisbe sketch in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, when Pyramus says that «lion vile hath here deflower'd my dear» (V.i.281), the sexual connotations of the word being plainly ridiculous in this latter context[18]. As Riess and Williams point out, the word «deflower» is a «revamping of Golding's word "Devour"», from which it might be inferred that Shakespeare «changed "devour" to "deflower" so that Pyramus could echo Capulet», and that «the inappropriateness of the usage in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* argues strongly that the appropriate usage preceded in *Romeo and Juliet*» (Riess and Williams 1992: 217).

This is a plausible line of argument, but what is perhaps to be questioned is the extent to which the usage of the word in *Romeo and Juliet* is indeed to be regarded as appropriate, for the fact is that the entire sequence of dirges that follows the discovery of Juliet's apparently lifeless body borders dangerously on the farcical. Capulet himself is propelled by the force of his conceit about Death the dark bridegroom to the brink of absurdity:

> Death is my son-in-law, Death is my heir.
> My daughter he hath wedded. I will die,
> And leave him all: Life, living, all is Death's. (IV.v.38-40)

It seems improbable that we are to take this entirely seriously, and any temptation to do so would be undercut by the Nurse's contribution to the succession of lamentations

[18] Though, as Taylor points out, they are not so in the original Ovid, so that in his travesty of them Shakespeare is showing that «he saw […] the link between Thisbe's thin veil […] torn and stained with blood, and the girl's virginity» (Taylor 2004: 56).

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uttered by those gathered about the body of Juliet. For after Lady Capulet has railed against the «Accurs'd, unhappy, wretched, hateful day!» (IV.v.43), the Nurse, not to be outdone, launches into her own variation on the theme:

> O woe! O woeful, woeful, woeful day.
> Most lamentable day. Most woeful day,
> That ever, ever I did yet behold.
> O day, O day, O day, O hateful day.
> Never was seen so black a day as this.
> O woeful day, O woeful day. (IV.v.49-54)

While it may be the aqua vitae she has called for that most immediately prompts this inspired outburst (IV.v.16), what should not be overlooked is that the Nurse's words have a striking parallel in the passage in the Pyramus and Thisbe sketch in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in which Pyramus, approaching the wall through which he is to speak to Thisbe, pronounces the following lines:

> O grim-look'd night! O night with hue so black!
> O night, which ever art when day is not!
> O night, O night! alack, alack, alack,
> I fear my Thisbe's promise is forgot! (V.i.168-171)

Although Pyramus's words might seem to be a travesty of the Nurse's diatribe, the fact is that the Nurse's words are already so ludicrous in themselves as to make parody superfluous. What appears more likely instead is that it is the Nurse's words which – whether through recollection or anticipation – are echoing those uttered by Pyramus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. If such is the case then what we are observing, once again, is not only a verbal link between the two plays, and what amounts to being a tacit invitation to read each in the light of the other, but a deliberate signal embedded in *Romeo and Juliet* that lying in the background of that play as well is the Ovidian story of star-crossed lovers that inspires the theatrical efforts of Peter Quince and his companions[19].

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[19] Extended portions of this article (predominantly from section III onwards) previously appeared in Lucking (2020).

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