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# Ovid and Petronius' Pyramus and Thisbe (*Satyricon* 131.8-11 and *Metamorphoses* 4.55-166)

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## Abstract

Petronius' engagement with Ovid's poetry in the Croton episode of the *Satyricon* is more extensive than has previously been appreciated. As well as drawing upon Ovidian elegiac poetry, especially *Amores* 3.7, the description of Encolpius' second failed tryst with Circe at *Satyricon* 131.8-11 also alludes to Ovid's narrative of Pyramus and Thisbe at *Metamorphoses* 4.55-166. This ironic perversion of one of the *Metamorphoses'* most innocent and tragic narratives parallels Petronius' later Ovidian allusion at 135.3-137.12, where the story of the pious couple Philemon and Baucis (*Met.* 8.616-724) is recalled during Encolpius' visit to Oenothea's hut. Petronius' engagement with the *Metamorphoses* during Encolpius' exploits in Croton is thus shown to be deeper than has previously been realised.

## Keywords

Petronius – Ovid – Pyramus – Thisbe – Encolpius – Circe

Ovid's influence on Petronius' *Satyricon* has long been recognised.<sup>1</sup> The Augustan poet's impact has been detected particularly during Encolpius' agonisingly prolonged series of erectile misfirings with the irrepressible and increasingly indignant Circe, an episode which seems to draw on *Amores* 3.7 and other Ovidian elegiac poems in its treatment of voracious sexual desire coupled with catastrophic male impotence.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Ovid makes a further conspicuous appearance in the aftermath of Encolpius' assignations with Circe during the narrator's meeting with Oenothea, the bibulous priestess of Priapus. Here Petronius draws upon the *Metamorphoses* rather than the poet's elegiac verses when Encolpius is taken care of in Oenothea's hut at Petr. 135.3-137.12, a scene which vividly recalls the story of the pious hospitality of the simple and rustic elderly couple Philemon and Baucis towards the unrecognised gods Jupiter and Mercury at *Met.* 8.616-724.<sup>3</sup> In Petronius' version, however, Ovid's account of the welcoming theoxenic reception of the 'pious old woman Baucis' (*pia Baucis anus*, 8.631) is transformed and perverted into a scene of sexual humiliation as the Priapic priestess attempts to cure her guest's unfortunate erectile problems by anally penetrating him with a leather dildo (*profert Oenothea scorteum fascinum ... paulatim coepit inserere ano meo*, 138.1)—an action which could not be further from the gentle and hospitable ministrations of Petronius' homely Ovidian model.

Ovid's presence in the background of Encolpius' Crotonian affairs is thus clear. But the full extent of Petronius' engagement with his Augustan predecessor within this section of the *Satyricon* has not yet been fully appreciated. This is because an allusion to Ovid's Pyramus and Thisbe narrative in *Metamorphoses* 4 as a means of foreshadowing Encolpius' coming phallic failure during the Circe episode has so far been overlooked. We find this further

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- 1 On Ovid's influence on Petronius see especially Collignon 1892, 258-267; Sullivan 1968, 189-190, 216-218, 236; Currie 1989, 317-335; Baldwin 1992, 63; Courtney 2001, 155, 175-176, 190, 194, 198, 202-206; Panayotakis 2009, 55-56; von Albrecht 2011, 6-10; Antoniadis 2013, 179-191.
  - 2 On Ovid's particular influence on the Circe episode see Collignon 1892, 267; Sullivan 1968, 189-190, 236; Schmeling 1971, 341-342 and 2011, 471; Antoniadis 2013, 179-191. On the influence of Ovidian elegiac poetry (especially *Am.* 3.7) on Petronius' treatment of Encolpius' impotence in the *Satyricon* see Collignon 1892, 263; Sullivan 1968, 190, 216-218; Adamietz 1995, 321, 323-324, 329; Conte 1996, 99; McMahon 1998, 77-85, 189-192; Courtney 2001, 155, 194, 198; Rimell 2002, 148-151; Ventura 2005, 135; Panayotakis 2009, 55-56; von Albrecht 2011, 8-10; Antoniadis 2013, 190.
  - 3 On Petronius' allusion to the Baucis and Philemon story (*Met.* 8.616-724) at Petr. 135.3-137.12 see Collignon 1892, 240-241, 262-263; Garrido 1930, 10-11; Sullivan 1968, 190, 217; Perutelli 1986, 125-143; Currie 1989, 328-329; Courtney 1991, 39-41; Adamietz 1995, 324-325, 329; Connors 1998, 43-47; Courtney 2001, 203-206; Rimell 2002, 161-162; von Albrecht 2011, 11-14; Schmeling 2011, 523-529.

allusion to the *Metamorphoses* at *Satyricon* 131, when the narrator, proudly brimming with confidence in his newly tumescent manhood, recently restored by a winning combination of the old hag Proselenos' spells and palpitating fingers, enters into a final thwarted tryst with Circe, who is by this point more than ready for love:

premebat illa resoluta marmoreis cervicibus aureum torum myrtoque florenti quietum (aera) verberabat. itaque ut me vidit, paululum erubuit, hesternae scilicet iniuriae memor; deinde ut remotis omnibus secundum invitantem consedi, ramum super oculos meos posuit, et **quasi pariete interiecto audacior facta** 'quid est' inquit 'paralytice? ecquid hodie totus venisti?' 'rogas' inquam ego 'potius quam temptas?' totoque corpore in amplexum eius immissus non praecantatis usque ad satietatem osculis fruor ...<sup>4</sup>

Circe was lying relaxed with her neck of marble upon her couch of gold and was fanning the still air with a branch of flowering myrtle. And when she had seen me, she blushed a little, conscious (or so it seemed to me) of yesterday's insult. Finally, once the others had left and I had taken my place beside her at her invitation, she placed the branch of myrtle over my eyes, and **made bolder, as if by a wall placed between us**, she said: 'What, then, my sweet paralytic? Have you come to me today with your full manhood?'—'Do you ask me?', said I. 'Why not try me instead?' And hurling myself with my whole body into her embrace, I devoured kisses (with no bewitchment necessary) to the very point of utter exhaustion ...<sup>5</sup>

The manuscripts testify that this tryst did not end well: when we resurface again into the narrative after a lacuna (132.2), we find a hysterical Circe ordering her grooms to spit on the phallically-challenged Encolpius and throw him out of the house; Proselenos and Chrysis too are ejected and the latter is flogged; meanwhile Encolpius, withdrawing to the seclusion of his bed and avoiding even his beloved Giton in his shame, reacts to his own failure and his mistress' comical sadism by berating his deficient penis and threatening it with amputation, finally provoking a reaction whose mock-pathos is expressed in what is perhaps the most famous, or at least notorious, Virgilian allusion in the *Satyricon* (132.11) when the narrator's enfeebled phallus reacts

4 Petr. 131.9-11. Petronian text is from Müller 1995.

5 All translations are our own.

to his chastisement as Dido does to Aeneas' impassioned plea for forgiveness in Virgil's Hades (*A.* 6.470-471).

But before we reach this exuberant mock-epic farrago of Virgilian quotation there is one puzzling aspect of Circe's seduction scene at 131.9-11 that remains to be explained. As the passage quoted above shows, while describing his mistress' amatory advances Encolpius makes sure to include the strange detail that her brief veiling of his eyes with a myrtle branch only made her 'bolder, as if by a wall placed between us' (*quasi pariete interiecto audacior facta*, 131.10). So far no one has ever tried to explain what this wall (*paries*) is doing in the narrator's discourse here. In context, it makes no sense. Clearly it has something to do with Circe's momentary blindfolding of Encolpius with Venus' sacred branch.<sup>6</sup> She is seemingly turned on by the obstacle that, no real obstacle at all, has by her artifice imposed itself between them, and which perhaps allows her to maintain the disingenuous outward performance of shame and decency that she is in any case about to drop, and which clashes so strongly with the wilful and louchely single-minded, even sadistic devotion to her own pleasure that she reveals as soon as that desire is frustrated. But why should this paradoxical obstacle take the specific form of a 'wall'?

The explanation lies once again within Encolpius' well-stocked mental library of poetic allusion—this time not to Virgil, but rather to Ovid. There is only one truly famous wall (*paries*) that divides two lovers who cannot even bring themselves to confide their desire to each other without the obstacle's limiting and encouraging presence, and this is the wall that divides and unites Pyramus and Thisbe, the star-crossed lovers of ancient Babylon, in the fourth book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (4.55-166). Ovid's version of this tale, the only one explicitly alluded to by subsequent ancient writers, clearly became the one and only canonical account of this exotic story in the Latin tradition.<sup>7</sup> In it the two youngsters continually confess their love through the slender crack in the wall that divides them (*fissus erat tenui rima, quam duxerat olim | cum fieret, paries domui communis utriusque*, 4.65-66), berating the 'envious' wall itself for standing in the way of lovers (*'inuide' dicebant 'paries, quid amantibus obstas?'*, 4.73). The wall thus both blocks and spurs the youths' desire for one another; they try but cannot exchange kisses through it; they decide therefore to trick their chaperones and meet outside the city walls by Ninus' tomb, a decision

6 Schmeling 2011, 503 notices this veiling action and suggests that "Circe plays a coy game and covers his eyes in an act of modesty": Circe's cultivation of coyness here is undoubtedly true, though there is more to this moment than this.

7 On the complicated pre-Ovidian tradition relating to Pyramus and Thisbe, and on the dependence of later Latin versions of the story on Ovid's account, see e.g. Duke 1971, 320-327; Knox 1989, 315-328; Stramaglia 2001, 81-106; Shorrock 2003, 624-627; Barchiesi et al. 2007, 256-258.

which leads to the death of both lovers when Pyramus mistakes a bloodied piece of clothing as evidence for Thisbe's ingestion by a lion and kills himself through grief, leading to the latter's own tragic suicide: only in a funeral urn are the two wall-divided youngsters finally united forever (*quodque rogis superest una requiescit in urna*, 4.166). The crucial link between Ovid's literal *paries* and Circe's figurative wall is thus the idea of an obstacle and its role in fostering desire; in Encolpius' mind, at least, he and Circe are for a moment again 'raised' to the tragic status of Ovid's star-crossed pair, with their innocence and rather po-faced seriousness.

In the *Satyricon*, however, Ovid's already ironical account is only ironized further by the explicit allusion to the Pyramus and Thisbe narrative folded into Encolpius' interpretation of Circe's response to the figurative wall: she is 'made bolder' (*audacior facta*, 131.10) by its presence—an allusion to Thisbe's response to reaching the fatal tomb that marks the site of the young lovers' long hoped-for assignation:

callida per tenebras uersato cardine Thisbe  
 egreditur fallitque suos adopertaque uultum  
 peruenit ad tumulum dictaque sub arbore sedit;  
**audacem faciebat amor.**<sup>8</sup>

Artful Thisbe, after opening the door, goes out through the darkness, deceiving her family, and after veiling her face she reached the tomb and sat beneath the appointed tree; **love was making her bold.**

Of course, the voracious Circe's wanton behaviour and level of sexual experience could not be further from those of the naïve and tragically-destined Thisbe, even if, in one sense, the end result of their situations will turn out to be the same: both women's much longed-for amatory encounters will eventually end in nothing but profound sexual disappointment. In this respect Encolpius' momentary comparison of the two not only once again reflects a key feature of his thinking—that is, his way of translating every thought and feeling into literary tropes—but also ominously (and hilariously) foreshadows the coming failure of his massive and seemingly unstoppable erection.

Though the lack of explicit sexual action may at first seem to render Ovid's tale of young and innocent lovers a surprising Petronian choice of source text in this particular context, a closer inspection of the poet's account actually reveals that the Pyramus and Thisbe narrative is in many ways one of the most

<sup>8</sup> *Met.* 4.93-96. Ovidian text is from Tarrant 2004.

ironically apt possible models for Encolpius' imminent sexual failure. The *locus amoenus* setting of Pyramus and Thisbe's scene of tragic and thwarted desire beside Ninus' tomb (*Met.* 4.86-166) is echoed by Encolpius' hexametric description of a landscape of passionate feeling and romanticized sexual desire as he progresses to the place of his impending assignation with Circe:

nobilis aestivas platanus diffuderat umbras  
 et bacis redimita Daphne tremulaeque cupressus  
 et circum tonsae trepidanti vertice pinus.  
 has inter ludebat aquis errantibus amnis  
 spumeus et querulo vexabat rore lapillos.  
 dignus amore locus: testis silvestris aedon  
 atque urbana Procne, quae circum gramina fusae  
 et molles violas cantu †sua rura colebant†<sup>9</sup>

The noble plane-tree drenched his summer shades, and Daphne crowned with berries, and the quivering cypresses, and the shorn pines, with trembling tops. Among them a foaming river was playing with wandering waters, whipping pebbles with his plangent dew. A place worthy of love: the woodland nightingale was a witness to this and Procne from the town, who, strewn across the grasses and the soft violets, were tending their countryside haunts with song

Here, in verses replete with Ovidian echoes, Encolpius' poetic terrain is eroticised to the point of wantonness.<sup>10</sup> The shady trees quiver excitedly like some mighty erection; the stream lashes his foamy ejaculate across the rocks; even the swallow and the nightingale, that tortured sister-pair Procne and Philomela, seem to fling themselves, singing, in wild abandon across the desire-stricken landscape.<sup>11</sup> Ovid too is no stranger to the production of such hyperbolic poetic ejaculatory fantasies within the setting of the *locus amoenus*.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the

9 Petr. 131.8.

10 See Schmeling 2011, 502 for multiple parallels to, and echoes of, the *Metamorphoses* in these lines; cf. also Courtney 1991, 33 and Setaioli 2011, 237. That these particular verses are redolent of Ovid was also suggested by Collignon 1892, 240.

11 The story of Procne and Philomela was of course well known from book six of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (6.412-674), an account which emphasises the disastrous nature of their love affairs: the awful outcome of Encolpius and Circe's assignation is thus potentially hinted at by Petronius' mocking mention of these two mythological characters (see Canali and Stucchi 2014, 216).

12 On the abundant number of *locus amoenus* motifs in this passage see Ventura 2005, 135-150 (especially 136-137, 145 on the potential influence of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* on the

main reason why his description of Pyramus and Thisbe's plight provides an apt model for Petronius to draw upon as a means of foreshadowing Encolpius' coming erotic disappointment is because this narrative contains one of the most wildly exuberant scenes of unattainable sexual union and thwarted phallic release in the entire ancient poetic tradition. We find this explosive image when Pyramus' dramatic death is compared, somewhat comically, to the sudden fracturing of a highly-pressured water pipe:

quoque erat accinctus, demisit in ilia ferrum;  
 nec mora, feruenti moriens e uulnere traxit.  
 ut iacuit resupinus humo, cruor emicat alte,  
 non aliter quam cum uitiatto fistula plumbo  
 scinditur et tenues stridente foramine longas  
 eiaculatur aquas atque ictibus aera rumpit.  
 arborei fetus aspergine caedis in atram  
 uertuntur faciem, madefactaque sanguine radix  
 purpureo tingit pendentia mora colore.<sup>13</sup>

He plunged the sword which was bound to him into his groin, and without delay, while dying drew it from his inflamed wound. As he lay thrown back on the ground, the gore shot out high, just as when a pipe with corrupted lead is burst and ejaculates out long hissing slender streams of water through an orifice and bursts the air asunder with its shots. The fruit of the tree, sprinkled with the slaughter, changed in appearance to dark red, and the roots, drenched with blood, dyed the hanging mulberries with a purple colour.

This hyperbolic description of Pyramus' aetiological staining of the mulberry fruit during his dying throes, designated by Segal as "the least subtle *double-entendre*" in the entire *Metamorphoses*, is absolutely drenched in sexual symbolism.<sup>14</sup> In fact, as Newlands has pointed out, Pyramus' dying spurts suggest nothing less than "a gigantic orgasm" as the young man's blood, compared to a highly-pressured stream of water, 'ejaculates' (*eiaculatur*, 124) on high after his sword, an obvious phallic stand-in, plunges violently into his groin (*demisit*

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bucolic framing of this particular Petronian passage), Setaioli 2011, 231-241 and Canali and Stucchi 2014, 211-217. See also Antoniadis 2013, 189, where Circe's *locus amoenus* in the *Satyricon* is compared to the "sylvan landscapes of the *Metamorphoses*".

13 *Met.* 4.119-127.

14 Segal 1969, 50. On the overt sexual symbolism of this passage see also Newlands 1986, 143-144; Hinds 1987, 31; Shorrock 2003, 624-627; Barchiesi et al. 2007, 266.

*in ilia ferrum*, 119).<sup>15</sup> Though Thisbe is the ultimate intended object of Pyramus' attentions, in the end it is only the mulberry fruit that the young man is able to touch in this idyllic *locus amoenus*. The simile as a whole, foreshadowing Thisbe's own encounter with Pyramus' blade in language so hilariously amplified and over-written that it could have been composed by Encolpius himself, emphasises the fact that Pyramus' death constitutes a massive sexual failure: in the end it is only the dead youth's sword that bold Thisbe, her true desires thwarted, will get her hands upon (*incubuit ferro, quod adhuc a caede tepebat*, 4.163).

In this way the separation of Encolpius and Circe by an imagined physical wall, the intertextual reference to Circe's Thisbe-like boldness, and the pervasive Ovidian atmosphere of the entire Crotonian episode combine to point to Petronius' ironic engagement with Ovid's *Metamorphoses* at *Satyricon* 131.8-11. The spectre of Ovid's Pyramus and Thisbe in the background of Encolpius' second attempted bedding of Circe thus foreshadows the coming sexual disaster and draws attention to the fact that the entire Circe narrative of the *Satyricon* is constructed according to the logic of perversely inhibited desire. Encolpius wants Giton, and indeed seems to have no problem performing when it comes to sex with his pederastic male 'brother', but what Giton wants is anyone's guess. Encolpius also wants Chrysis, but she sleeps only with wealthy men and looks down on scum like him. He feels he has to satisfy his rich mistress, whose beauty he describes in the most idealized and evocative terms, but he simply cannot maintain an erection when he is with her: as Circe reminds him, he is, like Pyramus, dead without it and may as well now summon the trumpeters for his funeral as a result (*medius [fidius] iam peristi ... licet ad tubicines mittas*, 129.6-7).<sup>16</sup> Circe herself desires only slaves and criminals; she wants Encolpius, but cannot find satisfaction with him: instead she explodes in violence when she fails to achieve her erotic aim. Just like Ovid's Pyramus and Thisbe, no one, at least at this point in the story, achieves anything other than frustrated desire. In this way Petronius' Ovidian allusion both reflects one of the central themes of this section of the *Satyricon* and ironically perverts one of the most innocent amatory tales of the *Metamorphoses* in a way which will be repeated at 135.3-137.<sup>12</sup> once Encolpius enters Oenothea's hut, where we find the story of Philemon and Baucis, that other most innocent Ovidian account,

15 Newlands 1986, 143.

16 Encolpius has already compared his impotence to a form of death at 129.1 (*funerata est illa pars corporis, qua quondam Achilles eram*); cf. also 134.7, where Oenothea asks Encolpius and Proselenos why they have entered her room looking like mourners at a fresh tomb (*'quid vos' inquit 'in cellam meam tamquam ante recens bustum venistis?'*). On Encolpius' impotence as a form of metaphorical death in the *Satyricon* see Conte 1996, 99.

twisted and transformed in similar fashion. Petronius' engagement with the *Metamorphoses* during Encolpius' exploits in Croton is thus more prevalent than has previously been realised.

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