

*In corpus corpore toto: Love's Merging Bodies in Ovid, Lucretius, and Plato*

Though Ovid presents readers of his *Metamorphoses* with countless episodes of lovers uniting in a temporary physical closeness, some of his characters find themselves so affected by their love that they become permanently and inseparably merged with the ones they desire. These scenarios of “merging bodies” strongly recall Lucretius’ explanations of love in *De Rerum Natura* (IV.1030-1287) and Aristophanes’ speech on love from Plato’s *Symposium* (189c2-193d5). In this paper, I propose to examine specific episodes of merging bodies in the *Metamorphoses* and to explore the verbal and conceptual parallels that intertextually connect these episodes with *De Rerum Natura* and the *Symposium*.

I will focus on Ovid’s stories of Narcissus (III.339-510), Pyramus and Thisbe (IV.55-166), Salmacis and Hermaphroditus (IV.276-388), and Baucis and Philemon (VIII.611-724). Narcissus is merged with the one he loves in that he is in love with himself, even uttering the memorable wish, “o utinam a nostro secedere corpore possem! votum in amante novum, vellem, quod amamus, abesset” (*Met.* III.467-8). Pyramus and Thisbe are merged in death, as their ashes, the remnants of their bodies, are mixed in a funerary urn. Hermaphroditus is unwillingly merged with Salmacis, a nymph who prays to be absorbed into the body of the youth and is granted her wish. Finally, Baucis and Philemon are merged at the end of their lives, as they grow together as trees when metamorphosed at the time of their death.

I will argue that the intertextual connections existing among the writings of Ovid, Lucretius, and Plato in these episodes demonstrate how literary creation, imitation, and preservation can involve a merging of the author’s own words and ideas with those of his predecessors, a metaphorical merging of bodies of work. In this paper, I will reference the work

of a number of scholars who have made similar associations, notably Philip Hardie (1988), whose discussion of Lucretian imagery in Ovid's Narcissus prompted this investigation.

The importance of bodies, both corporeal and poetic, in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* has produced a solid foundation of scholarship on Ovid's *corpora* from which I will draw. Joseph Farrell explains the distinction Ovid makes between these two types of bodies, focusing on the impermanent but necessary function of corporeal bodies to immortal poetic bodies:

Both the bodies of the readers who pronounce the words of the poem, and the bodies and texts of other poets who allow their predecessors to speak intertextually through themselves...stand in relation to the spirit that animates them in the same way as human bodies, which live for a fixed and relatively short span of years, do to the soul that animates them from the time of the body's birth to that of its death, at which time the enduring, imperishable soul passes on to another temporary home. (1999, 132)

Keeping in mind this cooperation between physical and poetic bodies, I will consider how Ovid's stories are intended not to make us think about love as much as to see the fluidity of the physical world he created as a representation of the fluidity of the intellectual, of the world of poetry and literature. "As a metaphor," Stephen Wheeler explains, "metamorphosis gives coherence to change by revealing the mysterious interconnectedness and parity between things" (1999, 15). Ovid's characters, their surroundings, what they metamorphose into, all preserve traces of one another in themselves in a way similar to that in which his poem intertextually preserves the poetic figures and atmosphere and works of his age. The merging-body episodes are a particularly apt metaphor for this, as they present us with distinct forms within the story

blending together into one while Ovid, in his position as storyteller, is blending the text of Lucretius and Plato into his own. Thus, the merged quality of his text itself reminds us not to see anything as isolated and wholly contained in its own form.

#### Works Cited

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