

Flows through Flaws: A Political Reading of Ovid's Pyramus and Thisbe Episode

Ovid draws on Lucretius to emphasize two instances of flowing in his Pyramus and Thisbe episode (*Met.* 4.55-166) and, in so doing, imbues these flows with political meaning. First, Ovid incorporates Lucretian imagery to characterize the movement of voices through a wall's *tenuis rima* ("thin crack") as a metaphorical flow (*Met.* 4.65-92). Second, Ovid reverses this imagery when he analogizes the literal flow of water from a pipe's *tenuis foramen* ("thin opening") to the movement of sound (*Met.* 4.121-24). Although Ovid traces both flows back to similar sources — material flaws, characterized as *vitium* and *vitiatus* — scholars have yet to explore the connection between these two passages. Finally, I argue that Ovid's use of additional Lucretian material, along with his nods to imperial architectural discourse, allow for a political reading of the flows in the episode.

First, Ovid draws on Lucretius's theory of sound to depict the movement of voices through a crack in a wall as a metaphorical flow. While Rosati and others identify Propertian precedents for Ovid's cracked wall scene, none have tried to explain why Ovid spends a full twenty lines describing the movement of voices through the wall, while Propertius uses a maximum of two (*Met.* 4.65-84; Prop 1.16.27-28 and 2.17.16). I suggest that Ovid's attention to this topic stems from his interest in Lucretius, particularly the latter's treatment of sound as an effluence (*DRN* 4.225-29). Just as Lucretius repeatedly employs the verb *transire* to refer to voices moving through openings in walls (e.g., at *DRN* 1.357, 1.489, 4.600, and 4.612), Ovid uses *transire* and *transitus* to discuss how the lovers' murmurings move through the wall (*Met.* 4.70 and 4.77).

Second, whereas Lucretius goes no further than characterizing sound as moving in a flow, Ovid takes the additional step of styling a flow of water as a source of sound. Ovid's fractured water pipe is a metaphorical musical pipe, as scholars such as Shorrock correctly identify. But this metaphor also reverses Lucretius's treatment of musical pipes as metaphorical water pipes (see, for instance, his use of the verb *fundere* to describe the music pouring from panpipes in *DRN* 4.583 and 4.589). Ovid even echoes Lucretius's language; the latter uses the verb *rumpere* to describe music from a pipe penetrating the silence, while the former uses the same verb to describe water from a pipe bursting through the air (*DRN* 4.583 and *Met.* 4.124).

Third, Ovid imports additional Lucretian ideas about destructive forces, which lend a political meaning to the episode. In the cracked wall scene, Ovid dramatizes Lucretius's theory that both empty spaces (*DRN* 1.532-35) and trickling water (*DRN* 4.1286-87) gradually corrode solid substances. Ovid implies that the empty hole in the wall, in combination with the steady trickle of the lovers' words, may gnaw and eat away at the barrier over time, frustrating those who would seek to control the couple. He even seems to draw inspiration from Lucretius's comparison of the gradual growth of love to the erosion of stone by "drops of water falling upon a stone in the long run" (*DRN* 4.1286-87). My reading of the voices in Ovid's Pyramus and Thisbe episode as destabilizing dovetails with Gladhill's interpretation of the voices in Ovid's House of Fama as politically threatening to Jupiter. Likewise, in his fractured pipe simile, Ovid alludes to *DRN* 2.195 (as noted by Hinds), which explains that water only moves upward when compressed or forced downward. In short, Ovid suggests that attempts to control flows, whether of words or of water, ultimately strengthen them.

Fourth, Ovid's cracked wall and fractured pipe evoke Roman infrastructure. The lead of the pipe is an obvious anachronism, but flaws in walls and pipes were also contemporary

concerns. Ovid uses architectural jargon: *Vitium* is a prosaic word (Bömer 1976), and, like Ovid, Vitruvius refers to *vitia* or *rimae* in *parietes* (“walls”) and lead *fistulae* (“pipes”) (e.g., in 6.8, 2.4, 2.8, 7.31, and 8.6). Moreover, in addition to its other meanings, *foramen* also meant water taps, including illicit ones that weaken pipes (Frontin. *Aq.* 129). The incorporation of prosaic Roman vocabulary is a subtle way to connect these walls and pipes to Roman imperial architecture. Ovid marshals Lucretian physics and contemporary architecture to imply that, in time, the flow of words will destroy imperial power, just as flowing water will its architecture.

Bibliography

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