Pyramus and Thisbe

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RETOLED BY EDITH HAMILTON

**Background** The tale of Pyramus and Thisbe appears in Book IV of *Metamorphoses*, Ovid's greatest achievement. A poem of nearly 12,000 lines, it tells a series of stories beginning with the creation of the world and ending with the death of Julius Caesar. In each story, someone or something undergoes a change. Divided into fifteen books, the stories are linked by clever transitions, so that the entire work reads as one long, uninterrupted tale.

Once upon a time the deep red berries of the mulberry tree\(^1\) were white as snow. The change in color came about strangely and sadly. The death of two young lovers was the cause. Pyramus and Thisbe, he the most beautiful youth and she the loveliest maiden of all the East, lived in Babylon, the city of Queen Semiramis, in houses so close together that one wall was common to both. Growing up thus side by side they learned to love each other. They longed to marry, but their parents forbade. Love, however, cannot be forbidden. The more that flame is covered up, the hotter it burns. Also love can always find a way. It was impossible that these two whose hearts were on fire should be kept apart.

In the wall both houses shared there was a little chink.\(^2\) No one before had noticed it, but there is nothing a lover does not notice. Our two young people discovered it and through it they were able to whisper sweetly back and forth. Thisbe on one side, Pyramus on the other. The hateful wall that separated them had become their means of reaching each other. “But for you we could touch, kiss,” they would

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1. mulberry (məlˈbәr-ˌē) n. tree with an edible, purplish-red fruit.
2. chink (chink) n. narrow opening; crack.

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say. "But at least you let us speak together. You give a
passage for loving words to reach loving ears. We are
not ungrateful."
So they would talk, and as night
came on and they must part, each would press on the
wall kisses that could not go through to the lips on
the other side.

Every morning when the dawn had put out the
stars, and the sun's rays had dried the hoarfrost on the
grass, they would steal to the crack and, standing
there, now utter words of burning love and now
lament their hard fate, but always in softest whispers.
Finally a day came when they could endure no longer.
They decided that that very night they would try to
slip away and steal out through the city into the open
country where at last they could be together in free-
dom. They agreed to meet at a well-known place, the
Tomb of Ninus, under a tree there, a tall mulberry full
of snow-white berries, near which a cool spring bub-
bled up. The plan pleased them and it seemed to them
the day would never end.

At last the sun sank into the sea and night arose.
In the darkness Thisbe crept out and made her way
in all secrecy to the tomb. Pyramus had not come;
still she waited for him, her love making her bold.
But of a sudden she saw by the light of the moon a li-
oness. The fierce beast had made a kill; her jaws were
bloody and she was coming to slake her thirst in the
spring. She was still far enough away for Thisbe to es-
cape, but as she fled she dropped her cloak. The li-
oness came upon it on her way back to her lair and
she mouthed it and tore it before disappearing into
the woods. That is what Pyramus saw when he
appeared a few minutes later. Before him lay the
bloodstained shreds of the cloak and clear in the dust
were the tracks of the lioness. The conclusion was in-
evitable. He never doubted that he knew all. Thisbe
was dead. He had let his love, a tender maiden, come
alone to a place full of danger, and not been there
first to protect her. "It is I who killed you," he said.
He lifted up from the trampled dust what was left of
the cloak and kissing it again and again carried it to
the mulberry tree. "Now," he said, "you shall drink
my blood too." He drew his sword and plunged it
into his side. The blood spurted up over the berries
and dyed them a dark red.
Thisbe, although terrified of the lioness, was still more afraid to fail her lover. She ventured to go back to the tree of the tryst, the mulberry with the shining white fruit. She could not find it. A tree was there, but not one gleam of white was on the branches. As she stared at it, something moved on the ground beneath. She started back shuddering. But in a moment, peering through the shadows, she saw what was there. It was Pyramus, bathed in blood and dying. She flew to him and threw her arms around him. She kissed his cold lips and begged him to look at her, to speak to her. “It is I, your Thisbe, your dearest,” she cried to him. At the sound of her name he opened his heavy eyes for one look. Then death closed them.

She saw his sword fallen from his hand and beside it her cloak stained and torn. She understood all. “Your own hand killed you,” she said, “and your love for me. I too can be brave. I too can love. Only death would have had the power to separate us. It shall not have that power now.” She plunged into her heart the sword that was still wet with his life’s blood.

The gods were pitiful at the end, and the lovers’ parents too. The deep red fruit of the mulberry is the everlasting memorial of these true lovers, and one urn holds the ashes of the two whom not even death could part.