

**FLOWS THROUGH FLAWS: A  
POLITICAL READING OF OVID'S  
PYRAMUS AND THISBE EPISODE (*MET.*  
4.55-166)**

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## WHY TREAT THESE PASSAGES AS A PAIR?

1. “Cracked Wall Scene” (4.65-92) – *tenuis rima* due to *vitium*
2. “Fractured Pipe Simile” (4.121.24) – *tenue foramen* due to *vitiatus* lead

## SUMMARY

1. In the cracked wall scene, Ovid incorporates Lucretian physics to fashion the movement of the lovers' voices through the wall as a destructive flow.
2. In the fractured pipe simile, Ovid incorporates Lucretian physics to suggest that attempts to contain flows often backfire.
3. Ovid uses technical Vitruvian vocabulary in the two passages to evoke imperial architecture.
4. Political reading: The Ovidian flows represent the the Augustan regime's inability to control the flows of words and water.

## ARGUMENT 1: LUCRETIVS IN OVID'S CRACKED WALL SCENE

fissus erat tenui rima, quam duxerat olim,  
cum fieret, paries domui communis utrique.  
id vitium nulli per saecula longa notatum —  
quid non sentit amor? primi vidistis amantes  
et **vocis** fecistis **iter**, tutaeque per illud  
**murmure blanditiae minimo transire** solebant. *Met.* 4.65-70

Split by a thin crack, which it had received when it was made, was the wall common to each house. This flaw was noted by no one through the long ages—what does love not perceive? First you saw it, lovers, and you made a journey of the voice, and through it your blandishments safe with the smallest murmur were accustomed to go.

## ARGUMENT 1: LUCRETIUS IN OVID'S CRACKED WALL SCENE

conloquium clausis foribus quoque saepe videmus,  
nimirum quia vox per flexa foramina rerum  
incolumis **transire** potest, simulacra renutant *DRN* 4.598-600

We often witness a conversation going on behind closed doors of course because the voice can pass unimpaired through tortuous passages in a substance, while images refuse. (Lucretius Translations by W.H.D. Rouse.)

## ARGUMENT 1: LUCRETIUS IN OVID'S CRACKED WALL SCENE

nam neque conlidi sine inani posse videtur  
quicquam nec frangi nec findi in bina secando  
nec capere umorem neque item manabile frigus  
nec penetralem ignem, quibus omnia conficiuntur. *DRN* 1.532-35

For it is seen that **without void** nothing can be crushed, or broken or split in two by cutting, **nothing can admit liquid** or again percolating cold or penetrating fire, **by which all things are destroyed.**

## ARGUMENT 2: LUCRETIUS IN OVID'S FRACTURED PIPE SIMILE

ut iacuit resupinus humo, cruor emicat alte,  
non aliter quam cum vitiato **fistula** plumbo  
scinditur et tenui stridente foramine longas  
eiaculatur aquas atque ictibus aera **rumpit**. *Met.* 4.121-24

As he lies on his back on the ground, a stream of blood leaps up high, no otherwise than when a water-pipe with faulty lead is split and from a thin, hissing opening, shoots out long streams and rends the air with blows.

## ARGUMENT 2: LUCRETIUS IN OVID'S FRACTURED PIPE SIMILE

adfirmant volgo taciturna silentia **rumpi**,  
chordarumque sonos fieri dulcisque querallas,  
tibia quas fundit digitis pulsate canentum,  
et genus agricolum late sentiscere, quom Pan,  
pineae semiferi capitis velamina quassans,  
unco saepe labro calamos percurrit hiantis,  
**fistula** silvestrem ne cesset fundere musam. *DRN* 4.583-89



## ARGUMENT 2: LUCRETIUS IN OVID'S FRACTURED PIPE SIMILE


quod genus e nostro cum missus corpore sanguis  
**emicat** exultans **alte spargitque cruorem.**

nonne vides etiam quanta vi tigna trabesque  
respuat umor aquae? Nam quo magis ursimus altum  
d directa et magna vi multi pressimus aegre,  
tam cupide sursum revomit magis atque remittit,  
plus ut parte foras emergant exiliantque. *DRN 2.194-200*

Even so when blood is let out from our body, out it spurts, leaping forth on high and sprinkling its red drops. Do you not see also with what force liquid water spits out timbers and beams? For the deeper we have thrust them and pushed them right down, pressing laboriously with full force and many together, the more eagerly does the water vomit them back and shoot them back up, so that they issue forth and leap out more than half their length.



## ARGUMENT 3: OVID'S TECHNICAL VOCABULARY

- combination of *vitium* and *paries*
  - combination of *vitium* and *rima*
  - combination of *vitium*, *rima*, and *paries*
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## ARGUMENT 4: POLITICAL READING

- The passage of the lovers' words through a crack in the wall is a metaphorical flow of the kind that can destroy walls over time.
- The flow of water through an opening in a broken lead pipe represents the fact that attempts to control often backfire.
- Ovid demonstrates the power of love and poetic/political expression, like flowing water, to resist control and lead to change.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

- Ovid follows Lucretius in analogizing the flow of sound to that of water.
- Ovid emphasizes the sound of literal water more than Lucretius does, because he is more interested in having the sound of water represent political expression.
- Ovid's treatment of flows as corrosive in this episode is in line with Pythagoras's treatment of flowing water as an agent of change in *Met.* 15, and Ovid's treatment of time as causing decay at the end of the poem.

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