

NOTAS E INFORMACIÓN

Ovid, *Metamorphoses* IV 94 – Parthenius, Ἐρωτικά Παθήματα 32.1-2 A Moral Interpretation

Ovidio, *Metamorfosis* IV, 94 – Partenio, Ἐρωτικά Παθήματα 32.1-2
Una interpretación moral

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Abstract: The problem of Ovid's Greek sources remains complex and very extensive. For the famous *Pyramus and Thisbe* episode, J. Lightfoot suggests that the Greek author, Parthenius of Nicaea, inspired, in part, the Latin poet. This note aims to bring a new argument in favour of this hypothesis by analysing deeply and precisely the line, *Metamorphoses* IV 94, in comparison with the 32nd story in Ἐρωτικά Παθήματα, a “note-book” collecting thirty-six love-stories.

Key words: Latin Poetry; Literary Influences; Greek Heritage; Mythography.

Resumen: El problema de las fuentes griegas de Ovidio permanece complejo y muy extenso. Para J. Lightfoot, el famoso episodio de *Pyramus y Thisbe* del poeta latino fue inspirado por el autor griego, Partenio de Nicea. Esta nota tiene por objeto aportar un nuevo argumento a favor de esta hipótesis analizando completamente y con precisión la línea *Metamorfosis* IV 94 en comparación con la historia 32 de las Ἐρωτικά Παθήματα, un «cuaderno» que recoge treinta y seis historias de amor.

Palabras clave: poesía latina; influencia literaria; herencia griega; mythographia.

In her commentary¹ on *Anthippe*, the 32nd story in Parthenius of Nicaea's Ἐρωτικά Παθήματα, J. L. Lightfoot studies the literary links between this Greek text and a later Latin one (Ov., *Met.* IV 55-167) for which it was probably one of the sources of inspiration. She details the differences and the similarities between these two legends, thereby illustrating that the famous Ovidian episode of *Pyramus and Thisbe* is partially based on the Parthenian model.

¹ Lightfoot 1999, pp. 537-542.

The purpose of this paper is not to chart the development of Lightfoot's thesis, but rather to suggest a new argument in support of her hypothesis, based on a detailed analysis of book IV, line 94 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: *Thisbe / egreditur fallitque suos adopertaque uultum*, «Thisbe steals out, seen of none and her face well veiled»². Indeed, the whole tale depends on this crucial moment when the two lovers proceed to meet together after a long separation, and in doing so cause their tragic destiny to unfold.

The first half of this passage (*Thisbe / egreditur fallitque suos*) can be read as a reference to two previous extracts of book IV. Line 94 clearly makes reference firstly to the verses 60-61: ... *taedae quoque iure coissent, / sed uetere patres ...*, «and they would have been joined in marriage, too, but their parents forbade», since the adolescents decide to indulge their passion in spite of their fathers' prohibition³. The legitimacy of paternal authority is also reinforced by the word *iure* in description of the forbidden union. Line 94 is also linked with l. 85, where Ovid uses the verb *fallere* for the first time in this episode: ... *statuunt ut nocte silenti / fallere custodes foribusque excedere temptent*, «then decided when all had become still that night to try to elude their guardians», thereby emphasizing the infringement of their parents' interdiction by the two protagonists.

The second half of l. 94 (*adopertaque uultum*) introduces the rest of the story with the item that will unwittingly provoke the death of the two heroes, Thisbe's veil:

... ut uero uestem quoque sanguine tinctam
repperit: «Vna duos» inquit «nox perdet amantes.» (*Met.* IV 107-108)

But when he saw the cloak smeared with blood, he cried: «One night shall bring two lovers to death.»

Although the veil was a common item of women's clothing⁴ in Greek and Roman civilization, Thisbe clearly uses hers in order to make her night evasion easier. We can reasonably suppose that the juxtaposition, in the same line, of the lovers' disobedience to their parent's rules (twice emphasized by Ovid in l. 60-61 and 85) with the veil which both eases their escape, and will ultimately lead to their miserable fate, is not just a coincidence. Indeed, it seems to strongly support the contention that the Latin poet condemns the protagonists' behaviour by suggesting to the reader that Pyramus and Thisbe's destiny was the direct consequence of their refusal to obey to the imposed laws of their families.

² Ovidian texts and translations come from Miller 1916.

³ On paternal authority: Pomeroy 1998, p. 202 and Blundell 1999, p. 114.

⁴ Lambin 1999, pp. 29-43.

Furthermore, the entire l. 94 refers also to the fable's last lines. In spite of the couple's disrespect for rules and their tragic end caused by the veil, the gods and their fathers forgive them for their disobedience:

Vota tamen tetigere deos, tetigere parentes;
nam color in pomo est, ubi permaturuit, ater,
quodque rogis superest, una requiescit in urna. (*Met.* IV 164-166)

Her prayers touched the gods and touched the parents; for the colour of the mulberry fruit is dark red when it is ripe, and all that remained from both funeral pyres rests in a common urn.

The death of the two protagonists absolves them of fault, and the lovers are bound together forever just as they desired from the tale's beginning.

It is now apparent that in addition to the many similarities between the Ovidian episode and the 32nd story in Ἐρωτικὰ Παθήματα highlighted by J. L. Lightfoot⁵, this nuanced, three-step concept of moral character (infringement of human laws – punishment – forgiveness) is also present not only in Anthippe's tale⁶ but in other legends written by Parthenius. In this manner, the 31st text tells an incestuous love story (like *EP* 2, 5, 6, 11, 13, 17, 28, 31, 33), which arguably provided Ovid with a source of inspiration when composing «Orpheus' catalogue» (*Met.* X 152-739)⁷. Following this, the *EP* 33 describes Niobe's unfortunate experience after showing contempt to a deity.

To return to *Anthippe*: echoed by Ovid, the Parthenian adolescents spend time together καὶ λανθάνοντες τοὺς αὐτῶν γονεῖς ἐξεπίπλασαν τὴν ἐπιθυμίαν, «and after this they gave their parents the slip and satisfied their desires»⁸ (*EP* 32.1) indirectly provoking Anthippe's death. Moreover, a second element present in the two stories reinforces our moral interpretation: on the site of the mortal accident befalling the heroine and the prince who accidentally killed her, a city named Cichyrus is founded⁹, symbol of the absolution of the lovers' fault due to the heroine's deadly injury¹⁰.

In this way, the two texts can be seen to follow the same moral structure: two young people break their families' prohibition to love one another and are consequently punished by fate, but their deaths ultimately make amends for the committed misdeed.

⁵ Lightfoot 1999.

⁶ Biraud – Voisin – Zucker 2008, p. 258.

⁷ Vandersmissen 2012.

⁸ Parthenian texts and translations come from Lightfoot 1999.

⁹ Cichyrus is the name of the prince.

¹⁰ Complete development in Biraud – Voisin – Zucker 2008, p. 259.

There is another, more tenuous, clue to Parthenius' influence on Ovid; in the Greek text, the two adolescents choose the moment of a *ἐορτή* to get together, and Parthenius contrasts the two young people's attitude (*ἀποσκεδασθέντες*, «they slipped away») with the whole city's one (*πάντων εὐωχομένων*, «everyone was feasting») (*EP* 32. 2) to accentuate their disrespect for the established traditions. They would have taken part in this «lieu de rassemblement de la cité où la fête est destinée à plaire à la divinité.»¹¹ Therefore, they ignore not only paternal authority (humans laws) but also the religious rites (divine laws), thereby causing their own destruction. This aspect reappears not directly in the Ovidian episode in question, but in the story which introduces it: Minyas' daughters (Ou., *Met.* IV 1-415), who wanted to amuse themselves instead of participating in Bacchus' mysteries. These protagonists, exactly echoing Pyramus and Thisbe, refused to respect the rules (dictated in this case by a god, Bacchus) and were severely punished by a transformation (Ou., *Met.* IV, 405-415) into night beings, bats: *lucemque perosae / nocte uolant*, «and hating the light of day, they flit by night». This last argument does share the moral character detailed above, but nonetheless constitutes a very hypothetical piece of *EP* 32's influence on the Latin text.

In conclusion, this similar moral significance in the two texts confirms Lihghtfoot's hypothesis of Parthenius' influence on Ovid's work¹². We can confidently assert that the Latin poet was to some degree inspired by the Ἑρωτικά Παθήματα during the Pyramus and Thisbe episode's redaction for which we don't know any previous source¹³.

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¹¹ Jost 1992, p. 147; on this aspect see also Vanhaegendoren 2007, pp. 19-28.

¹² For further evidence of Parthenius' influences in Ovid, see also Fabre-Serris 2008, pp. 189-205 and Francese 2001.

¹³ Lafaye 2007 (orig. ed. 1925), p. 98. For details of a possible previous version, see Knox 1989, pp. 315-328.

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