Finite Atoms and Infinite Violence: Lucretius 2.500–507 and Ovid *Met.* 6.576–83

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I argue that Ovid deliberately draws on Lucretius' description of the finitude of atoms at *de Rerum Natura* 2.500–507 within his Philomela narrative at *Met.* 6.576–83. Specific lexical choices that constitute rare or unique usages within the Ovidian passage strengthen the case for intertext. Ovid's use of Lucretius subverts expectations: by drawing on a passage that emphasizes finitude, Ovid underscores the infinite potential within the Philomela narrative for increasing violence, which must be halted at a moment of equilibrium, when Tereus' crime has been answered by that of Procne and Philomela, before it spirals even further out of control.

KEYWORDS

atoms, intertext, Lucretius, Metamorphoses, Ovid, Philomela

This article investigates a lexical connection between Ovid's Philomela narrative in Book 6 of the *Metamorphoses* and Book 2 of Lucretius' *de Rerum Natura*. Previous scholarship that treats both authors focuses on the connections between their Pythagoras figures,[1] the didactic and cosmological elements in each,[2] or other Ovidian works besides the *Metamorphoses* or other sections of the *Metamorphoses* besides Book 6.[3]

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[1] The definitive treatment of Ovid's Pythagoras and his interactions with Lucretius is Segal 2001. See also Hardie 1995.

[2] Myers 1994; Wheeler 1995; Hardie 1988; Hardie 2007, 116–17; Fitzgerald 2013, 229–61; Sommariva 1980; Shulman 1981; Volk 2002, 157–95 *passim*.

[3] Gibson 2022 on the *Ars Amatoria*; Ham 2022 on *Metamorphoses* 5; Krasne 2022 on *Metamorphoses* 13; on Ovid's engagement with philosophy in general, see the entirety of

The intertext under discussion here, however, lends support to O.S. Due's assertion that "The presence of Lucretius in the *Metamorphoses* is not … confined to passages dealing with philosophical problems."[4] Ovid's engagement with a passage of Lucretius in a seemingly incompatible narrative in *Metamorphoses* 6 serves to enrich the stakes of Ovid's characters' actions and foreshadow the increasingly gruesome events to come.

To illustrate the connection, I analyze five words shared by both passages that derive from the same lemmata, occupy the same metrical positioning, or play upon various denotations within the same word. Among them are two difficult cruxes in the Ovidian passage that seem incongruous with the contexts in which they are used; my reading argues simultaneously for the correctness of the terms and their propriety to the narrative with support from the Lucretian intertext. I conclude that Ovid's deliberate invocation of Lucretius' passage, which describes the limits and finiteness of atoms, presages the end of this narrative of ever-increasing violence, a cycle of terrible crime augmenting terrible crime that is stopped only by an unspecified supernatural force that transforms all three into birds. This containment of the violence creates a latter boundary for the narrative and sets the story as one element of a larger progression, indeed one atom of many in the body of the *Metamorphoses*.

The Intertext

I present here both passages that I argue constitute an intertext. In the first, Lucretius argues that atoms necessarily have a finite number of shapes and sizes. As a proof, he provides examples of the best kinds of various entities like colors and songs as objects that cannot be superseded in quality:

> iam tibi **barbaricae vestes** Meliboeaque fulgens (500)
> **purpura** Thessalico concharum tacta colore,
> aurea pavonum ridenti imbuta lepore
> saecla, novo rerum superata colore iacerent

Volk and Williams 2022, from which all three items in this footnote derive. Exceptions to this include detailed commentaries that illustrate connections between Ovid's Philomela episode and Lucretius, but thematic, not linguistic, ones; for example, Rosati 2009, 336 *ad* 6.557–60, links the depiction of Philomela's snake-like mutilated tongue (6.557–60) to Lucretius' mutilated serpent attempting a "reunification" (3.657–59).

[4] Due 1974, 32.

et contemptus odor smyrnae mellisque sapores,
et cycnea mele Phoebeaque daedala chordis (505)
carmina consimili ratione oppressa **silerent**;
namque aliis aliud praestantius exoreretur. (Lucretius 2.500–507)

Now, you see, **foreign clothes** and gleaming Meliboean **purple**, tinged
by the Thessalian color of shells, golden generations of peacocks, imbued
with laughing charm, [those things] would lie defeated by a new color of
things, and the smell of myrrh and the taste of honey would lie spurned,
and the songs of swans and Apollo's intricate **songs** from the lyre's strings
would be silent, suppressed for a similar reason, for one thing after
another would come into being that was more outstanding than the rest.[5]

In the second, the Thracian king Tereus has raped his sister-in-law, the
Athenian princess Philomela, and cut out her tongue so that she cannot tell
anyone what has happened. After a year of subsequent imprisonment,
Philomela weaves a tapestry to express what he did. She sends it via a
messenger to her sister Procne, Tereus' wife, who reads it and falls into
stunned silence upon deciphering its message:

stamina **barbarica** suspendit callida tela
purpureasque notas filis intexuit albis,
indicium sceleris, perfectaque tradidit uni,
utque ferat dominae, gestu rogat. illa rogata
pertulit ad Procnen; nescit quid tradat in illis. (580)
euoluit **uestes** saeui matrona tyranni
germanaeque suae **carmen** miserabile legit
et (mirum potuisse) **silet**. (Ovid *Met.* 6.576–83)

She hung the crafty warp from the **foreign** loom and wove **purple**
markings into the white threads, an indictment of the crime, and she
handed the finished product to a servant and asks with gesturing that she
bring it to her master. So asked, she brought it to Procne; she does not
know what she hands over in it. The wife of the savage tyrant unrolls the
garment and reads the miserable **poem** of her sister and (a marvel she was
able) she **is silent**.

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[5] All translations are my own, with gratitude to an anonymous referee for certain
phrasings.

The collocation of five words or closely-related pairs of words in each passage provides our intertextual link. First, three share metrical similarities. Anaphora of the initial syllables of the noun *purpura* (Lucretius 2.501) and adjective *purpureae* (Ovid *Met.* 6.577) occupy the same line-initial metrical position of their respective lines and describe the decorative colors in a work of weaving. While the color in the Lucretian passage is itself the paragon, in the Ovidian passage it is the weaving of purple marks (*purpureas notas*) into a white background (*filis ... albis*) that causes the purple to stand out.

Both forms of *silere* (*silerent*, Lucretius 2.506; *silet*, Ovid *Met.* 6.583) occur at weak caesurae in their respective lines. Each instance involves silence of differing kinds, both unreal and actual: the impossibility of Apollo's intricate songs falling silent at the appearance of better songs (which do not exist) and the actuality of Procne's stunned silence at the revelation of Philomela's plight. The subject of *silerent* in Lucretius (*carmina*) becomes a verbal object (*carmen ... legit*) and the cause of Procne's silence in Ovid.[6]

The adjective *barbaricus* also appears in the same metrical position in its respective lines in both passages, at the second metron. In Lucretius, this specific version of the adjective (as opposed to, e.g., *barbarus*) appears only here,[7] and in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, this is one of only two appearances.[8] Within Ovid's Philomela narrative, one that extensively treats the civilized–barbarian divide,[9] the adjective *barbarus* appears three times,[10] which casts

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[6] See below for a more in-depth discussion of *carmen* as one of the five points of intertextual connection.

[7] Bailey 1947, *ad loc. Barbarus* appears only once, at 5.36.

[8] The second is at 11.161–63: *calamis agrestibus insonat ille / **barbarico**que Midan aderat nam forte canenti / carmine delenit*. In the rest of Ovid's corpus, *barbaricus* appears at *Heroides* 3.2 and 12.70 and *Ars Amatoria* 1.180, for a total of 5 appearances. By comparison, the adjective *barbarus* appears 55 times in Ovid's corpus, spread relatively thinly across Ovid's early and middle works but concentrated in the exilic poetry (perhaps unsurprisingly, given its subject matter): *Am.* x2, *Her.* x6, *Ars am.* x3, *Rem. am.* x2, *Met.* x9, *Fast.* x1, but *Tr.* x21 and *Pont.* x11. The noun *barbaria* appears once each in the *Amores*, *Ars Amatoria*, and the *Metamorphoses* but 6 times in the *Tristia* and twice in the *Epistulae ex Ponto*.

[9] Gildenhard and Zissos 2007, 21–23.

[10] 6.423, to describe the foreign enemies attacking Athens; 6.515, used by the narrator to denote Tereus; 6.533, used by Philomela in the vocative case to lambast Tereus. I define the boundaries of the narrative as 6.424–674; on the latter bookend, see Libatique 2018, 220 n. 351.

the sole occurrence of *barbaricus* in the narrative into relief and suggests a specific purpose in its use, perhaps the creation of an intertext and a deliberate reference to the adjective's sole use in Lucretius.

The remaining two words, *vestes* and *carmina/carmen*, require deeper explication. First, in Latin literature from at least Ennius and Plautus to Tacitus, the term *vestis* primarily denotes clothing or garments. This definition fits the context of the Lucretian passage, where foreign garments and products dyed in rich colors are offered as the best possible products of their respective kinds. Its use in the Philomela narrative, however, seems not to fit the context; Philomela's tapestry is not necessarily something to be worn. Indeed, by the point at which Ovid uses *vestis* in *Met. 6*, the term has appeared 30 times throughout the *Metamorphoses*,[11] and in almost all instances it denotes a worn garment.[12] One such noteworthy use occurs within the Philomela narrative, exactly 12 lines earlier than the intertext cited above, when Procne dons dark clothing (*induiturque atras vestes*, 6.568) to grieve the sister that she erroneously believes has perished. Ovid thus conditions his reader by 6.581 to expect the denotation of "clothing."

One passage in the *Metamorphoses* that provides several exceptions to the definition of *vestes* as clothing is the weaving of Arachne (6.17, 59, 131). The three uses in this passage take on the transferred sense of *vestes* as a tapestry or, at least, non-sartorial product. Arachne's tapestry functions in many ways as a precursor to Philomela's tapestry less than 500 lines later in the same book. The narratives are linked both thematically and linguistically. With regard to the former, Arachne's tapestry depicts the profligacies of the gods and indicts their abuses of power.[13] Philomela's communicates her rape by Tereus, indicting him in the process, and acts as a substitute for the voice that Tereus stole away from her.[14] This lexical connection, the description of both Arachne's and Philomela's tapestries as *vestes*, is reinforced by the incontrovertible uses of the primary definition of *vestes* as

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[11] Book 1 x4; Book 2 x5; Book 3 x3; Book 4 x6; Book 5 x4; Book 6 x8.

[12] One possible exception is the weaving of the Minyeides (4.395), whose product suddenly sprouts ivy. The text does not make clear what kind of product the sisters are weaving. Their activity is introduced as "untimely Minerva" (*intempestiva Minerva*, 4.33) and broken down into the drawing of wool, spinning of thread, hanging of webs, and orders to slaves (4.34–35). For a definite exception to the definition of *vestes* as clothing, see below on the Arachne narrative.

[13] Johnson 2008, 74–95.

[14] Libatique 2018, 186–94.

clothing in the narrative of Niobe (6.166, 288, 299), which occurs between Arachne's and Philomela's. The former's *vestes* have prepared the audience for the latter's.[15]

So, the term *vestes* denotes two different objects in the Lucretian and Ovidian passages: clothing in Lucretius versus a tapestry in Ovid. The resonance of the term in Ovid is dual. It connects not only Philomela to Arachne but also this passage of the *Metamorphoses* to the one in *de Rerum Natura*, by means of its collocation with four other terms that appear in both. Lucretius' *vestes* themselves are explicitly coded as foreign (*barbaricae vestes*), while Philomela weaves her *vestes* on a foreign loom (*barbarica … tela*). The transferred epithet of sorts strengthens the case for intertext; despite the difference in objects signified by *vestes*, both are undeniably connected by this association with foreignness.

Like *vestes*, *carmen*, "song" or "poem," seems at first glance an inappropriate word choice for the content of the tapestry in the *Metamorphoses*. Its use in Lucretius undeniably denotes music; the *carmina* belong to Apollo (*Phoebea*), the god of music, and they issue from the strings of a musical instrument (*chordis*). The term in the Philomela narrative, however, appears to have caused enough confusion amongst scribes and editors that numerous variants are recorded in the apparatus criticus of Richard Tarrant's Oxford Classical Text; options in 13th-century manuscripts include *crimen*, *casum*, and *fatum*. Tarrant suggests *textum*, while Reeve suggests that the whole verse should perhaps be bracketed.

The confusion may stem from an association of the term *carmen* with musical or metrical contexts, like its use in Lucretius. But Thomas Habinek provides a useful and comprehensive definition of *carmen* and its associated or related terms that can encompass its senses deployed in both passages:

> *Cano* and its relatives *cantus*, *cantio*, *canticum*, *carmen*, and perhaps *occentatio* … describe speech made special through the use of specialized diction, regular meter, musical accompaniment, figures of sound, mythical or religious subject matter, and socially authoritative performance context: in effect, speech that has been ritualized.[16]

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[15] For more on these connections between the Arachne and Philomela episodes, see Libatique 2018, 220–23; Newlands 2018, 160.

[16] Habinek 2005, 61–62. Per Habinek 2005, 274 n. 3, see also Ernout and Mellet 2001, s.v. *carmen*, and Habinek 1998. See also *TLL* s.v. *carmen* (1), which subdivides the uses of *carmen* into three categories: songs produced by human voices, those produced by musical

Habinek offers this definition to contrast such modes of communication with unmarked forms of speech encapsulated in terms like *loquor*, *for*/*adfor*, *queror*, and *voco*. This set of qualifications, then, helps contextualize the use of the term *carmen* for Philomela's message woven into her tapestry. In particular, Philomela's report of Tereus' rape of her constitutes "mythical ... subject matter," inasmuch as her message to Procne, coded into the tapestry, meta-narratively catalyzes the progression of the mythical story towards the ultimate etiology of the swallow, nightingale, and hoopoe. The connection to "religious subject matter" has been explored convincingly by Andrew Feldherr, who argues that this dramatic narrative, when read together with the allusions to Philomela in the Lucretia narrative of Ovid's *Fasti* (2.741*ff.*), causes its audience to question its conceptions of the boundaries between self and other, or *Romanitas* versus alterity, and the means by which one side or the other is bound together: "the various alternatives for construing likeness and difference offered by the representation of myths translate into a kaleidoscope of possible ideological uses for Greek myth at Rome, while potentially interfering with and destabilizing one another."[17] Denoting a communication as a *carmen* implies an elevation above regular communication, whether because of the augmentation of music or because of the depth or significance of its subject matter; while the former is clearly at play in Lucretius, it seems that the latter is at play in Ovid.[18]

The *carmen* on Philomela's tapestry is most likely composed in letters rather than pictures.[19] In Ovid's version of the myth, the markings on the tapestry are described as *notae*, which predominantly denote individual

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instruments (played either solo or as an accompaniment to human voices), and those produced by birds and inanimate objects. Habinek's definition adds necessary shades of meaning to the *TLL*'s broad brush strokes.

[17] Feldherr 2010, 236.

[18] Newlands 2018, 161, also suggests a convincing meta-textual resonance through the use of the term *carmen*: "The word *carmen* actualizes [Philomela's] earlier projected association with poetry through Orpheus (*Met.* 6.547), a sign of the power of her written voice and a link with the *Metamorphoses* itself, which has represented already the story of her rape."

[19] For arguments in favor of words on the tapestry rather than pictures, see Newlands 2018, 160–61; Newlands 2015, 67–68; Segal 1992, 264–67; Curley 2003, 193–95; Spaltenstein 2008, 111; *contra*, Salzman-Mitchell 2005, 144–46; Pavlock 1991, 41. Neither of the cited arguments for pictures is convincing; Salzman-Mitchell bases her argument on editorial conjectures and secondary dictionary definitions, and Pavlock's arguments contravene the text and unsuccessfully appeal to figuration and ambiguity.

letters rather than pictorial representations.[20] The tapestry itself is "un-rolled" (*evolvit*) like a scroll and "read" (*legit*) by Procne. The script on the tapestry, composed by the Athenian Philomela, would be Greek, a language that the barbarian Tereus would not be able to decipher; pictures, on the other hand, would be much easier to recognize and understand. The *carmen* requires careful composition to achieve two goals: deception of Tereus and intelligibility by Procne.

These five terms (*purpura/purpureus*, *silere*, *barbaricus*, *vestis*, and *carmen*) create a connection between Ovid's Philomela narrative and Lucretius' proof of the finitude of atoms. Moreover, the seemingly incongruous uses of *vestes* and *carmen* in the context of the Ovidian passage, though explicable, serve to make the intertext with Lucretius even stronger. Yet while Ovid's engagements with previous authors are often clear in terms of theme or content,[21] the connection between these two passages is obscure. Why would Ovid reference Lucretius' proof in his depiction of Philomela's weaving and Procne's reading? The key, I argue, lies in the comparison between the finite shapes and sizes of atoms and the seemingly infinite potential for increased violence in the Philomela story.

Finite Atoms and Infinite Violence

In the passage at 2.500–507, Lucretius offers examples of paragons whose ontological perfection precludes the possibility of anything better; atoms have a similar ontological perfection that precludes the possibility of larger or different shapes (2.478–521). The passage is a series of present contrary-to-fact apodoses, built on three imperfect subjunctives (*iacerent*, *silerent*, *exoreretur*). The syntax makes it clear that there cannot be anything better than foreign clothing, Meliboean purple, peacocks, the smell of myrrh, the flavor of honey, or the songs of swans and Apollo. The inherent excellence in each of these examples cannot be amplified or increased to a greater magnitude, just as the size and shape of atoms cannot be amplified or increased.

[20] *OLD s.v. nota.* See also Rosati 2009, 339 *ad* 6.577, who offers examples of *notae* construed as "*comunicazione cifrata*" ("encrypted communication") in literary examples like the *Amores* and *Tristia* and in Propertius.

[21] Consider, for example, his compression of Euripides' *Medea* into four lines in *Met.* 7 or his version of Euripides' *Bacchae* in *Met.* 3.

   Such amplification, however, constitutes a theme in Ovid's Philomela
narrative. The rape of a sister-in-law leads to a greater horror, the butchery
of her tongue at the hands of her rapist brother-in-law. That butchery leads
in turn to a still greater horror, the murder of a child. That murder leads still
in turn to an even greater horror, the feeding of that child to his father.[22] The
next step would increase the body count to at least three as Tereus chases
Procne and Philomela to kill them. The vividness of the scene in which
Tereus realizes what has happened (that Procne and Philomela have
murdered Itys and fed Itys to him) is underscored by a shift from
Philomela's actions in the perfect tense (*prosiluit, misit, maluit,* 6.658–59)
to Tereus' actions in the present tense (*repellit, ciet, gestit, flet, sequitur,*
6.661–66). If unchecked, the narrative action will clearly continue and
escalate to a new level of horror: the rape of Philomela leads to the murder
and forced consumption of Itys which, in Tereus' intention, will lead to two
more murders, that of Procne and Philomela. The ever-increasing amplitude
of atrocity threatens to grow indefinitely.

   However, at some point, the cycle must cease; the escalation has to end;
the violence needs to stop growing. In Lucretius' own formulation, without
a finite limit to the shapes and arrangements of atoms, new shapes and
arrangements may arise that are worse than those that came before, causing
a regression:

> cedere item retro possent in deteriores
> omnia sic partis, ut diximus in melioris;
> namque aliis **aliud** retro quoque **taetrius** esset
> naribus auribus atque oculis orisque sapori. (Lucretius 2.508–11)

> In the same way, everything might be able to regress into worse parts, just
> as we have said [that they might be able to go] into better parts; for **one
> thing** after another may come into being even **more foul** than the others
> to our noses and ears and eyes and the taste of our mouth.

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[22] Gildenhard and Zissos 2007, 18–19, note that while this is indeed an amplification of
violence, there is also a certain parity and symmetry in the forcible introduction of an
unwanted body (Itys') into Tereus' body: "According to the somatic economy that governs
the episode, Procne has achieved a fitting *quid pro quo* for the violation of her sister."

The sudden metamorphoses of the three principals into birds, unmotivated as they are by any explicit actor in the narrative,[23] imply that this stage of the story, the fulfillment of *lex talionis* in the murder and forcible feeding of a child to his rapist father, is the equivalent of Meliboean purple or Apollo's songs or, indeed, the atom. There should be no *aliud taetrius*, something more foul — this is as "good" as it gets, or, at least, this is the boundary beyond which the story cannot transgress. If the story were to continue and escalate into Tereus' murders of Philomela and Procne, the narrative would become imbalanced and imply a sense of just vengeance on Tereus' part. However, the story clearly implicates all three actors as guilty of horrific deeds, and by freezing the action in this moment of equilibrium, when Tereus' crime has been answered by that of Procne and Philomela, all three remain both victim and aggressor. As Newlands writes, "the final image of hunt and flight, coupled with the enduring reminders of tragic crime, implicates all three in a seemingly unending cycle of fear and intimidation; as we leave the birds suspended in the air ... so too final moral judgment has to be suspended."[24]

An Epicurean rationalization of Philomela and Procne's forcible feeding of Itys to Tereus might perhaps excuse the violence or at least render it moot; after all, Itys' corpse is no longer Itys but a collection of atoms meant to be repurposed and put to different tasks.[25] As Lucretius himself states, *nil igitur mors est ad nos neque pertinet hilum*, "Therefore, death is nothing to us and does not concern us at all" (3.830). Lucretius' "vivid depiction of violent death and bodily mutilation contribute[s] to the poem's protreptic purpose"[26] by shocking the would-be Epicurean into considering the futility of protecting a flawed and vulnerable body from pain or death

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[23] The moment of transformation is not as drawn out or explicit as other transformations in the *Metamorphoses*, like that of Daphne in Book 1 in which we see her limbs, then torso, then hair, then arms, then feet, then head turn into the analogous parts of a laurel tree (1.548–52); here, the transformation is completed in two words with a shift from the potential subjunctive into the definite indicative: *corpora Cecropidum pennis pendere putares; / pendebant pennis!* "You would think that the bodies of the Athenians were hanging on wings; they *were* hanging on wings!" (6.667–68). See also Gildenhard and Zissos 2007: "At the close of the episode, as the violence threatens to spin more out of control, with Tereus about to kill the sisters, the tableau of escalating payback is frozen through unattributed metamorphosis" (20; see 19–20 for context).

[24] Newlands 2018, 163.

[25] I am indebted to an anonymous referee for this point.

[26] Gale 2018, 64.

and encouraging them to consider their own death as but a transitory event.[27]

This conception of violence and death as rational facts of life, however, lends more strength to the case for an Ovidian–Lucretian intertext. K. Sara Myers convincingly argues that Ovid in various episodes of the *Metamorphoses* engages with Lucretian rationalism by purposefully "remythologizing" that which Lucretius had explained materially and scientifically.[28] Specific examples include Lucretius' depiction of fire and water as elements in battle at 5.396–410 being deliberately echoed in Ovid's Phaethon episode at *Met*. 1.750–2.400; Ovid's Echo and Narcissus of 3.339–510 remythologizing Lucretius' theories of love at 4.29ff.;[29] Boreas' description of lightning and thunder at 6.693–97 responding to Lucretius' description of meteorology at 6.84–422; and the invention of song with the story of Pan and Syrinx at *Met*. 1.682–714 interacting with Lucretius' version at 5.1382–83. This playful layering of the mythological upon the scientific blurs the boundaries between each:

> To play with details of science and veracity in the context of such tales is to test the interplay between the different narrative modes and truth claims of fiction (*fabula*) and philosophy, between fantasy and realism … Ovid lays bare the disjunction between the mythological layer and the underlying scientific "truth" which had been created by the hermeneutic practice of physical allegory.[30]

To such interactions we might connect this intertext in the Philomela narrative. Ovid "remythologizes" Lucretius' scientific rationalization of the finitude of atoms by illustrating its tenets with affective narrative, interpersonal confrontations, and a hard limit on the amount of violence that the narrative contains. Ovid's Philomela narrative, in essence, expands upon the proof in Lucretius, which was already saturated with (mostly) tangible exempla, by adding another example of ontological perfection into the mix: the atomic combination of Philomela and Procne, initiated at this moment of the story when Procne is informed about what Tereus has done to her

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[27] For more on the effects of death and violence in Lucretius, see Gale 2018 *passim*; Segal 1990.

[28] Myers 1994, 55–57.

[29] On which see also Hardie 1988.

[30] Myers 1994, 57.

sister. This reunion creates a sum greater than its parts, a singular force of retribution against Tereus. The joining of Philomela and Procne and the aftermath of their reunion, the forcible feeding of Itys to Tereus and violation of his body in response to Tereus' violation of Philomela's body, is where the augmentation and amplification ends, however, and the finitude of violence in the story must be realized, lest our "final moral judgment"[31] be weighted too heavily in one direction versus another. The limit on the narrative's violence echoes Lucretius' finitude of atoms and ensures that equilibrium is maintained.

This containment of the violence also highlights the episodic nature of the *Metamorphoses*, a 15-book poem composed of a series of individual narratives that create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts, like atoms combining to form bodies and natural features of the earth. In the same way that, in the Lucretian formulation, "larger units (words/natural objects) can be created by means of the combination of small elements (letters/atoms),"[32] even larger units like narratives and poems can be created by means of the combination of words and narratives respectively. These building blocks must necessarily be finite, or else the *Metamorphoses* loses its episodic character.

The intertext explored above also invites the contemporary reader to consider more deeply Ovid's other intertextual engagements with Lucretius within the Philomela narrative. For example, the collocation of *implebo silvas* (6.547) in Philomela's threat against Tereus to reveal what he has done seems to echo Lucretius' *silvas … replebat* (5.992), during Lucretius' discussion of hunting during the Golden Age, as these are the only instances in both texts where a compound of *pleo* governs *silvas* as a direct object.[33] The connection is enhanced when we compare the prior line in Lucretius (*viva videns vivo **sepiliri** **vis**cera **busto***, 5.993) with Tereus' reaction to learning he has eaten Itys (*flet modo **seque** **vo**cat **bustum** miserabile nati*, 6.665), which seems to mimic the alliterative and consonantal pattern in Lucretius. More intertextual connections surely remain to be discovered.[34]

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[31] Newlands 2018, 163, and above, pp. 9–10.

[32] Volk 2002, 86; see also 100–105 for more discussion of Lucretius' equation of letters and atoms.

[33] My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this illuminating point.

[34] A comparison of Ovid *Metamorphoses* 6 with Lucretius' *de Rerum Natura* using the University of Buffalo's *Tesserae* interface (https://tesserae.caset.buffalo.edu) returns 5,455 potential intertextual connections of varying likelihoods.

Ovid deliberately evokes Lucretius' discussion of the finitude of atoms in order to foreshadow the halting of a narrative of escalating violence that threatens to spiral even further out of control. The embedding of the five points of linguistic connection (*barbaricus*, *vestis*, *purpura/purpureus*, *carmen*, and *silere*) into the descriptions of Philomela's weaving and Procne's reception of Philomela's tapestry marks the moment when the cycle of escalating retribution, action in response to action, is catalyzed towards its sudden end in the three avian transformations. It is in this passage that Procne realizes that her sister is alive and has been brutalized by her husband. After this point, the two join together like Epicurean atoms to create a force of retribution to pay Tereus back in kind for his crime. By engaging with Lucretius' depiction of the finite nature of atoms, Ovid emphasizes the potential for infinite violence in the Philomela narrative and the deliberate containment of its violence before it spirals into *aliud taetrius*.[35]

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