

1991

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Repository Citation

Ekstein, N. (1991). Pyrame et Thisbé: Lost in a "minimalist" world. In M.-F. Hilgar (Ed.), *Actes de Las Vegas: Théorie dramatique, Théophile de Viau, Les Contes de fées*, (pp. 131-135). Paris, [France]: Biblio 17.

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Pyrame and Thisbé: Lost in a “Minimalist” World

by

NINA EKSTEIN

Discussions of *Les Amours tragiques de Pyrame et Thisbé* generally center on the eponymous couple. Young star-crossed lovers, opposed by all who surround them, doomed to death, Pyrame and Thisbé belong to a long tradition in Western literature. What I believe merits greater attention is the dramatic world in which the lovers' tragedy unfolds. The young couple occupies the center of the play, but Thisbé and Pyrame seem curiously out of place in, and at odds with, their environment in all its particulars, from characters to objects to scenic space. The two characters are lost in the dramatic universe of *Les Amours tragiques de Pyrame et Thisbé*.

Pyrame and Thisbé play out their love story in a dramatic framework which is uncommon for the period. While the Baroque in general, and Baroque dramaturgy in particular, seem marked by complex and extensive development (e.g., Racan's *Bergeries* and Comeille's *Illusion comique*), Théophile's only play is extreme in what I will call its “minimalism.” The plot is simple. Pyrame and Thisbé encounter numerous obstacles to their love. Upon discovering that the king is determined to assassinate Pyrame, they agree to run away together and set up a rendez-vous at Nimbus's tomb. Arriving first, Thisbé sees a lion and flees. When Pyrame arrives, he sees only traces of blood and Thisbé's scarf, which she lost when taking shelter. Pyrame, of course, assumes the worst, and kills himself in grief. Thisbé returns, finds Pyrame's body, and she too commits suicide. The play is extremely short, with only 1234 lines in its five acts. There are only 12 scenes in the entire play (compared to an average of 30.28 scenes per play for Comeille and 30.5 for Racine). The majority of the characters appear onstage only once,¹ while other significant persons, such as Pyrame's mother and Thisbé's father, are never seen at all. Théophile eschews multiple identities, disguises, and complex onstage exchanges.

¹ Eight of the twelve characters. Scherer cites this play as an example of an unusually high number of secondary characters who appear on stage only once (*La Dramaturgie classique en France* [Paris: Nizet, 1956], p. 34).

His stage is so sparsely populated that Racine's appears crowded by comparison. Dramatic conflict in *Pyrame et Thisbé* is repeatedly presented in its most pared-down form: an onstage dialogue between two characters. Only twice do we find three persons present, and in both cases one of the three quickly leaves the stage. Several scenes, including the first of the play, are in part monologues. The end of the play is even further reduced: in place of dialogue, the last three scenes, encompassing more than an entire act, are pure monologue. Théophile thereby foreshadows the dissolution of the couple, the reduction of two to one, and finally, through death, to none at all.

Contributing to the impression of minimalism is the schematic nature of the play. The scenes are rarely linked:² almost every one is cut off from the surrounding scenes. So minimal is this dramatic universe where two-thirds of the characters appear only once, where the temporal and spatial relationship between consecutive scenes is left unexplained, and where most of the characters do not come in contact with each other, that the result is fragmented and disjointed.

The emphasis of my title must be on the word, "lost." The moment the focus changes from the tightly constructed and traditional love story of Thisbé and Pyrame to those elements not directly related to it, one is struck by differences and disjuncture. Pyrame and Thisbé are situated in a universe in which they can find no place, either physically or metaphorically. First, they do not share a common language with the other characters of the play. The discourses of those around them are of authority or practicality, or even morality, but Pyrame and Thisbé are alone in articulating a discourse of love. Narbal, Pyrame's father, can no longer remember experiencing love, and the king's amorous sentiments for Thisbé are expressed through insult ("ceste ingrante farouche," v. 169) and murderous rage. The differences in discourse are often jarring. Pyrame and Thisbé sing the poetry of their sentiments in lyrical terms, but the longest scene in this dramatic universe involves two clearly secondary characters (Syllar and Deuxis), and concerns not love but the problem of individual moral responsibility. In the two scenes where Syllar and Deuxis in turn evince qualms about the king's decision to assassinate Pyrame (I,iii, and III,i), their conclusions introduce further distance from the sentimental concerns of Pyrame and Thisbé. Both choose the expedient path of compliance with the king's wishes, and both are motivated by the monetary gain that compliance will entail. The classical unities have not yet been

articulated, of course, but the juxtaposition of disparate elements and tones is strikingly discordant.

Syllar and Deuxis have no direct relationship to Pyrame and Thisbé beyond the assassination attempt which is ordered. The king, on the contrary, is linked to the couple in strong and traditional ways: he is Pyrame's rival and the couple's most formidable obstacle. Pyrame's father expresses a violent anger toward his son in a conversation with his confidant, and the lion drips blood, but while both suggest their noxious potential, neither takes direct action. The king, however, sends assassins to kill Pyrame. Nevertheless, the king too seems to belong to a different dramatic universe from that of the young couple. First, his political theorizing, while common in the Renaissance theater, is alien to the love story. Far more significant, the king gives signs of being a comic figure. He is comic in his excesses, in his swaggering, and even in his unsatisfied desire for Thisbé. He blusters about the stage, reducing morality to the necessity of his physical pleasures; he is childlike and almost flirtatious in his relationship with Syllar, rails against the gods, and acts only through intermediaries, thus risking nothing himself. While not sharing my interpretation of the king, Arnaldo Pizzorusso does note that "une telle entreprise [assassinating Pyrame] doit réussir, sans quoi les menaces du Roi ne seraient que bravades et le Roi lui-même prendrait des allures de matamore."³

The dramatic universe is thus not a pure one. Pyrame and Thisbé are isolated in their very seriousness. The world not only does not understand them, but it seems to belong in another play. While it is certainly true that the numerous differences between the young couple and their world serve to underline their special status, as well as to foreshadow the impossibility of a happy ending of unity and unification, the elements of disjuncture are more extreme than simple difference would suggest.

This is a play of couples. One couple after another parade across the screen: Thisbé and Bersiane, Narbal and Lidias, the king and Syllar, Pyrame and Disarque, Syllar and Deuxis, Thisbé's mother and her confidant. Yet these couples could not be more dissimilar from Thisbé and Pyrame. First, invariably made up of two members of the same sex, they are in no way romantic couplings. Second, far from representing love and harmony, these scenes are debates. Edmund Campion has noted the impor-

² Only twice: II, 1 and 2, and III, 1 and 2.

³ Arnaldo Pizzorusso, "Sur une scène des *Amours de Pyrame et Thisbé*," in *De Jean Lemaire de Belges à Jean Giraudoux. Mélanges d'histoire et de critique offerts à Pierre Jourda* (Paris: Nizet, 1970), p. 170. Henry Lancaster describes the king as a "typical braggart" (*A History of French Dramatic Literature in the Seventeenth Century* [New York: Gordian Press, 1961], I, p. 175).

tance of rhetorical argumentation in the play.⁴ In each of these scenes the two individuals argue strongly opposite positions. And while Pyrame and Thisbé have equal status in their relationship, social and/or political inequality is inscribed in each of the other couplings.

It is not surprising that when one of the characters in the debate is him- or herself an obstacle to the union between Pyrame and Thisbé, the obstacle-character (Narbale, the king, Thisbé's mother) wins the argument.⁵ The power of the forces opposing the lovers – family, king, and beast – is highly overdetermined in the play. The losers in these arguments (Lidias, Syllar, and the mother's confidant) point to a more interesting issue: pervasive scenic disjunction with respect to characters. These three secondary characters all take the side of the young lovers. Yet no direct contact between these seeming allies and Pyrame and Thisbé is ever even hinted at, let alone represented onstage. Pyrame and Thisbé are isolated from any potential sympathizers. Similarly, when Thisbé's mother has a change of heart after her dream, she does not find her daughter before the latter's death. Even more curious in this universe of dramatic opposition, Pyrame and Thisbé never come face to face with their opponents. They never share the stage with mother, father, king, or even the lion. Their isolation is fundamental. Even the attempt to assassinate Pyrame is at a remove from the underlying opposition of the king: his power is mediated (ineffectively) by Deuxis and Syllar. The disjuncture of the lovers and their world is thereby emphasized. No one ever meets: not enemies, not allies, not even Thisbé and Pyrame.

Indeed, the disjuncture and "minimalism" of their world extend to them as well. Until they flee, they are separated onstage by a wall. The significance of this instrument of separation has been shown by Mitchell Greenberg: "the wall that is thrust between the two lovers is the most obvious example of the cleavage that informs the rhetoric of desire and that constitutes the poetics of difference, of political and sexual difference, that is at the crux of the tragedy."⁶ The play can be read as an attempt to overcome the spatial separations imposed on the couple. It opens with Bersiane

⁴ "Une structure rhétorique de *Pyrame et Thisbé*," *Revue du Pacifique* 3 (1977), 103.

⁵ In the case of Thisbé's mother, the debate concerns an issue related only indirectly to Thisbé and Pyrame: the prophetic force of dreams, the validity of which her confidant opposes. The mother convinces her confidant, in part by the force of her narrative recounting of her dream. See Daniela Della Valle, "Il Sogno della madre in *Pyrame et Thisbé*," *Saggi e Ricerche di Letteratura francese* 16 (1977), p. 91-125.

⁶ Mitchell Greenberg, "Théophile's Indifference," in *Detours of Desire* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1984), p. 62.

berating Thisbé for having gone off by herself (v. 41-42), moving away from the protective enclosure of home and mother. It ends with Thisbé and Pyrame having fled to the tomb of Nimbus which lies outside the space ruled by parents and king. However, this new space is at least as inimical to the young lovers as was the old: the king's abuse of force gives way to the lion's savagery and Pyrame's misinterpretation. And once again Pyrame and Thisbé are prevented from meeting. As Janis Pallister notes, union in death is not suggested.⁷ Unlike Tristan and Iseult, Romeo and Juliet, Camille and Curiace, death does not bring Pyrame and Thisbé together at last. In this stylized world, they are never able to break through the symbolic and physical walls and attain union.

⁷ "Love Entombed: Théophile de Viau's *Les Amours tragiques de Pyrame et Thisbé*," *PFSCL* 12 (1979-1980), p. 177.