

Mr. Guimaraes

“Pyramus and Thisbe” from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Translated by Allen Mandelbaum

THE DAUGHTERS OF MINYAS

v
—
their bodies overboard. Your chariot
rolls heavily across the mountaintops;
it’s drawn by lynxes, and it has bright reins.
Bacchants and satyrs follow in your wake,
together with Silenus: that old man
is drunk; he staggers, leaning on his staff—
or hardly keeps his seat upon the back
of the bent ass he rides. And where you pass,
young men and women chant and clamor—glad.
Palms beat the tambourines, bronze cymbals clash,
long flutes of perforated boxwood add
their strident music. Theban women cry:
“Be with us now, o merciful and mild!”
observing, as the priest had asked, your rites.

And only Minyas’ daughters stay at home;
they violate the holy day; the tasks
Minerva sets are theirs: close to the loom,
they give their household women work to do.
They thumb the twisting threads, they spin their wool.
And one, whose thumb is agile, as she draws
a thread, says to her sisters: “Let us now—
while others stop their work to join the crowd
upon this so-called feast day—on our part
(since we are great Minerva’s votaries,
and she is a much finer deity),
lighten the useful labor of our hands
with varied talk; our ears are idle; let
each take her turn at telling tales, so that
the hours may seem less tedious to those
who listen.” And to this they all agree:
they say that she should be the first to speak.

But she, who knows so many fables, finds
it hard to choose the tale that’s best to try.
O Dercetis of Babylonia, shall
the change you suffered be the tale she tells?
For you—the Palestinians are convinced—

Latin [24–46]

THE DAUGHTERS OF MINYAS · PYRAMUS & THISBE

found all your limbs were veiled by scales: as fish,
it’s pools that you were driven to inhabit.
Or should she speak of Dercetis’ great daughter,
Semiramis, the queen who had to wear
white feathers and, as dove, spend her last years
perched on high towers? Or recount instead
how, using chants and potent herbs, a Naiad
transformed the bodies of young boys? She changed
those boys into mute fishes—until fate
forced her own self to take that same sad shape.
Or how the mulberry, which once had borne
white berries, now has such dark fruit, because
it has been touched by blood? This last seems best:
it’s not a tale that many know as yet.
So even as she weaves, she tells her story:

“The house of Pyramus and that of Thisbe
stood side by side within the mighty city
ringed by the tall brick walls Semiramis
had built—so we are told. If you searched all
the East, you’d find no girl with greater charm
than Thisbe; and no boy in Babylon
was handsomer than Pyramus. They owed
their first encounters to their living close
beside each other—but with time, love grows.
Theirs did—indeed they wanted to be wed,
but marriage was forbidden by their parents;
yet there’s one thing that parents can’t prevent:
the flame of love that burned in both of them.
They had no confidant—and so used signs:
with these each lover read the other’s mind:
when covered, fire acquires still more force.

“The wall their houses shared had one thin crack,
which formed when they were built and then was left;
in all these years, no one had seen that cleft;

Latin [46–67]

Mr. Guimaraes

“Pyramus and Thisbe” from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Translated by Allen Mandelbaum

PYRAMUS & THISBE

but lovers will discover every thing:
you were the first to find it, and you made
that cleft a passageway which speech could take.
For there the least of whispers was kept safe:
it crossed that cleft with words of tenderness.
And Pyramus and Thisbe often stood,
he on this side and she on that; and when
each heard the other sigh, the lovers said:
‘O jealous wall, why do you block our path?
Oh wouldn’t it be better if you let
our bodies join each other fully or,
if that is asking for too much, just stretched
your fissure wide enough to let us kiss!
And we are not ungrateful: we admit
our words reach loving ears.’ And having talked
in vain, the lovers still remained apart.
Just so, one night, they wished each other well,
and each delivered kisses to the wall—
although those kisses could not reach their goal.
But on the morning after, when firstlight
had banished night’s bright star-fires from the sky
and sun had left the brine-soaked meadows dry,
again they took their places at the cleft.
Then, in low whispers—after their laments—
those two devised this plan: they’d circumvent
their guardians’ watchful eyes and, cloaked by night,
in silence, slip out from their homes and reach
a site outside the city. Lest each lose
the other as they wandered separately
across the open fields, they were to meet
at Ninus’ tomb and hide beneath a tree
in darkness; for beside that tomb there stood
a tall mulberry close to a cool spring,
a tree well weighted down with snow-white berries.
Delighted with their plan—impatiently—
they waited for the close of day. At last
the sun plunged down into the waves, and night
emerged from those same waves. □ □ □

Latin [68–92]

PYRAMUS & THISBE

“Now Thisbe takes
great care, that none detect her as she makes
her way out from the house amid the dark;
her face is veiled; she finds the tomb; she sits
beneath the tree they’d chosen for their tryst.
Love made her bold. But now a lioness
just done with killing oxen—blood dripped down
her jaws, her mouth was frothing—comes to slake
her thirst at a cool spring close to the tree.
By moonlight, Thisbe sees the savage beast;
with trembling feet, the girl is quick to seek
a shadowed cave; but even as she flees,
her shawl slips from her shoulders. Thirst appeased,
the lioness is heading for the woods
when she, by chance, spies that abandoned shawl
upon the ground and, with her bloodstained jaws,
tears it to tatters.

“Pyramus had left
a little later than his Thisbe had,
and he could see what surely were the tracks
of a wild beast left clearly on deep dust.
His face grew ashen. And when he had found
the bloodstained shawl, he cried: ‘Now this same night
will see two lovers lose their lives: she was
the one more worthy of long life: it’s I
who bear the guilt for this. O my poor girl,
it’s I who led you to your death; I said
you were to reach this fearful place by night;
I let you be the first who would arrive.
O all you lions with your lairs beneath
this cliff, come now, and with your fierce jaws feast
upon my wretched guts! But cowards talk
as I do—longing for their death but not
prepared to act.’ At that he gathered up
the bloody tatters of his Thisbe’s shawl
and set them underneath the shady tree
where he and she had planned to meet. He wept

Latin [93–116]

Mr. Guimaraes

“Pyramus and Thisbe” from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Translated by Allen Mandelbaum

PYRAMUS & THISBE

and cried out as he held that dear shawl fast:
‘Now drink from my blood, too!’ And then he drew
his dagger from his belt and thrust it hard
into his guts. And as he died, he wrenched
the dagger from his gushing wound. He fell,
supine, along the ground. The blood leaped high;
it spouted like a broken leaden pipe
that, through a slender hole where it is worn,
sends out a long and hissing stream as jets
of water cleave the air. And that tree’s fruits,
snow-white before, are bloodstained now; the roots
are also drenched with Pyramus’ dark blood,
and from those roots the hanging berries draw
a darker, purple color.

“Now the girl
again seeks out the tree: though trembling still,
she would not fail his tryst; with eyes and soul
she looks for Pyramus; she wants to tell
her lover how she had escaped such perils.
She finds the place—the tree’s familiar shape;
but seeing all the berries’ color changed,
she is not sure. And as she hesitates,
she sights the writhing body on the ground—
the bloody limbs—and, paler than boxwood,
retreats; she trembles—even as the sea
when light wind stirs its surface. She is quick
to recognize her lover; with loud blows
she beats her arms—though they do not deserve
such punishment. She tears her hair, enfolds
her love’s dear form; she fills his wounds with tears
that mingle with his blood; and while she plants
her kisses on his cold face, she laments:
‘What struck you, Pyramus? Why have I lost
my love? It is your Thisbe—I—who call
your name! Respond! Lift up your fallen head!’
He heard her name; and lifting up his eyes

Latin [116–45]

PYRAMUS & THISBE · MARS, VENUS, VULCAN, THE SUN

weighed down by death, he saw her face—and then
he closed his eyes again.

“She recognized
her own shawl and his dagger’s ivory sheath.
She cried: ‘Dear boy, you died by your own hand:
your love has killed you. But I, too, command
the force to face at least this task: I can
claim love, and it will give me strength enough
to strike myself. I’ll follow you in death;
and men will say that I—unfortunate—
was both the cause and comrade of your fate.
Nothing but death could sever you from me;
but now death has no power to prevent
my joining you. I call upon his parents
and mine; I plead for him and me—do not
deny to us—united by true love,
who share this fatal moment—one same tomb.
And may you, mulberry, whose boughs now shade
one wretched body and will soon shade two,
forever bear these darkly colored fruits
as signs of our sad end, that men remember
the death we met together.’ With these words,
she placed the dagger’s point beneath her breast,
then leaned against the blade still warm with her
dear lover’s blood. The gods and parents heard
her prayer, and they were stirred. Her wish was granted.”

That tale was done. Another had begun:
this time the teller is Leuconoe—
the pause is brief before the second story.

She speaks; her sisters listen—silently:
“Even the one who guides and shepherds all
with glowing light—the Sun—has been enthralled

Latin [145–70]