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Aurore Labbé de la Genardière

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Pyramus and Thisbe in the 19th century: When the Tale of Innocence Leaked Shameful Sex

In the 19th century, the Ovidian tale of Pyramus and Thisbe from Book IV of *The Metamorphoses*, was repeatedly associated with adultery or forbidden sex in literature and art, albeit the story relates a perfectly chaste story of impossible love, thwarted by the parents of the two young neighbours for unknown reasons. Desperate, the pair of children decides to meet at night outside the city walls of Babylon where, after a series of delusions, they eventually commit suicide, one after the other. Pyramus discovers Thisbe's veil torn and covered with blood and wrongly assumes that she has been devoured by a lioness. The Middle Ages gave a Christianized reinterpretation of the tale—turning it into an *exemplum* of faithful love and chastity. In the 19th century, the tale resurfaced in France on popular imagery, termed *image d'Épinal*, as an allegory of faithfulness. The images were a great success and circulated all over the country.

Thereby, one can wonder how, by a strange process of subversion, the lovers reappeared in fiction attached to stories of adultery and obscene sexuality. La Tisbe is a harlot actress in Victor Hugo's play *Angelo, tyran de Padoue* (1835). In Zola's novel *Madeleine Féral* (1868), images of the Ovidian tale decorate the bedroom walls where the eponymous character cheats on her husband. In the short-story "Le Lit" (1882) by Maupassant, the tapestry with the two lovers on the protagonist's bed covers her illicit sexual frolics with a priest. The connection between the legend and sexuality due to its appearance in fictional bedrooms has already been pointed out by academic research, but the reiterated urge to *adulterate* the tale of innocence and the exposure entailed require further developments. The viewpoint will be intermedial, since the same paradigm is to be found in visual arts.

Myth and exposure

Images of the myth resurfaced in fictional bedrooms, hence the *topos* of a reflection on sexuality, as it was insightfully pointed out by Clélia Anfray (87). The mythical image is repeatedly used in fiction to debunk young women's illusions about love, the most famous example being Jeanne's naiveté in *Une Vie* (1883) by Maupassant. Discovering the bedroom refurbished by her father, the soon bride-to-be marvels at the bed curtains where the tale of Pyramus and Thisbe is embroidered, and fantasizes about love:

Alors elle reconnut les malheurs de Pyrame et de Thysbé ; et, quoiqu'elle sourît de la simplicité des dessins, elle se sentit heureuse d'être enfermée dans cette aventure d'amour qui parlerait sans

cesse à sa pensée des espoirs chéris, et ferait planer, chaque nuit, sur son sommeil, cette tendresse antique et légendaire (Maupassant, 205).

Yet, her married life with Julien de Lamare proves to utterly contradict the legend of eternal and faithful love. Their marriage unfolds in a series of disappointments and deceptions: her husband turns out to be bad-tempered and aloof; he recurrently cheats on Jeanne as soon as they come back from their honeymoon. After their first sexual intercourse which resembles a rape, her sense of delusion is intertwined with the Ovidian myth:

Elle resta longtemps ainsi, désolée, l'œil errant sur les tapisseries des murs, sur la vieille légende d'amour qui enveloppait sa chambre (Maupassant, 260).

The similar situation is to be found in Zola's *Madeleine Férat*. The mythical images counterpoint the protagonist's illusions. The eponymous character hopes that she has found a morally safe situation with her lover Jacques. He forsakes her before she eventually marries Guillaume (who later turns out to be her former lover's best friend). The young woman's detailed description of the different prints of the legend is meaningful:

Madeleine regardait un à un les tableaux qui racontaient les malheureuses amours de Pyrame et de Thisbé.

[...] Voici la gravure où Thisbé trouve Pyrame baigné dans son sang ; le jeune homme a cru que son amante venait d'être dévorée par une lionne ; il s'est poignardé, et Thisbé, en le voyant sans vie, se tue à son tour, se jette sur son corps pour y mourir... Je voudrais mourir ainsi... Jacques se moquait : "Si tu me trouvais morte, lui demandai-je, que ferais-tu ?" Il est venu me prendre dans ses bras, il m'a donné un baiser en riant plus fort et en me répondant : "Je t'embrasserais comme cela, sur les lèvres, pour te ressusciter." (Zola, 280)

The story suits her romantic aspirations. She delightedly predicts the following image—the use of deictics reflects her perfect knowledge of the story—as if she were going through childhood pictures full of nostalgic remembrances. However, the disclosure entailed is set in a dramatic situation. Madeleine and her husband are fleeing from Jacques and her past, but the images remind her that the bedroom's inn is precisely the same than the one she shared with her lover years before.

Elle recula, elle prit le bougeoir et fit le tour de la chambre. A chaque pas, elle trouva un souvenir. Elle reconnut une à une les images coloriées qui racontaient l'histoire de Pyrame et de Thisbé. (Zola, 255)

The colourful prints turn into accusations of wrongdoing. In her guilty imagination, they acquire an anthropomorphic and threatening intensity. Philippe Hamon has pointed out their exposing power, alluding to the relevant idea of the *camera obscura* (Hamon, 109). It

reproduces the photographic development¹ of the latent image, in reverse: the negative (her dark secrets) is what comes to light. The disclosure is not constricted to young maidens though. In Prosper Mérimée's short story "La Chambre bleue" (1866) an adulterous couple meets in a hotel room where the bed curtains are decorated with the legend (Mérimée, 17). Ironically, the pair looks for discretion and moral disguise, notwithstanding the embroideries that contrast and thereby make all the more manifest their illicit sexuality. Amédée Achard's short-story "Pyramus et Thisbé" surprisingly relates the dishonest tactics of Baron Oscar to get rid of his mistress in order to marry the daughter of a wealthy businessman (Achard, 315). The title works as a wrong way sign, disrupting the reader's expectations. The narrative is void of love but replete with manipulation. Thus, the symbol of faithful love is repeatedly associated with stories of adultery and betrayal. This process is closely attached to the female protagonist, as if she were a two-faced character.

Thisbe, from medieval martyr to modern prostitute

In medieval rewritings of the *Ovid Moralisé*, the female figure was Christianized and allegorized as the human soul. By a process of subversion, she turns into its exact opposite in the 19th century. The muse unveils her sex appeal, often represented as an Eve-embodiment. Interestingly, the indissociable Ovidian pair symbolically divorces, and Thisbe is reimagined by male artists in connection with seduction. Alfred de Musset famously pinpointed the century's quest for sensual love and seductive women:

Daphnis et Chloé, Héro et Léandre, Pyrame et Thisbé.
Vouloir chercher dans la vie réelle des amours pareils à ceux-là, éternels et absolus, c'est la même chose que de chercher sur la place publique des femmes aussi belles que la Vénus ...
(Musset, 45)

This beautiful muse could be La Tisbe, the courtesan actress in Victor Hugo's *Angelo, tyran de Padoue*. The potentate Angelo Malipieri is madly in love with her. Despite his power, she refuses to be his, as she is secretly in love with Rodolfo, who is in love with Malipieri's wife Catarina. The foursome unfolds in a series of deceptions, secret identities and a binary representation of women. La Tisbe heroically sacrifices herself to let Rodolfo and Catarina free to love each other, yet her final death is the result of her incapacity to live without the man she loves. The process of mythologizing the feminine is duplicated in Théodore de Banville's

¹ In the 1830s, photography was invented by Nicéphore Niépce and Louis Daguerre in France, and by William Fox Talbot in Britain.

“Tisbé” (1861). The poet fuses two Hugolian’s characters, La Tisbé and Doña Sol from *Hernani* (1830): “A Tisbé, l’ange aux mains fiévreuses, / Car c’est elle avec doña Sol, / Qui sont toujours nos amoureuses.” (Banville, 228)

The poem echoes the Faustian myth of the eternal feminine and Hugo’s intention to depict through the two characters a perfect synthesis of *the* woman, « en deux types vivants, toutes les femmes, toute la femme » (Hugo, *Preface*). Transmuted into a Venetian seductress, Tisbé in the poem evokes the licentious charm of the Italian city—the epitome of the stage-city, laden with masks and costumes. The poet mentally associates the character with the flesh and bones actress: the process climaxes in his poem “Le Théâtre, à Jules Bonnassies”: “Puis c’est le Drame, avec son extase féérique, / ... / C’est Tisbe menaçant par la voix de Dorval” (Banville, 215-216). Marie Dorval famously played the role at the *Théâtre-Français* around 1835. The fusion of the character with the actual actresses playing the role re-emerges a few decades later in a letter from Paul Meurice—a famous playwright and close friend of Hugo’s, in his comments on Sarah Bernhardt, the well-known actress, as la Tisbé, published in the *Le Gaulois du Dimanche* (1905). They read as follows:

Ce rôle de la Tisbé a eu du bonheur ; il a été joué par les trois grandes actrices du siècle, Mars, Dorval et Rachel. Voici la quatrième, qui dépasse chacune d’elles, et qui les résume toutes trois !

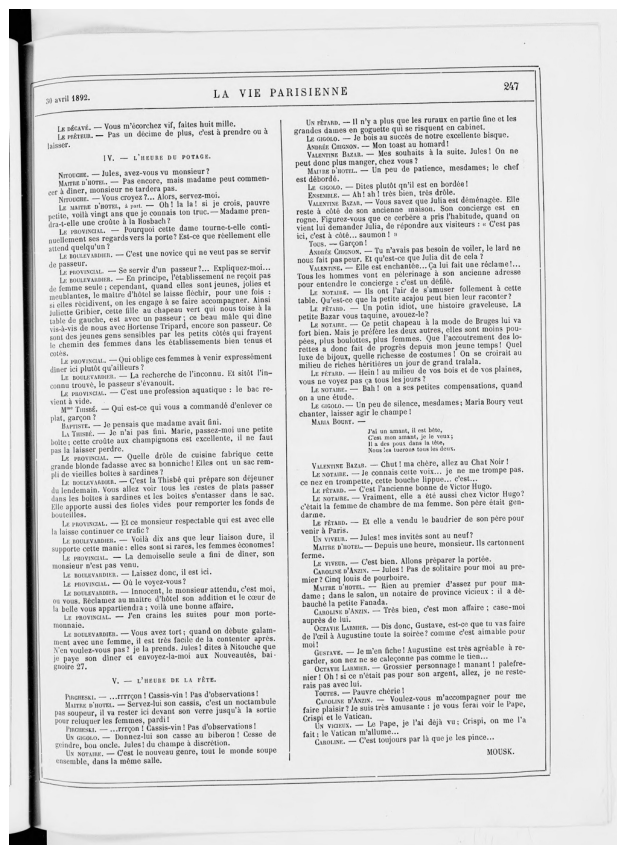


Letter from Paul Meurice, in *Le Gaulois du Dimanche*, 1905. URL: <https://www.parismuseescollections.paris.fr/fr/maison-de-victor-hugo/oeuvres/angelo-au-theatre#infos-principales>

The character turns into the beautiful actress who, in turn, is envisioned as a venal woman—Sarah Bernhardt had a licentious reputation, that the character of Thisbe absorbs through a process of merging. She is not only detached from her male counterpart but she is reinterpreted as a woman of many men. The immorality attached to the character climaxes in Théodore de Banville's poem « Les deux Frères » (1843) in which the main character Oscar discovers his mistress in his friend's arms:

Et lorsque enfin Thisbé l'appelait : son Pyrame, / il trouve un soir la belle ivre, et nue à demi, / qui rêve son remords aux bras de son ami. (Banville, 129)

In the press, the feature is duplicated in an 1892 issue of the weekly magazine *La Vie Parisienne*, in which "M^{me} Thisbé" is what was called at the time a *demi-mondaine*², a sort of courtesan or prostitute financially supported by a wealthy Parisian. In the publication "Café fin de siècle", which portrays various customer-types of the period, "M^{me} Thisbé" is described stuffing her bag with boxes and flasks of the left-over food and wine in the gallant company of her so-called "protector" (*La Vie Parisienne*, 247).



La Vie parisienne : moeurs élégantes, choses du jour, fantaisies, voyages, théâtres, musique, modes. 1892. dir. Marcelin, Émile Planat.

² See Lola González Quijano, « Performer un mauvais genre : la demi-mondaine au XIX^e siècle ».

In Zola's novel, Madeleine is a replica of Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne³ even though she does not wear the letter of infamy embroidered on her bosom but on her name which recalls the biblical and sinful Mary Magdalene (whose double-fold name potentially betrays duplicity). In visual arts, the sexualization of the character is obvious in Jérôme Paupion's canvas below which portrays a highly eroticized version of the maiden.



Jérôme Paupion. 1880. *Thysbe écoutant la voix de Pyrame*. oil canvas, 187 x 100, Beaune: Musée des beaux-arts et musée Marey.

Thisbe is depicted as a fallen woman. In the 19th century, the character tore her veil of virtue.

Sacred sex

Obsession with feminine sexuality echoes the widespread fear of sexual emancipation. Zola previously planned to entitle his novel *The Shame*. Therein, images of the myth function as the stigmata of shameful sexuality. Throughout the story, sex is associated with self-destruction urges, domination impulses, and incestuous violence, such as Madeleine stepfather's plan to feed and prepare the young girl before tasting her like a goose, and his failed attempt to rape

³ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (1860).

her (Zola, 62). Madeleine's daughter's innocence is repeatedly matched with dirty sexuality. She resembles her mother's lover and seems physically contaminated by her moral stain. She eventually dies of smallpox.

Zola's novel is the scientific chronicle of an announced adultery. He explores the contemporary concept of *imprégnation*—a medical theory that a woman's body remains marked by the sperm of her first sexual partner. Alain Corbin explains:

La croyance persistante des médecins en l'imprégnation ou hérédité par influence, selon laquelle une femme reste très longtemps influencée par le sperme du premier partenaire qui l'a fécondée, au point d'accoucher par la suite d'enfants portant la marque de celui-ci. Il me semble qu'on n'a pas suffisamment souligné l'importance de cette conviction scientifique qui tendait à multiplier les risques de l'infidélité féminine et même ceux de toute liberté sexuelle anténuptiale. (Corbin, 135)

Zola dramatizes the concepts of heredity and determinism to the extreme: the young child dies at the exact moment when her mother yields in adultery. The “crimes of the flesh” (Zola, 295) infect the tale and the age of innocence.

Jeanne's naïve interpretation of the legend is the reverse mirror of Maupassant's former erotic short-story “Le lit” (1882), in which the images of the Ovidian couple cover the roof of the bed of an anonymous young woman who turns out to be the mistress of a clergy man, l'abbé d'Argencé. The story is laden with salacious double-entendre. Maupassant plays with the two antithetic interpretations of the myth, eventually displaying that they are the two sides of the same coin. The emblem of purity can easily give way to what Claude Millet has defined as the dirty face of desire (Millet, 86) in Maupassant's fiction.

Realist writers shatter the illusions of faithful and eternal love and thereby associate the legend with brutal and impure sex. To understand the process, it is necessary to reconsider adultery in its sociohistorical context:

L'adultère du mari ne peut guère être poursuivi ; celui de l'épouse est toujours un délit, punissable en théorie jusqu'à deux ans de prison. Mais est-il aussi répandu ? Sa mise en scène dans les romans et le théâtre n'est-elle pas encore une forme d'exorcisme ? (Corbin, *Interview*)

The repeated urge to *adulterate* the myth of innocence can be interpreted as a means to purge society's sexual anxiety in the face of apparent loosening values. It eventually exposes the inverted taboo. Jean-Jacques Wunenburger reflects on the etymology of the term *sacred*:

Quant au latin *sacer*, étymologie du mot français, il semble introduire une valeur nouvelle, parce qu'il dénote à la fois la présence d'un signe surhumain vénérable (proche d'*augustus*) et une mise à l'écart par une souillure qui suscite l'effroi. (Wunenburger, *introduction*)

The more the artists express the desire to stain sex, the more its sacred subtext is made manifest. By the turn of the century, Guillaume Apollinaire's short poem, « Pyrame et Thisbé »

in *L'œuvre libertine des poètes du XIX^e siècle* (1910) was nothing but overtly obscene: “Madame Thisbé / Se pâme : --Bébé! / Pyrame / Courbé / L'entame: -Hébé ! / La belle / Dit : “Oui!” / Puis elle / Jouit / Tout comme / Son homme. / L'ABBÉ DE THÉLÈME” (Apollinaire, 159). The choice of the Rabelaisian clergyman as the poem's narrator highlights the urge to violate the sacred. The poet used a pen name though: unveiling sex still demanded secrecy.

To conclude, by using the chaste legend to demystify illusions about romance, artists and writers subverted it, but ultimately expressed a reverse reverence. The corruption of the myth of innocence, degraded with shameful and illicit sex, functions as a form of cathartic transgression and as a magnifying glass on how sexuality engrossed the period. The inverted tale functions as a refracted mirror of sexual anxiety. Michel Foucault brilliantly summed up the phenomenon:

Ce qui est propre aux sociétés modernes, ce n'est pas qu'elles aient voué le sexe à rester dans l'ombre, c'est qu'elles se soient vouées à en parler toujours, en le faisant valoir comme le secret. (Foucault, 49)

Pyramus and Thisbe acquired a very sexual connotation in the 19th century. The myth of innocence was, in modern terms, X-rated.

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