Ovid's Pyramus and Thisbe
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OVID’S PYRAMUS AND THISBE

We do not know from what source Ovid took the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, one of his best-told tales. In fact, with a single exception, it has not been possible to identify any of the specific works utilized by Ovid in the composition of the Metamorphoses, the title of which he apparently took from a lost work of Parthenius of Nicaea. The story which Ovid elected to tell about Pyramus and Thisbe came from some little-known author: vulgaris fabula non est (Meta. 4.53).

There was a much commoner form of the story, which Ovid rejected, and of which we catch tantalizing glimpses in certain later authors. In the Δοκοντακά of Nonnus of Panopolis we hear the river Alpheus (of Greece) speak to the river Pyramus (of Cilicia): “I,” he says, “shall seek out the traces of Syracusan Arethusa, but you, O Pyramus, go in search of Thisbe.” Thus Arethusa and Thisbe are springs and nymphs. Later in the same work we are told: “But Thisbe will be running water, also Pyramus, comrades both, longing for each other.” This myth of a river-god in love with a nymph is also referred to by Themistius of Bithynia: “As silly talk you might mention Pirene, as silly talk Thisbe, or you might say to no purpose at all that Alpheus had his troubles in being the lover of Arethusa.”

More information is given by Nicolaus of Myra: “Thisbe and Pyramus conceived an equal passion for each other, and as lovers they came into familiarity. But the girl, becoming pregnant and seeking to escape unnoticed from what has happened, does away with herself: the youth, having learnt this, undergoes a like fate. And the gods, pitying what has happened, changed both to water: and Pyramus, having become a river, flows through Cilicia, but Thisbe, a spring beside him, pours fourth her flow.” Himerius of Bithynia also refers to this story: “Upon the neighboring river (this marriage) bestows Thisbe, who was his neighbor, whom it changes from a maiden into water; and even to the extent of their streams does it preserve their love, bringing as it does into one and the same place the waves of the beloved and of her bridegroom.” Also in the Pseudo-Clemen-

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1 The Baucis and Philemon story, which is from the Hecale of Callimachus, according to J.W. Duff, A literary history of Rome: from the origins to the close of the Golden age (1960), p. 441, n. 2.
4 Nonnus, Dionysiaca 12.843.
5 Themistius Bithynius, Orationes xi.151c–d, 180 Dindorf.
6 Nicolaus, Progymnastica (in Rheteres Graeci I.271 Wald and Mythographi 384.21 Westermanck.
7 Himerius Bithynius, Orationes i.11.
tine *Recognitiones* we read that “Thisbe was changed into a fountain in Cilicia, and in the same locality Pyramus was changed into a river.”

The location of the Pyramus (today the Ceyhan) has been known since Hittite times; its name is of an old Anatolian type (cf. Priamus, etc.), and it may perhaps mean “brownish-yellow,” if it is indeed Indo-European. The name of Thisbe is more of a problem; it is the name of a small town in Boeotia, or rather of a spring there and of its nymph. The name of this spring was very likely carried to Cilicia by the Greek settlers there, whether they followed in the train of Mopsus or not. This name *Thisbe* is of an old pre-Hellenic type and has often been compared with that of Thebe, herself a water-nymph and eponym of a Boeotian town. Exactly where the Cilician Thisbe was located is hard to determine now. One scholar has argued that the spring Thisbe must be somewhere on the north coast of Cyprus in a position analogous to that of Arethusa in Syracuse. It is argued that the delta-formations of the Alpheus and Pyramus rivers demonstrate their striving in the directions of their beloved spring-nymphs. Nothing, however, is known of a fountain Thisbe in Cyprus. Strabo, who describes the Pyramus river and its deposit of mud, quotes twice an ancient oracle: “This will be for those to be born later, when Pyramus with his silver eddies, extending his holy coastline, will reach Cyprus.” One had better look for this Thisbe in lower Cilicia.

It is possible that Diodorus has made a mistake when he mentions “Thebe, the daughter of Cylix,” and that he really meant Thisbe. The river-god Pyramus appears upon the coinage of three cities of Cilicia in Hellenistic times; they are Anazarbus, Hieropolis Castabula, and Mopsus (often called Mopsuestia). The coins of Mopsus also show Pyramus together with a nymph, and she may well be Thisbe.

One may speculate that the non-Greek Cilicians also possessed their own version of the story, perhaps the original one. After all, the Pyramus ought not to be compared with such amorous Greek rivers as the Achelous or the Alpheus; it is rather more like the Marsyas (Şınar Çay), a tributary of the Maeander, which somehow represents the tears and blood of the slain satyr, who is really an old Anatolian god. We know also of the river Adonis in Syria (today the Nahr Ibrahim) and of the river Asclepius (the Nahr el-Awali), which flows into the sea at Sidon. These two rivers represent the slain gods Dumuzi (Tammuz) and Eşmûn. Lucian tells us that at a certain time each year the Adonis was tinged with red clay, and that this bloody appearance announced to the Phoenicians their annual time of mourning. Thus the Pyramus was perhaps originally one of Frazer’s “dying gods,” the lover of a great goddess; the story of Attis or Atys comes readily to mind.

At any rate, we have established the vulgaris fabula which Ovid rejected in favor of an obscure but vastly superior story.

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9 Pausanias 9.32.2; Stephanus Byzantinus, *Scholia ad Iliadem* II.502; Eustathius on the same line, I.216.

10 The latest discussion of the Mopsus-problem is to be found in Ph. H.J. Houwink Ten Cate, *The Luwian population groups of Lycia and Cilicia Aspera* (1961), p. 44–50.


12 O. Immisch in Roscher, op. cit. III (2), 3338. Strabo 1.3.7; 12.2.4; 14.5.16.

13 Diodorus 5.49.3.


16 Lucian, *De dea Syria* 8.

Once Ovid had made this newer story well known, it became the standard one. There is some slight possibility that Vergil, too, had read somewhere this new version, for he mentions in the *Eclogues* (6.22) a naughty nymph who smeared the face of the sleeping Silenus *sanguineis moris*; however, the adjective may simply mean "blood-colored" mulberries without reference to the new myth. After Ovid, many authors mention the sad story as told by him.18 There is or was a tomb inscription at Ostia, in which the love of a local couple is compared with that of Pyramus and Thisbe.19

In Ovid’s version (*Meta*. 4.55–166) the lovers are human, and the scene is surprisingly shifted to the city of Babylon. They converse through a crack in a party-wall, since their parents forbid that they should marry or even see each other. They arrange to meet at night outside the city at the tomb of Ninus; here a lioness with mouth bloodied from a fresh kill frightens Thisbe away and rends her dropped garment (or veil). Pyramus, arriving later, supposes from the stained cloth that his beloved has been devoured and so kills himself with his sword. Thisbe, emerging from hiding, finds her lover dying and kills herself with his sword. The blood of the lovers stains forever red the hitherto white fruit of the mulberry tree. This certainly seems to be a Greek aetiological myth of a familiar type, but the preciosity of the story, the unusually tight and well-developed plot, points specifically to some contriving Hellenistic writer. Perhaps he was a poet, such as Callimachus of Alexandria, or perhaps he was a writer of prose-romance, such as Xenophon of Antioch.

I am inclined to believe that the author of this improved and amplified story was thoroughly familiar with North Syria. From the Cilician border and the river Pyramus but a short distance beyond he would have learnt the original myth; on the other hand, he would have acquired his additional story elements from the cult-center of Hierapolis-Bambyce not very far to the east. The coinage of Hierapolis will have suggested to him all on a single type the woman, the veil and the lion.20 Actually, of course, he was looking at the Aramaic goddess Ἄτα, who is usually veiled at Hierapolis; perhaps it was not clear to him whether the goddess was fleeing from her raging lion or riding (as indeed she was) upon the animal. And when he learned that Ἄτα was a great goddess of springs and ponds, and that she, too, like Thisbe was reputed to have killed herself because of an unwanted pregnancy, it must have seemed to him that Thisbe was simply a form of the great Syrian goddess.

One has the distinct impression in reading *Meta*. 4.42–54, in which lines Ovid’s story-teller is made to hesitate over which tale of a series of four in her repertory might most effectively be related here, that Ovid is really describing his own hesitation. All four of these stories lie before him in the same work or scroll, but he rejects the first three, possibly because of their grotesqueness and lack of pathos. All four were part of the cycle of myth connected with Hierapolis-Bambyce. Lucian in his *De dea Syria* has left us a sensational account of this shrine, its ministrants and its pilgrims. The original name of the place with its abundant springs was in Aramaic *Mabigg*; "fountain," of which the Greek Βαμβόκα represents an interesting corruption.21 The water-goddess was actually a

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20 Coins representing Atargatis are cited in Head, op. cit., p. 772, 777, 778 (Derceto 804). See also W. Wroth, *Catalogue of the Greek coins of Galatia, Cappadocia and Syria* (British Museum series, Bologna reprint 1964), p. liii, liv, lvii, 143–146, 149, 150, and especially pl. XVII.

21 W.F. Albright, *Archaeology and the religion of Israel* (1946), p. 194, n. 7. Curiously enough, there was a locality in Sparta named βαμβόκα (Plutarch, *Lyc.* vi.1), a Semiticism hitherto un-
compound deity—‘Atar-‘Atâ, a bewildering conflation of three old Canaanite divinities, and this syncretism is observable even at the end of the Bronze Age.  

Atargatis, as the Greeks and Romans called her, was regarded as the consort of Hadad, the West-Semitic lord of rain and storm, that is, the Syrian Zeus. It would seem that pilgrims to the holy city were required to bring with them jars of water, which they emptied into a dry well under the floor of the temple, probably to augment her power. Below the temple was the sacred lake filled with the tame fish of the goddess.

Now the first story, mentioned by Ovid in lines 44–45, is this: Once Atargatis had been a young woman of this place, but having killed her faithless lover and having abandoned her child by him, to escape her misery and shame she flung herself into this lake and was drowned. But somehow she was reborn as a fish-goddess (cf. the Greek story of Ino), and at Ascalon she was actually represented as a mermaid, while amongst the Nabataeans she was a dolphin-goddess, that is, an early form of Aphrodite. Ovid speaks of her as Baby-

lona Dercetis, but she is not a Babylonian divinity at all. Dercetis or Derceto is gen-

erally regarded as a worn-down form of Atargatis, but a new and attractive etymology derives the name from an epithet of ‘Anat, an old Canaanite goddess.

The second story considered by Ovid (lines 47–48) was that of the woman-hero Semiramis, so venerated in the city of Hierapolis-Bambyce that one almost might believe that this was her place of origin. She was the child abandoned by the disgraced mother. She was fed by doves, rescued by shepherds in the approved manner, and, after an astonishing career as the beautiful and voluptuous queen of Babylon, she turned into a dove and flapped about the towers of that city. This woman, about whom so much has been written, including the so-called Ninus romance, was actually the sinnešāt ēkallī (“palace-woman,” not queen!) Sammu-rāmat, widow of the Asyrian king Šamši-Adad V (823–810 B.C.) and regent of the empire for a time. Ovid and his source would have called her husband Ninus (eponym of the city of Nineveh), transferring them both from Nineveh to Babylon, as so many authors did. Sammu-rāmat tended to be confused

noticed and pointed out to me by Professor Donald Laing.

22 The standard opinion was established by W.F. Albright in The American journal of Semitic languages and literatures 41 (1925) 73–101 and 283–285; 43 (1927) 233–276; see also his Yahweh and the gods of Canaan (1968), p. 115–116. ‘Atar(t) or ‘Aštart is conjoined by ‘Attâ (Aramaic for ‘Anat), and the double consonants are re-
duced. From a third goddess, ‘Aštar or Kudšu (“holy one”), a certain sexual exuberance is added. Albright now considers that the first name means “splendor” (of the evening star); the second name means “turning” of Ba’al’s face; the third means “treading” (upon the sea). As goddesses of sex and war, they were inextricably confused by the Egyptians and other neighbors of the Canaanites; they eventually became one, though separate in the Canaanite myths. A description of ‘Atar-‘Atâ is given by S. Langdon in Mythology of all races V (Semitic), p. 36–37 and 386, n. 174; see especially his fig. 20. The reader is also referred to Pauly-Wissowa II (2), 1896 s.v. “Atargatis”; IV (2), 2236–2243 s.v. “Dea Syria.”

23 Lucian, De dea Syria 13; see the remarks of W.F. Albright, Archaeology and the religion of Israel (1946), p. 194–195.

24 Nelson Glueck, Deities and dolphins (1965), p. 269–392 has much archaeological information dealing with the Atargatis-Aphrodite of the Nabataeans.

25 Albright, Yahweh and the gods of Canaan (1968), p. 113, shows that ‘Anat was ba’alatu darkati (“mistress of dominion”) on a recently discovered Ugaritic tablet, and he thinks that Derceto is derived from darkatu, “dominion” or “rule.” M.C. Astour, Hellenosemita (1965), p. 206, attempted to derive the name of Derceto from the West Semitic dārak, “to trample,” suggesting a wine-goddess trampling the vintage, a concept for which there is absolutely no proof. Still, as ‘Atrat, the prototype of Aphrodite, she might well tread upon the sea!

26 Sammu-rāmat seems to mean “the goddess Sammu is loved.” Obviously, -rāmat is the feminine stative of the verb ra’āmu, “love.” But who is Sammu? A god Šamû (“heaven”) is attested at Alalakh ca. 1500 B.C. (Astour, op. cit., p. 38), but the doubling of the letter m gives
with the goddess Atargatis because of the Akkadian word *summatu*, “dove,” popularly believed to have been part of her name, and the dove, no less than the fish, was a totem of the great goddess. Onnes, the first husband of Semiramis (cf. the Babylonian fish-god Oannes and the Biblical Jonah), was both dove- and fish-man.\(^{27}\)

The third story contemplated by Ovid (lines 49–51) concerns an unnamed naid (the word *nais* means “water-sprite”), who turned young men into fishes until she herself was changed into a fish. This is obviously a doublet of Atargatis. All of these stories must have been at home in Hierapolis-Bambuye, itself “Springville.” Atargatis was in part descended from the *bēlīt ēnī*, “lady of the spring,” worshipped at Ugarit some centuries earlier; she was partly formed also by the *rabbatu ʾatratu yammi*, “the mistress who walks in the sea,” another Ugaritic water-goddess and likely enough, the original Aphrodite.\(^{28}\) Whether Thisbe was accepted into this company by the priests of Hierapolis-Bambuye, or whether our unknown poet or fabulist brought her there, it is evident that the cult is that of springs and wells, which might sometimes fail or die during the hot season. The Cilician Thisbe, no doubt, possessed a cult of its own with a water-shrine such as the Hittites built at the spring of Eflatun Pinar near Beyşehir. When the maiden Thisbe is moved to Babylon in a further development of the myth, her spring is moved with her along with the convenient cavern.

The red or black mulberry tree was well known in the countries of the Near East, but the white mulberry was a native of China and slowly moved westward along with the silk-industry from India, through or Derceto also possessed a dove-totem). The corn-god Dāgôn was perhaps worshipped as a merman. This fish is to be regarded as the sign of life-giving water. For possible etymologies of the name Oannes, see now W.G. Lambert in *Journal of cuneiform studies* 16 (1962) 74; W. Hallo, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 83 (1953) 176, n. 79. It may have been S. Reinach who first suggested somewhere that the idea of Jonah being swallowed by a “whale” was derived from an ignorant interpretation of the statue of a merman—a male Derceto at Ascalon. I cannot refrain from mentioning here the delightfully wicked song in the *Kommersbuch* “Zum schwarzen Walfisch zu Askalon,” in which it appears that Jonah was drunk in the tavern called the “Black whale” for three days. It is doubtful whether Dāgôn or Dāğân was really worshipped as merman or fish, but there is an interesting confusion in Hebrew between the words for fish (*dāg*, *dāgh*) and “grain” (*dāgân*). *Deuteronomy* 4:18 forbids the making of images of fish for worship, an obvious reference to Atargatis-Derceto or a male counterpart. Dāgân was a very old Akkadian divinity with temples at Mari and Ugarit.

\(^{27}\) Onnes, the first husband of Semiramis, is probably a variant of Oannes the merman cited by Berossus as having first brought the arts of civilization to Mesopotamia. He is probably a form of *Enki*-Ea (we now read *Ae* in place of the familiar *Ea*!), whose temple-floor at Eridu was found by the excavators to be covered with fish-bones. On the other hand, Oannes or Onnes is to be equated with the West Semitic *yōḏāh*, “dove” (hence the name of Jonah, and his connexion with the fish-towns Nineveh and Ascalon is due to the fact that the fish-goddess Atargatis...
Persia and Mesopotamia to Syria. Aristotle is the first westerner to know of the silkworm and its product; Theophrastus, the pupil of Aristotle, is the first to know of the white mulberry tree. It seems that silkworms prefer the white mulberry to the red. Now this industry must have been established at Hierapolis-Bambyce by Alexander or his successors, the Seleucids, because the Greek words for “silkworm” and “cocoon” (βόμβυξ and βομβόλις) are derived from the name of Βομβώκη. For that matter, the English bombazine and possibly bombast are derived from the same place. It may well be that our Greek poet or short-story writer saw for the first time a white mulberry tree growing in or near Hierapolis-Bambyce along with the more familiar red type. Here he got the notion of the lovers’ blood staining the berries.

The final mythological development was the transfer of the story to Babylon. One may well wonder why this was done. In the first place, it may be observed that the ruins of Babylon were simply more stupendous than those of any other great city of the past, and they stirred the imagination more. For this reason, the Ninus-Semiramis stories were transferred from Nineveh, which could hardly be recognized by Hellenistic times, to the still considerable setting of Babylon, itself fast going to rack and ruin. But Babylon still possessed a magic name, and it became a sort of Baghdad in the romance of the East.

Now the strip of land separating the Cilician lovers becomes a house-wall in Babylon. Of course, all cities had such fissures in their walls, even Rome, as Juvenal tells us in his third Satire (194–196); but the situation was worse in Babylonia because the lack of fuel prevented the extensive manufacture of burnt bricks. The legal texts of Babylonia refer to the nīgis bēti, the crack in the house wall which must be repaired before the new tenant moves in. Perhaps Ovid’s source had actually seen people talking through an aperture of this type. He would certainly be familiar with the Ἀφροδίτη παρακατούσα or Venus prospiciens, the goddess or sacred harlot peering out from the window-lattice, as seen in Palestinian and Syrian art.

Still, we are compelled to find a second reason for the transfer of the Pyramus and Thisbe story to Babylon, and I think we must assume the pre-existence there of a similar story, one in which a priestess attempted to escape from the temple-compound and from her city. This Babylonian Thisbe, whatever her name and status may have been, was certainly a tabooed person, as may be argued from the prompt appearance of the lioness to punish broken vows. There is nothing fortuitous in this. The animal is the epiphany of the goddess ἸΝΑΝΝΑ-Ισταρ, she who is called in the Babylonian texts labbatu ʾlgigi, “lioness of the Great Gods,” or simply labbatu ʾlstar, “the lioness Istar.” Along the late Processional Road just before the traveller from the north comes to the splendid Istar Gate (now in Berlin, and through which it may well have been imagined that our Babylonian Thise made her escape), there are walls on either side with figures of lions in enamelled brick. When in human form, the goddess is frequently seen, as on the seals, standing upon the back of a lion. It is true that other goddesses in the West borrowed this noble animal, as Atargatis.

29 Note βόμβυξ, Aristotle, Historia animalium in Athenaeus VII.352, “silkworm”; βομβόλις in Aristotle, Historia animalium 551f. 12 “cocoon”; βομβόκην ibid. 551b 14 “cocoon”; note also βομβολίς in Hesychius, Lexikon, s.v. “Cocoon.” That these words are connected with βομβος and βομβέω would appear unlikely. “It is interesting to note that from Bambys (near which much silk was produced) were derived the bombicina vestis of the Romans, and, through the crusaders, the bombazine of modern commerce” (Encyclopaedia Britannica, XIII, p. 452). Bombast, of course, is a form of cottons. As for the two types of mulberry trees, they are first mentioned by Theophrastus, De causis plantarum 6.4 and Historia plantarum 1.6.

30 E.g., see André Parrot, The arts of Assyria (1961), p. 147, fig. 180. Many other examples could be adduced.
and Cybele did, but we must not forget the lioness of Babylony.\textsuperscript{31} Ovid’s source has made an amusing blunder: the lovers agree to meet \textit{ad busta Nini} (line 88), as though the reputed tomb of Ninus were just outside the walls of Babylon, whereas we know that it was actually one of the mounds on the site of Nineveh more than two-hundred and fifty miles away.\textsuperscript{32}

The goddess is evidently angered because Thisbe is escaping from her service, not because she disapproves of marriage as such. We know a great deal about the temple-maidens of Mesopotamia. The divinities generally asked for the girl in the dreams of the parents; it would be unthinkable to refuse such a request—this was a vocation (\textit{iršītum}). The great advantage in dedicating one’s daughter to serve god or goddess lay in the fact that her portion or settlement returned at her death to the family, whereas with her marriage it was irretrievably lost. Not all of the priestesses by any means were \textit{gasātī}, sacred prostitutes. Of the six types of women attached to the temple, the \textit{entum} and the \textit{nadītum} were required to be absolutely chaste. The \textit{entum} was high-priestess and a sort of abbess; the \textit{nadītum} (from a word meaning “lie fallow” or “be barren”) was a type of cloistered priestess or enclosed nun. The \textit{entum} was frequently a royal princess, and the last king of Babylony, Nabû-na’id (558–538 B.C.), tells us how he compelled his daughter to assume this office at the city of Ur, where he had surrounded “the couch of the ancient priestesses” with a wall.\textsuperscript{33} It was a pious duty of Babylonian and Assyrian kings to repair or rebuild walls enclosing temples and their personnel.

The \textit{nadītum} is chiefly known from the Old Babylonyan period, although this name appears in the latest times as well, signifying harlot or witch. She was apt to be a wealthy woman of good birth, and she did much business, including money-lending, with the men of the town, these transactions taking place \textit{ana bāb gāgīm or ana pi aptīm}, “at the gate of the cloister” or “at the window-lattice” of the convent. Might not a priestess have preconcerted in this way an escape with her lover? People were always running away from things in Mesopotamia; at least five words for fugitive may be counted in an Akkadian dictionary. Furthermore, the word \textit{aptīm} could mean any sort of hole or slot in a wall, not necessarily a true window. We must not think of these women as living in cells; on the contrary, within the wall each lived in her own private house with servants, some of whom were male. Priests and their families also had their homes within the same temple-enclosure. Still, this word \textit{gāgīm}, which we translate as “cloister” or “enclosure,” comes from a Sumerian expression meaning “locked

\textsuperscript{31} Not every lioness, of course, is the embodiment of the goddess Ištar; for example, the lioness mauling an Aethiopian, one of the Nimrud ivories illustrated in Parrot, op. cit., p. 152–153, fig. 186–187, is Egyptian, and if she represents any goddess at all, must be Sekhmet. Male lions attend the great goddesses of western Asia, but they are not incarnations of the goddess herself. Lion or lioness was a regal and quasi-divine animal, the hunting of which was generally reserved for kings (cf. the lion-hunts of Aššurbanipal in his \textit{paradise} or hunting-park. One of the Mari letters written to King Zimri-lim by a certain Yakin-Addu describes a lion which has wandered into the upper part of a house; no one dared molest him, and the beast was finally captured and in a crate shipped off to the king, who in a sense owned all lions (A. Leo Oppenheim, \textit{Letters from Mesopotamia} (1967), p. 108). That there was a lioness-goddess in Ugarit is proved by the personal name \textit{bd-ibit}, “servant of the lioness,” in Cyrus Gordon, \textit{Ugaritic handbook} (1965), p. 426, and this is probably a western form of Ištar.

\textsuperscript{32} The tomb of Ninus is located and described by Diodorus 2.7.1–2, who follows Ctesias. Actually, Šamši-Adad, the historical husband of Semiramis, was put into a basalt sarcophagus and entombed with others of his family at the holy city of Aššûr (see A.T. Olmstead, \textit{History of Assyria} [1933], p. 157). As for the tomb mentioned by Diodorus, its dimensions are wildly absurd; a pseudo-epitaph is provided by Atheneaus XII.530e.

house,” and in late lexical lists gāgū is equated with various words for prison or bordello.34

Ovid’s Thisbe wears the veil, the use of which was restricted by Assyrian law to the wives and daughters of respectable citizens;35 it is difficult to believe that this Thisbe was lowborn or that she was intended for any of the lower grades of temple service. Perhaps the parents could not afford the secular dowry. We hear of girls waiting as much as ten years, perhaps, to enter the cloister; during this time they remained with their parents they must have been equally unapproachable to any would-be lovers as though they had actually entered the religious life. On the other hand, we hear with some perplexity of women of the rank of entum or nādītum seemingly living outside the cloister. They called the outside world the kidum, the “flat-land” or “plain.” It was permissible to visit the world from time to time, provided that one kept out of wine-shops.36

The nādītum was sometimes allowed to contract a purely formal marriage with some man, possibly for financial or social reasons; but she supplied her handmaid or a lesser priestess called the sugītum as the actual physical wife. This was not pleasing to the Babylonian Thisbe, who was probably named Amat-Ištar (“servant-girl of Ištar) or Erišši-Ištar (“requested by Ištar”) or something of the sort vaguely reminiscent of the Greek name. Perhaps the veil was that of a bride, that is, of a normally married woman, which so excited the bloody rage of the lioness-goddess! Whoever brought the names of Pyramus and Thisbe to Babylon might well require the name of a local river or river-divinity. There was available the name of the Euphrates itself, Sumerian bur.ā. nun (“great water-hole”), of which the later forms in certain languages might remind one of the Pyramus, especially if our Pyramus is the 1Drūnu of the Hittite texts.37 In some ways, too, the Cilician god Pyramus was an analogue of the Babylonian Dumuzi (dumu. zid. abzu, “faithful son of the subterranean water”), whose yearly death in the parching heat of summer was lamented by all the Near-East.38

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37 Astour, op. cit., p. 43. For analysis of the Sumerian word nūr and its descendants, see W.F. Albright and T.O. Lambdin, “The evidence of language,” fascicle no. 54 (1966) of the new Cambridge ancient history and intended to be the fourth chapter of volume I.