CAXTONIAN

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Summer Special Issue: light reading for beach or hammock

# Nigh Famous

A look at the once-celebrated American humorist

*Dan Crawford*

There are several reasons you haven't heard a lot about Edgar Wilson "Bill" Nye, once the second most famous humorist in America. The lifespan of a humorous column is seldom more than five years, even in the days of slower news service. The issues he discussed in his columns are to a great degree dead. Nye himself died three days short of being exactly 45-1/2, not a venerable age even then. (The MOST famous humorist of the day lived to be 76, after all.) And for some time prior to his death he had labored under a disease which sapped his strength and cut down on valuable writing time.

He had tried to produce more lasting work. He wrote two Broadway plays which had respectable runs. There was to have been a novel, *Thelma*, but because things HAPPEN to humorists, the only manuscript wound up at the bottom of the Caribbean. Only one and a half of his books contained anything like continuous narratives. The first of these, a bestseller, is tough reading today, to the extent that Katharine White banished its author from the Subtreasury of American Humor. The second was a bibliographic curiosity, since it includes illustrations for the chapters Nye never lived to write.

Nye's best work, though, was in those newspaper columns, recording life in Laramie, Wyoming, in a day when the west was pretty much won, but not yet tidied up. Nye told of a time when a man could listen to the best singers of Europe in the new Opera House, but had to be wary of gunshots from the cheap seats. Frontier feuds and roller skating rinks co-existed uneasily, giving Nye material for domestic humor as well as grim tales of sudden death.

Edgar Wilson Nye (dubbed Bill early on, with the name immortalized by Bret Harte in "The Heathen Chinee") was born in Maine in 1850, but grew up in Wisconsin. As a young man in Wisconsin, he achieved the notable feat of failing the bar exams three times in succession. All of his brothers had law careers by this time, as did most of the men in his family. He wrote of his law studies

**"I could read the same passage today as I did yesterday, and it would seem as fresh at the second reading as it did at the first. On the following day I could read it again, and it would seem as new and mysterious as it did on the preceding day."**

*A portrait of Bill Nye by Bill Nye*

He set off for the west, where men were men and wilderness ruled and, with any luck, the exams were easier. He did pass his bars, but only then learned WHY it was so easy to become a lawyer in the Wyoming Territory: nobody felt the need of them. To reverse one of his most famous quotes, people were hanging men by moonlight, not by law. He tried mining with no notable success and worked as assistant editor on the Republican newspaper in Laramie (**"He gave me twelve dollars a week to edit the paper—local, telegraph, selections, religious, sporting, political, fashions and obituary. He said twelve dollars was too much, but if I would jerk the press occasionally and take care of his children, he would try to stand it."**)

When the newspaper went under, he managed to get himself elected postmaster, only to find that out of the salary, he had to pay for all the postage due mail, whether the intended recipient eventually paid him back or not. Even that job disappeared in 1884 when a Democrat, Grover Cleveland, was elected President, sweeping Republicans out of office. Nye swept himself out with an open letter to Cleveland, published in newspapers across the country as "A Resign." His ostensible purpose was to help the new president with many of the important facets of the position he was vacating: **"You will find the postal cards which have not been used under the distributing table, and the coal down in the cellar. If the stove draws too hard, close**

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**NYE**, *from page 1*

**the damper in the pipe and shut the general delivery window."**

In the meantime, however, a Laramie judge was bemoaning the lack of a Republican paper, and offered to stake Nye in the enterprise. Nye named his paper the *Boomerang*, after his mule. (He'd called his mule Boomerang because, he said, you never knew where it would strike.) His first office was on the second floor above the livery stable where Boomerang resided; visitors were advised that they could reach the editor's office by way of the stairs, or could take the elevator by twisting the tail of a certain mule on the first floor. It was more than a full-time job; Nye had to get advertisers, get subscribers, and get out a paper while he was at it. The daily paper lost money, but the Sunday paper, which summarized all the highlights of the daily issues, was quickly bought up by townfolk, cowboys, miners, and even the occasional Ute who felt like risking a trip into town.

It was also subscribed to by an ever-increasing number of eastern newspapers. As Nye noted above, one of the departments in every newspaper was the "Exchange" or "Selection" section, where important articles were reprinted from other newspapers, under a polite pretense that the newspapers swapped the rights to these reprints. In fact, the author of the original article seldom got credit, and almost never saw a cash payment. Items by "Bill Nye" began to turn up in eastern newspapers, sometimes with his name attached. His fame, if not his bankroll, increased as readers out east ate up his depictions of life in the Real West.

Nye alternated between acting as the ignorant western reviewer agog at eastern sophistication and music (**"Theodore Thomas is certainly a great leader. What a pity he is out of politics." "Wagner's music is not as bad as it sounds."**) and the western sophisticate explaining to the tenderfoot what life out west was really like. He pointed out that the average cowboy was more familiar with the handle of a hoe than with a Smith and Wesson person perforator, and more likely to shoot his own foot than anything else. He told with relish the tale of the three cowboys who tried to hurrah the ice cream parlor only to be rendered unconscious by the mild-mannered Swedish shopkeeper.

Not that the West had been tamed. In the same tone of quiet irony he outlined the story of the drunks who decided to ride down the rail from a mine in an ore car, only to realize there was no brake, so that the only way to prevent wholesale demise was to tie one of them to a rope and toss him out to act as an anchor. A classic column, which got longer each time he wrote it, told the tale of the posse who went after a fugitive who had stolen not just a man's wife but also his horse. They brought back a dead body, claiming the desperate man, seeing himself trapped, had killed himself with an overdose of opium. An opium overdose, Nye observed, apparently caused a dark ring around the suicide's neck. The culprit had also, under the effects of the drug, tied his own hands behind his back first. Nye admitted to the possibility that the man had actually died of a "ropium" overdose.

The *Boomerang* prospered; more of Nye's columns dealt with his wife and six children, and the joys of homemaking on the frontier. At about this time, his doctors, after first treating him for four other diseases, told him he had spinal meningitis, and might have six weeks, six months, six years left to live. Confronted with the prospect of his wife and children living on the charity of his lawyer brothers (some of whom were on their way to becoming judges), Nye decided his only option was to make a lot of money fast. He had tried this before, but now it was a matter of some urgency.

Then as now, literature was not the ticket to Easy Street. Here is Nye on his own career:

**"To put a bushel of words into the hopper and have them come out a poem or a sermon, is a more complicated process than it would seem to the casual observer. I can hardly be called literary, though I admit that my tastes lie in that direction, and yet I have had some singular experiences in that line. For instance, last year, I received flattering overtures from three young men who wanted me to write speeches for them to deliver on the Fourth of July. They could do it themselves, but hadn't the time. If I would write the speeches they would be willing to revise them. They seemed to think it would be a good idea to write the speeches a little longer than necessary and then the poorer parts of the effort could be cut out. Various prices were set on these efforts, from a dollar to 'the kindest regards.' People who have squeezed through one of our adult winters in this latitude, subsisting on kind regards, will please communicate with the writer, stating how they like it.**

**"One gentleman, who was in the confectionery business, wanted a lot of 'humorous notices wrote for to put into conversation candy.' It was a big temptation to write something that would be in every lady's mouth, but I refrained. Writing gum drop epitaphs may properly belong to the domain of literature, but I doubt it. Surely I do not want to be haughty and above my business, but it seems to me that this is irrelevant."**

So Nye went after the nineteenth century equivalent of making the rounds of talk shows by appearing on the lecture circuit. He signed on with Major Pond, that era's impresario, a combination of Col. Tom Parker and Swifty Lazar. Pond, who had seen dozens of writers apply to him for a new career, felt Nye had possibilities. The Wyoming humorist was capable of delivering the most outrageous remarks with a completely straight face, and he LOOKED funny besides: over six feet tall, weighing—it seemed—no more than eighty pounds, and completely bald due to some malady he had suffered in his twenties. The man was a natural on the lecture circuit.

At his premier, though, he bombed severely; jokes which had seemed fairly risible on paper left the audience in the throes of boredom. Major Pond was no man to give up a challenge, however. No one, the Major theorized, could sit and laugh for two hours straight. Some element of seriousness, of tragedy, even, had to be added. And it so happened that Pond had another speaker whose potential was unfulfilled. James Whitcomb Riley, now remembered for his humorous poems, was at that time renowned for tearjerking tales of small children dying and old folks mourning the loss of their youth. Two hours of this had left audiences severely inattentive. If the two men could be teamed, and take alternating sets, the Major decided, people could laugh, and cry, and laugh next. Variety was the ticket.

He hedged his bets. According to legend, when the team was to make its debut in New York, Pond saw one of his other clients, Mark Twain, in the audience, and hauled him on stage to improvise an introduction. (This introduction appears in Twain's collected works, so either he wrote it down from memory or Pond had asked him to improvise something in advance.)

*A McDougall caricature. "Everywhere I go I find people who seem pleased with the manner in which I have succeeded in resembling the graphic pictures made to represent me"*

*One of the bitternesses of Nye's life were these caricatures: it wasn't that they made fun of his looks; it was that they captured him so perfectly that hundreds of people recognized him instantly on the street.*

Whether it was Pond's strategy or Twain's introduction, the team was a huge hit. The men became fast friends, producing a book, *Nye and Riley's Railway Guide*. They toured to capacity crowds across America. It was not a perfectly smooth partnership: Nye was in increasing pain from the meningitis, and Riley's drinking assumed monumental proportions. (Nye locked Riley in the dressing room once so his Hoosier friend couldn't buy a drink, and came back to find a stagehand holding a bottle up to the keyhole while Riley drank the contents through a straw.) The program came to an end one dark night when Nye stepped out the back door of the theater for fresh air, not knowing that for security purposes, the stairs were always removed during the performance. The broken leg caused him nearly as much suffering as the rumors that he had fallen out while drunk, leaving his poor, sober partner to carry on alone.

He produced fewer and fewer columns, between the pain and the work of his doctors. He laughed literally in the face of death.

**"You take a man's spine out of his system and he is bound to miss it, no matter how careful you have been about it."**

**"Next year, if I can get railroad rates, I am going to hold a reunion of my physicians in Chicago. It will be a pleasant relaxation for them, and will save the lives of a large percentage of their patients."**

**"But you did not have such a physician as I did when I had spinal meningitis. He was a good doctor for horses and blind staggers, but he was out of his sphere when he strove to fool with the human frame. Change of scene and rest were favorite prescriptions of his. Most of his patients got both, especially eternal rest. He made a specialty of eternal rest.")**

Bill Nye died at last on Feb. 22, 1896. A number of his columns were collected posthumously, as was his "Comic History of England." His reputation today continues to rest on the work he produced before his

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# *One Thing Leads to Another*

Star-crossed lovers make their way from Mesopotamia to American television

*Paul Ruxin*

Our theme here suggests a journey. It may be through time or across distances, it may be from one genre to another, or from one format to another. Or, in this case, all of the above. Ordinarily it would spoil the dramatic tension of a story to disclose at the outset both the beginning and the end, but in this case I doubt even the most brilliant and well-read among you will be able to fill in the blanks and connect the dots, at least for a while, and so here is where we start, and where we will end.

The story begins in the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Now we know it all too well as Iraq, but in the second millennium B.C., it was known as Mesopotamia, and that part of it along the Euphrates was Babylonia. Although the Akkadian language of that time and place had a cuneiform written version (the first written laws—the Code of Hammurabi—came down to us in that form), it is largely through archeologic finds and oral traditions, only later preserved in written form in other languages, that we know much about Babylonian life. From that oral tradition comes our story, probably dating to the latter second or early first millennium B.C., of a young couple, a beautiful girl and a handsome boy, who fall in love, of their feuding fathers, who try to forbid that love, and of the dusty wall between their gardens, separating them until tragedy strikes.

This ancient legend—surely among the oldest and most familiar tales in all literature—may also lead us to one of the most popular network television shows of the turn of the twenty-first century. How does a three-thousand-year-old legend lead to a television series? Let me lead you along the twisting path.

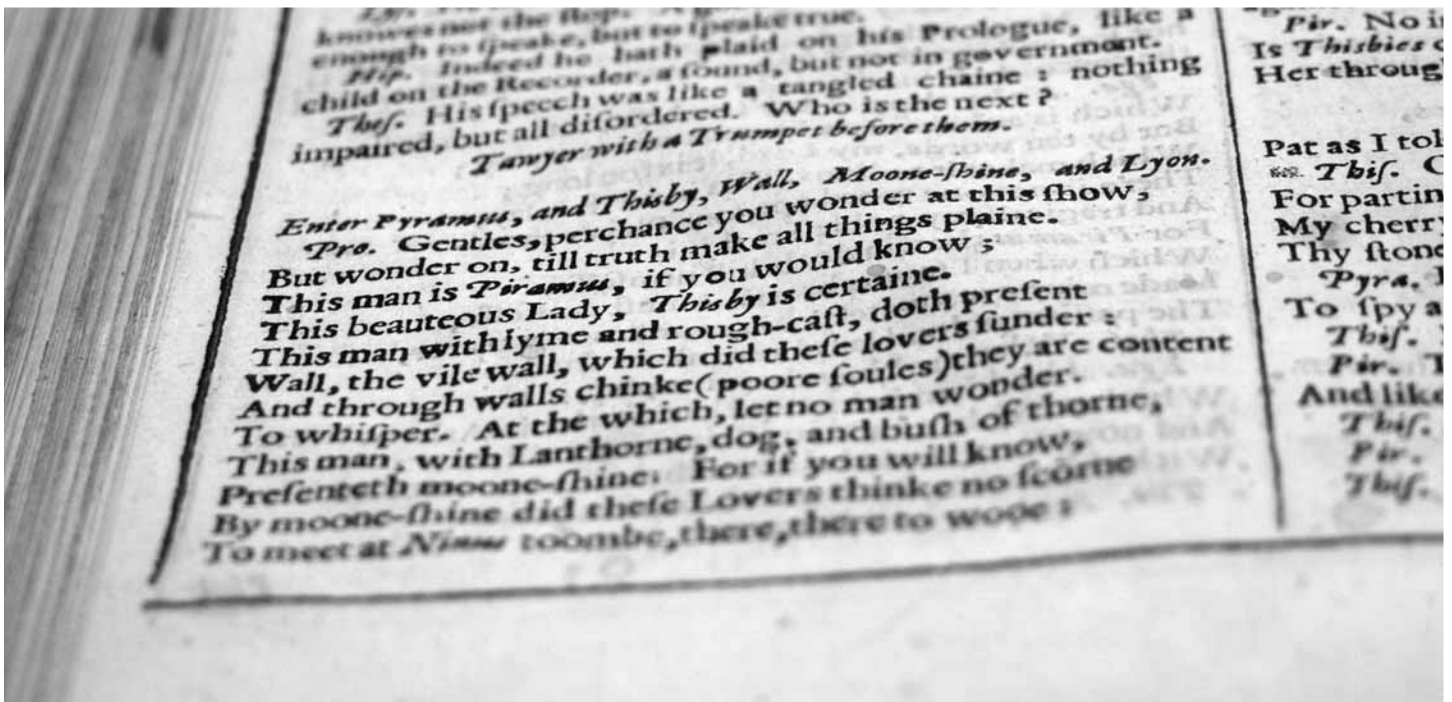
The Babylonian folk tale—perhaps the first urban legend—was told and re-told by generations of storytellers in the great bardic tradition. After Babylonia fell to Persia in 539 B.C., the story became popular in Greece, and half a millennium later, around the time of Christ's birth, it was, as far as we know, written down for the first time. It was transcribed by Publius Ovidius Naso, born in 43 B.C., just a year after the assassination of Julius Caesar. Better known as Ovid, by the time he was banished from Rome by Caesar Augustus in 9 A.D., he had included the story in his collection of Greek and Roman folk tales and myths, written, of course, in Latin, in lovely dactylic hexameter, and known as *Metamorphoses*. It begins this way.

> Pyramus et Thisbe, juvenum pulcherimus alter,
> Altera, quas Oriens habuit, praelta puellis,
> Contiguas tenuere domos, ubi dictur altam
> Coctilibus muris cinxesse Semiramus urbem.

No more Latin, I promise, but I wanted you to hear the meter—the music—of it.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* survived many years in Latin manuscript and codex form. Because he was a pagan writer, and often, as in his *Art of Love*, an explicitly sexual one, the popularity of Ovid and the *Metamorphoses* went into a six-century-long decline—or at least went underground—after the Roman Emperor Constantine adopted Christianity in the early fourth century A.D. Interest in Ovid revived, however, in the 11th century, as poets studying in the cathedral schools learned of him from the monks who had kept the *Metamorphoses* on their illicit reading and copying lists for hundreds of years. This led to the practice of "moralization," begun perhaps in the 14th century, as the way the late medieval and early Renaissance scholarly world legitimized secular, pagan classical works. *Ovide Moralise*, a French work by Pierre Bersuire completed in 1340, did this for the *Metamorphoses*, and Bersuire's moralization of Ovid in turn influenced Chaucer, who drew on many of its stories for his *Canterbury Tales*. During

*Shakespeare,* A Midsummer Night's Dream, *act five. London: T. Cotes for R. Allot, 1632 [the second folio].*



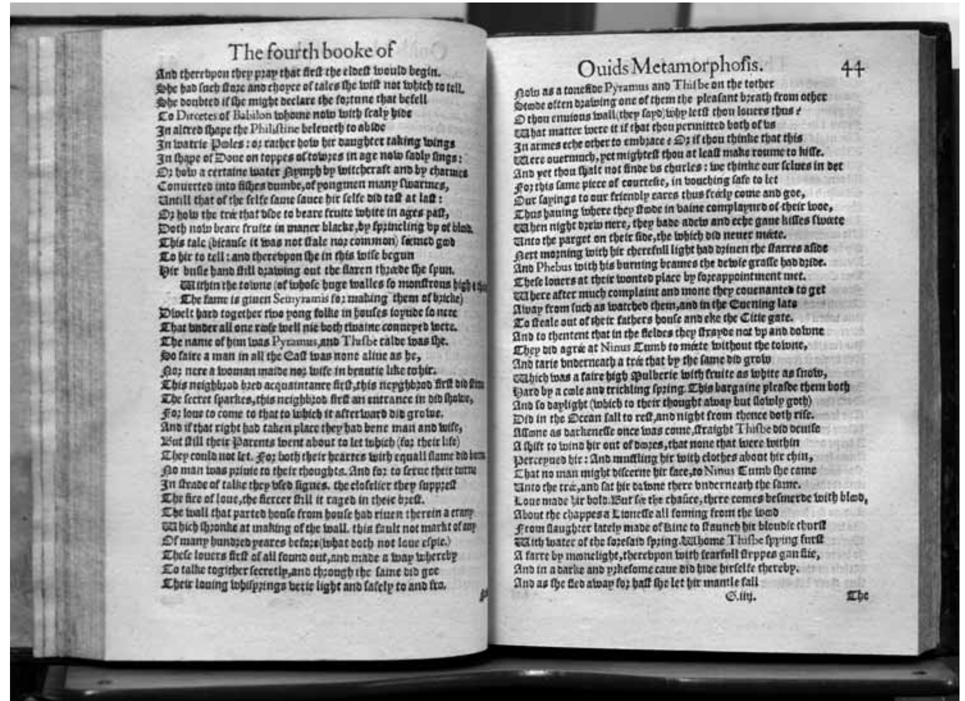
*Hip.* Indeed he hath plaid on his Prologue, like a
child on the Recorder, a ſound, but not in government.
*Theſ.* His ſpeech was like a tangled chaine: nothing
impaired, but all diſordered. Who is the next?
*Tawyer with a Trumpet before them.*
*Enter Pyramus, and Thisby, Wall, Moone-ſhine, and Lyon.*
*Pro.* Gentles, perchance you wonder at this ſhow,
But wonder on, till truth make all things plaine.
This man is *Piramus*, if you would know;
This beauteous Lady, *Thisby* is certaine.
This man with lyme and rough-caſt, doth preſent
Wall, the vile wall, which did theſe lovers ſunder:
And through walls chinke (poore ſoules) they are content
To whiſper. At the which, let no man wonder.
This man, with Lanthorne, dog, and buſh of thorne,
Preſenteth moone-ſhine. For if you will know,
By moone-ſhine did theſe Lovers thinke no ſcorne
To meet at *Ninus* toombe, there, there to wooe:

the Renaissance the *Metamorphoses* was translated from the Latin into Dutch, French, German, and finally, in 1567, into English, by Arthur Golding; 1567 was three years after the birth of William Shakespeare. Although his friend, contemporary and rival Ben Jonson said famously that Shakespeare had "small Latin and less Greek," Jonson himself was an extremely learned man, and his view of what was "small Latin" probably differs greatly from ours. In fact, Shakespeare seems to have attended a grammar school where Latin was the core of the curriculum, and Shakespeare's plays borrow heavily from the Latin texts taught in such schools. Of these texts, it is to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that Shakespeare turned most often for plot and character.

Whether Shakespeare drew on Ovid's Latin text, or on Golding's 1567 translation, or both, we do not know. We do know that he was fascinated by the ancient Babylonian tale of the star-crossed lovers, Pyramus and Thisbe. Around the year 1595 he wrote two plays which, in profoundly different ways, draw on the story of young lovers who face first the opposition of their families, and then tragic death resulting from confusion and mistake. The first, of course, is *Romeo and Juliet*, too well known to be rehearsed here, but telling of a boy and a girl, forbidden by their fathers to see each other, who communicate secretly and who die because one mistakes the simulated death of the other to be real.

This is in fact exactly the story of Pyramus and Thisbe told by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses*. Forbidden by their fathers in ancient Babylonia to marry, they communicate through a chink in the wall between their houses, and resolve to meet one night. Thisbe arrives first, but, frightened by a lioness dripping the fresh blood of recently killed cows, Thisbe drops her scarf as she runs to hide. The lioness picks up the scarf and bloodies it before dropping it, mangled, on the ground. Pyramus, arriving later, finds the bloody veil and the lion tracks, and concludes that Thisbe herself has been killed. In grief, he stabs himself and dies. Thisbe comes out of hiding, sees her dead lover, his sword, and the bloody scarf, understands all, and kills herself.

But *Romeo and Juliet's* retelling of this story was neither the only nor the most direct use Shakespeare made of the ancient story of Pyramus and Thisbe. About the same time he also wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a comedy, rather than a tragedy, containing one of Shakespeare's uses of his famous "play-within-the-play" device. Here, as entertainment at the weddings of Theseus and Hippolyta, Hermia and Lysander, and Helena and Demetrius, a group of crude artisans performs a theatri-


The fourth booke of

And therevpon they pray that first the eldest would begin.
She had such store and choyce of tales she wist not which to tell.
She doubted if she might declare the fortune that befell
To Dircetes of Babilon whome now with scaly hide
In altred shape the Philistine beleueth to abide
In watrie Pooles: or rather how hir daughter taking wings
In shape of Doue on toppes of towres in age now sadly sings:
Or how a certaine water Nymph by witchcraft and by charmes
Conuerted into fishes dumbe, of yongmen many swarmes,
Untill that of the selfe same sauce hir selfe did tast at last:
Or how the trée that vsde to beare fruite white in ages past,
Doth now beare fruite in maner blacke, by sprincling vp of blood.
This tale (bicause it was not stale nor common) séemed good
To hir to tell: and therevpon she in this wise begun
Hir busie hand still drawing out the flaxen thréede she spun.
Within the towne (of whose huge walles so monstrous high ...
The fame is giuen Semyramis for making them of bricke)
Dwelt hard together two yong folke in houses ioynde so nere
That vnder all one roofe well nie both twaine conueyed were.
The name of him was Pyramus, and Thisbe calde was she.
So faire a man in all the East was none aliue as he,
Nor nere a woman maide nor wife in beautie like to hir.
This neighbrod bred acquaintance first, this neyghbrod first did ...
The secret sparkes, this neighbrod first an entrance in did showe,
For loue to come to that to which it afterward did growe.
And if that right had taken place they had bene man and wife,
But still their Parents went about to let which (for their life)
They could not let. For both their heartes with equall flame did ...
No man was priuie to their thoughts. And for to serue their turne
In steade of talke they vsed signes. the closelier they supprest
The fire of loue, the fiercer still it raged in their brest.
The wall that parted house from house had riuen therein a cranny
Which shronke at making of the wall. this fault not markt of any
Of many hundred yeares before (what doth not loue espie.)
These louers first of all found out, and made a way whereby
To talke togither secretly, and through the same did goe
Their louing whisprings verie light and safely to and fro.

Ouids Metamorphosis. 44

Now as a toneside Pyramus and Thisbe on the tother
Stoode often drawing one of them the pleasant breath from other
O thou enuious wall (they sayd) why letst thou louers thus?
What matter were it if that thou permitted both of vs
In armes eche other to embrace? Or if thou thinke that this
Were ouermuch, yet mightest thou at least make roume to kisse.
And yet thou shalt not finde vs churles: we thinke our selues in det
For this same piece of courtesie, in vouching safe to let
Our sayings to our friendly eares thus frely come and goe,
Thus hauing where they stoode in vaine complayned of their woe,
When night drew nere, they bade adew and eche gaue kisses swéete
Unto the parget on their side, the which did neuer méete.
Next morning with hir cherefull light had driuen the starres aside
And Phebus with his burning beames the dewie grasse had dride.
These louers at their wonted place by forappointment met.
Where after much complaint and mone they couenanted to get
Away from such as watched them, and in the Euening late
To steale out of their fathers house and eke the Citie gate.
And to thentent that in the feeldes they strayde not vp and downe
They did agrée at Ninus Tumb to méete without the towne,
And tarie vnderneath a trée that by the same did grow
Which was a faire high Mulberie with fruite as white as snow,
Hard by a coole and trickling spring. This bargaine pleasde them both
And so daylight (which to their thought away but slowly goth)
Did in the Ocean fall to rest, and night from thence doth rise.
Assone as darkenesse once was come, straight Thisbe did deuise
A shift to wind hir out of doores, that none that were within
Perceyued hir: And muffling hir with clothes about hir chin,
That no man might discerne hir face, to Ninus Tumb she came
Unto the trée, and sat hir downe there vnderneath the same.
Loue made hir bold. But see the chaunce, there comes besmerde with blood,
About the chappes a Lionesse all foming from the wood
From slaughter lately made of kine to staunch hir bloudie thurst
With water of the foresaid spring. Whome Thisbe spying furst
A farre by moonelight, therevpon with fearfull steppes gan flie,
And in a darke and yrkesome caue did hide hirselfe thereby.
And as she fled away for hast she let hir mantle fall

G.iiij. The

*Ovid,* Metamorphoses, *translated into English by Arthur Golding. London: William Seres, 1567.*

cal version of the Pyramus and Thisbe story, complete with young lovers, angry fathers, wall, and lion. The ending here though, must be happy, and so Shakespeare turns *Romeo and Juliet* inside out, and Pyramus and Thisbe as well, for in a *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the tragic lovers rise from the dead at the end of their unconvincing performance. Although their audience of newlyweds—eager to move on with other nuptual practices—declines to hear an epilogue, they agree to have the "actors" who played Pyramus and Thisbe perform a rustic dance.

After Arthur Golding's translation of the *Metamorphoses* in 1567, and Shakespeare's use of the story in his twin tellings about 1595, there were many other versions of the Babylonian story of Pyramus and Thisbe, as retold by Ovid, in many languages. The *Metamorphoses* is one of the great resources of classical literature, scholarship and mythology. More than a hundred years after Golding translated it into English, so did John Dryden, among others. However, after the period known as the "long eighteenth century," about 1680 to 1820, Romanticism flourished, and the *Metamorphoses* and Pyramus and Thisbe became a less prominent feature of the literary-educational-cultural menu. As in all things though, what once was old became new again, and a revival of interest in classical studies—encouraged by or reflected in such things as the Loeb Classical Library series of translations from Harvard University—has kept Ovid, in Latin and English, before us throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

In 1955 the distinguished American poet and translator Rolfe Humphries, who deserves to be better known, issued the first of what we could call a "modern" English edition of the *Metamorphoses*. Humphries was the perfect choice. His father, a gradu-

*See **METAMORPHOSES**, page 6*

**METAMORPHOSES**, *from page 5*

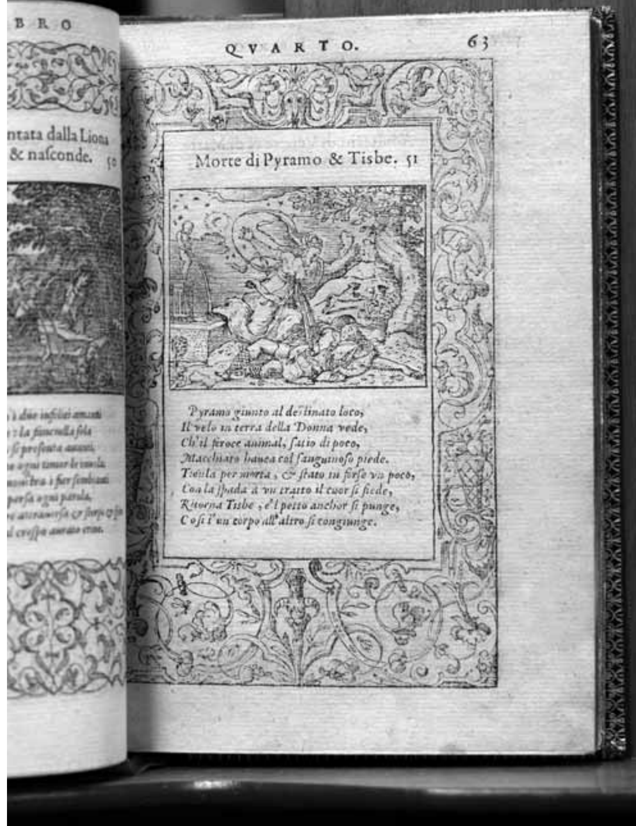
ate of Cornell, was the first member of Phi Beta Kappa to play major league professional baseball, for the New York Giants, in the 1880s. Humphries himself was a scholar and an athlete, not unlike Ovid, who was as well something of a rake and libertine. In fact, Ovid's banishment by Augustus from Rome to a miserable town on the Black Sea coincided with Augustus' banishment of his own daughter Julia, and legend has it that the two exiles were linked, although we will never know. Humphries too, at least in his youth, was something of a rake, and moved, during the 1920s and 1930s, in a fast crowd, like Ovid's, consisting of other writers—the "Bohemians"—including Edna St. Vincent Milay and the "beautiful people" of the Jazz Age. This was a society attracted to concepts of relaxed morality, not without its own antecedents in Ovid's work and life.

Turning to the *Metamorphoses* in 1954 Humphries wrote about its musical lines in hexameter:

> …there was fun enough in the original, variety and richness enough, for all the metrical sameness, so that to perform feats of virtuosity would have been an intolerable license on the part of the translator, a chopping-up of the texture, an insult. In his different way, Ovid commands as much respect as Virgil does; his dactylic hexameters …do not sound at all like Virgil's, but they are not material to do stunts with, either; the translator had better, I concluded, use the nearest approximation; the loose ten-beat line, unrhymed, seemed the least obtrusive medium.

Of course you remember the Latin of Ovid's first lines about Pyramus and Thisbe—at the beginning of this tale., Here is how Humphries' translation begins:

> Next door to each other, in the brick walled city
> Built by Semiramis, lived a boy and a girl,
> Pyramus, a handsome fellow, Thisbe,
> Loveliest of all those Eastern girls. Their nearness
> Made them acquainted, and love grew, in time,
> So that they would have married, but their parents
> Forbade it. But their parents could not keep them
> From being in love: their nods and gestures showed it—
> You know how fire suppressed burns all the fiercer.
> There was a chink in the wall between the houses,
> A flaw the careless builder had never noticed,
> Nor anyone else, for many years, detected
> But the lovers found it—love is a finder, always—
> Used it to talk through, and the loving whispers
> Went back and forth in safety….




*Ovid,* Metamorphoses, *in Italian. Lyon: Giouanni di Tornes, 1559.*

So there it is, thousands of years and ten thousand miles, and from an oral legend to a printed page, the lovers, their fathers, the wall…. One thing leads to another.

Let us step back a moment from Humphries' 1954 translation to the "Gay '90s," the 1890s, that is, when "gay" meant something like "happy." In Paris the French dramatist Edmond Rostand decided to do a spoof of the Pyramus and Thisbe story as told in *Romeo and Juliet*, making the fathers conspire to fake a feud in order to bring their children together by forbidding them to see each other. Rostand—also the author of *Cyrano de Bergerac*—called his 1894 version *Les Romanesques*. This play, in verse like Shakespeare's version, was then translated back into English by a woman using the pseudonym George Fleming, and it was produced with a new name—I'll give it to you in a minute—in London in 1909. There it was directed by one B. Iden Payne.

This same Mr. Payne went on to become a professor of drama at the University of Texas. A few decades later, while teaching there, he had among his students two, named Tom Jones and Harvey Schmidt. He introduced them to *Les Romanesques* and its 1909 English version. Then, in 1960, in a very small theater off-Broadway in New York, opened a small American musical play. It had book and lyrics by Tom Jones, with music by Harvey Schmidt. It ran until January of 2002, a total of 17,162 performances. Nothing else has ever come close. You probably all know it. Schmidt and Jones used the name adopted for the 1909 London version, *The Fantasticks*.

Pyramus and Thisbe thus lived again, on the stage, in 1909 in London and then in 1960 in New York. While Schmidt and Jones may not have had Pyramus and Thisbe immediately in mind in their off-Broadway telling of the story, it was indeed Rostand's version that led them to it, and it was Rostand's version, which, in French, had transferred from tragedy to comedy the *Romeo and Juliet* take on our old Babylonian story. Two fathers, who forbid the beautiful daughter and the handsome son to see each other, know, in *Les Romanesques* and in *The Fantasticks*, just as Rolfe Humphries had put it in his translation of Ovid, that "fire suppressed burns all the fiercer." In *The Fantasticks* that notion leads to the song, "Never Say No," in which, as in many of the lyrics, you can hear the original Ovidian hexameter, or at least the "loose ten-beat line" version of Ovid's metrical

*See* **METAMORPHOSES**, *page 8*

# *Caxtonians Collect: Susan Levy*

Ninth in a series of interviews with members.

*Interviewed by Kathryn R. J. Tutkus*

I interviewed Susan Levy at the RR Donnelley company library at 77 West Wacker Drive in March before the entire library was packed up ("it took two weeks to pack," she says) and moved to its newest location at 111 South Wacker Drive.

Levy's business card is two-sided; on the RR Donnelley side her title reads Director, Community Relations, and on the RR Donnelley Foundation side it reads Vice President. I was envious that she gets to spend time in the company of a choice selection of the books, magazines, and even scientific journals printed by RR Donnelley for more than one hundred years.

Levy herself collects Chicago printing, especially RR Donnelley. Their Lakeside Classics got Levy into collecting. "Every year since 1903 they've done a small volume of American history. It's the only thing the company actually publishes under its own name and is the holiday gift for employees, customers, etc. In 1985 I got my first volume. Being a librarian [Levy has a Masters of Library Science from the University of Chicago] and historian, I started looking for them and picking them up in bookstores. At that time you could get them in bunches." She started working backward on the less expensive ones. "I got my first big find through a dealer at Printers Row Book Fair. Six months later he wrote that he had found 17-18 of the first 25 and I bought them all. I never regretted it. I found the last one I was missing one night on 57th Street. By the time I had a whole set of Classics, it was probably 1992. My husband keeps asking, 'Why do you buy books that you don't read?' I have to admit I have not read a lot of the Lakeside Classics. Having a book, you never know when it is going to turn up useful."

The thing that got away? "A lot of things got away. I just didn't want to go that high. I've only bought one thing that is really expensive: a three-volume edition of *Moby Dick* illustrated by Rockwell Kent. I'd never spent more than $200 on a book and here this one was $2000. I think it is one of the most beautiful books ever printed here." It was included at the Caxton Club Centennial exhibit. She cannot think of anything she regrets missing, although sometimes if prices are too high, she lets something go. She said "Someone gave me the advice when I started collecting that if you can't walk out of a store…if you can't bear to leave it on the shelf, buy it." She doesn't think of her books as an investment.

There was that Sinclair Lewis novel *Main Street*. "It had Grant Wood illustrations and was a limited edition for sale on ebay. The price wasn't bad, it had some memorabilia with it, but it was in Sweden." She had never purchased anything internationally so she hesitated and when she did bid, it was gone. "I hesitated too long. If I'd jumped faster…"

Levy joined the Caxton Club after she became associated with RR Donnelley. "The Donnelleys were not founding members but joined the Club in 1895 and have been members continuously since then. Working for the Library has afforded a lot of opportunity to participate in events and meet people I otherwise would not. It has been a good experience overall."

Levy stores her books at home. Her dining room has a wall of teak, glass-doored bookcases her husband assembled for her. "It is starting to fill up. Now they've moved into the living room." The upstairs is filled with books but those are everything from paper detective stories to biographies. We do buy many current books and have a hard time parting with them."

Levy has an Access data base which one of her sons created; all her books are recorded about when, where, and cost, and other bibliographic information. Her husband helped her download it to her Palm Pilot. Since it hasn't been updated recently she can print out a list from her Access data base to take to a book fair so she can check and see what she has. Though Levy says her husband is "amenable" to her collecting he does not like to "lose her in a bookstore."

Her favorite reading is mysteries. At the time of this interview her current favorite was Donna Leon "who writes in English but about a detective in the Italian police force." She and her husband took a Donna Leon tour of Venice, where the author lives, and were surprised to find the view from the police station window is exactly as described in the books.

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**NYE**, *from page 3*
spine began to ail, when he wrote about the west. He was a Republican of his time and place, so some of his opinions wouldn't suit us now. He was in favor of circuses, dancing (**"I told my wife I thought I was too brainy to dance. She said she had not noticed this, but observed that I did run to rather too much leg."**), roller skating (**"I made a trip around the rink last August, but was ruled out by the judges for incompetency, and advised to skate among the people who were hostile to the government of the United States, while the proprietors repaired the rink."**) and women's suffrage. He intensely disliked Mormons (against whom the U.S. government was still considering military action), Jay Gould, Dr. Mary Walker, and the American Indian. (He had a deepseated terror that he would come home from his mine to find his family massacred; his son, writing an "autobiography" for his father in 1921, could not explain where this came from.)

If he never produced a full-length work that could compete with Twain's books, Nye was nonetheless a skilled humorist, both caustic and human as he observed humanity's foibles, finding his own as funny as anyone else's. Wyoming's great contribution in an era when every state had its star humorist, his success owed as much to the state of Wisconsin: if not for their bar exams, his eloquence would have been wasted on the smaller (if better-paying) audience in a courtroom.

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*About the author: Just one of those things; Mr. Crawford noticed while he was doing the initial research for this article that he was exactly 3 days short of being 45-½.*

**METAMORPHOSES**, *from page 6*
pattern that Rolfe Humphries adopted.

As you will recall, *The Fantasticks* is not the end of the path outlined above. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* got a fresh new translation from David Slavitt in 1994, and another—although partial—version from Ted Hughes in 1997. Slavitt's version was the basis for another stage adaptation, by Chicago's own Mary Zimmerman for the Lookingglass Theater in 1998, a production that subsequently moved to Broadway where it was nominated for Tony Awards in the Best Play and Best Director categories. In fact, it won the director's award for Northwestern's Prof. Zimmerman. Unfortunately, for the chain of events in this article, while it retold ten of Ovid's tales, Prof. Zimmerman's version did not include the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, and so this little step has really taken us slightly off our path. Back to it.

Now our story has already led us from Babylonia to Rome, from Rome to London, from London to Paris, from Paris back to London, then from London to Texas and on to New York. It has been transformed from a story kept alive in the oral telling, to a codex in Latin, to a printed book, and then to the stage, first in English, then in French, then back to English, both on stage and in print. How and where does it lead to the airwaves, to that television series mentioned earlier? I admit that this hint of the ultimate step in our journey was a red herring. But it strikes me as an amusing finish for our travels.

The television program—which itself has led to progeny of its own—begins with words you may all recognize:

> In the criminal justice system, the people are represented by two separate yet equally important groups: the police, who investigate crimes, and the district attorneys, who prosecute the offenders. These are their stories.

Of course, the television program is "Law and Order." How, you wonder, can I get the Babylonian Pyramus and Thisbe to metamorphose into—excuse me, I mean lead to—"Law and Order"? Remember, that step was something of a red herring. Ovid tells his story through a narrator. Even Shakespeare has a narrator introduce the play-within-the-play Pyramus and Thisbe in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. And a narrator—called The Narrator—tells the story of *The Fantasticks*. "Law and Order" featured a droll and charming portrayal of one of the main characters, Detective Lenny Briscoe. And who played Lenny Briscoe? Jerry Orbach. And who played the droll and charming Narrator in *The Fantasticks* when it opened in New York in 1960, more than 3000 years after Pyramus and Thisbe first fell in love? Jerry Orbach. And that is how, with one giant leap at the end, one thing led to another.

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*This article was adapted from a talk given to a joint meeting of The Fortnightly of Chicago and The Chicago Literary Club.*

*It has been illustrated with photographs by Robert McCamant of books from the Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University Library.*

# THIS FALL…

**SEPTEMBER LUNCHEON:**
On September 9, Caxtonian Dan Crawford will start the Friday luncheon series with a rousing speech, tentatively entitled "Famous Caxtonians You Never Heard Of."

**SEPTEMBER DINNER:**
September 21, Gail Kern Paster, director of the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, will speak on "Finding the the Body in Elizabethan Almanacs." The books provide a rare glimpse of daily habits from long ago.

**OCTOBER LUNCHEON:**
October 14's luncheon speaker will be Saundra Taylor of the Lilly Library, Bloomington, Indiana. She will share the challenges she faces as Manuscript Curator of a world-famous collection.

**OCTOBER DINNER:**
On October 19, New York lawyer and collector David Richards will speak on "Collecting Kipling." Richards is at work on a biography of Kipling, and in the process has amassed the world's largest private Kipling collection.