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THE SEPARATION OF PYRAMUS AND THISBE – AND OF THEIR NAMES (OVID, *METAMORPHOSES* 4.55–166)*

by

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ABSTRACT: Ovid's placement of the names *Pyramus* and *Thisbe* reflects these characters' failed desire for physical union. The only time their names are next to each other is when the lovers are sitting at their wall; otherwise, the closest they get is as the "title" of the story in its first line. This play with the position of their names throughout the story reflects how tantalizingly close the two people come to being together and adds to the pathos of this failed attempt at union. A final play on the name *Thisbe*, however, may suggest their ultimate union in death.

KEYWORDS: Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Pyramus, Thisbe

Separation is the central theme of Ovid's famous Pyramus and Thisbe story (*Metamorphoses* 4.55–166), with the two lovers kept apart by their parents, a wall, and then bad timing and poor deduction skills. Louis Perraud has shown how Ovid uses apostrophe in this episode to highlight the alienation of the two lovers, who never actually speak to each other face-to-face in the story.[1] The closest they come is Thisbe's words to Pyramus right before he dies.

In this note I complement Perraud's study (and other scholarship) by showing that Ovid uses the position of the names *Pyramus* and *Thisbe* within verses to emphasize and depict the separation of the two lovers, and to show just how close they come to being united without actually doing so, thereby adding to the pathos of the story. Ovid generally restricts Pyramus' name to the first position in the line (five times: 55, 107, 142, 143, 146), and Thisbe's to the last (four times: 93, 99, 115, 143). When Ovid alters this positioning it is to suggest the characters' tantalizing proximity, in different senses of the term. I end by suggesting that this emphasis on the characters' names may also be setting up an instance of etymological wordplay at the end of the tale.

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1 Perraud 1983.