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Bodies Atomic: Lucretian Poetics in the Renaissance

By

Jessie Hock

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

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Committee in charge:

Professor Victoria Kahn, Co-Chair  
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Bodies Atomic: Lucretian Poetics in the Renaissance  
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Abstract

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*Bodies Atomic: Lucretian Poetics in the Renaissance* reveals a forgotten atomist genealogy at the heart of the lyric tradition. Today, Lucretius is well known as a source of materialist thinking in the Renaissance, but I argue that Renaissance poets read *De rerum natura* (*DRN*) as a meditation on the imagination, generating a line of atomist thought in and about verse. In Lucretius's versification of the atom – an invisible body situated at the tender intersection of the imaginary and the corporeal – Renaissance readers discovered a poetics that theorized how the resources of verse could elucidate material reality. On the one hand, Lucretian poetics helped them articulate poetry's purchase on material conditions, from patronage networks to politics. On the other, *DRN* asserted an intimate connection between poetry and natural philosophy, offering a vision of how poetry might constitute a natural philosophical method, even at a time when the rise of empirical scientific methodologies downgraded the capacity of the human imagination to conceive of and explain natural phenomena. Looking to *DRN* for theories of the imagination rather than matter, I reconsider what "materialism" means in the context of early modernity, and give a very different answer to the question of what made Lucretius important to the Renaissance.

Moving outwards from a reading of Ovid and Petrarch's rarely acknowledged debt to Lucretius, the four chapters cover a wide range of Renaissance lyric, touching on such important figures as Petrarch, Pierre de Ronsard, Remy Belleau, John Donne, and Margaret Cavendish. The first two chapters argue that sixteenth-century French Pléiade poets recast Petrarchism in Lucretian terms, reimagining the Petrarchan poet's tears and sighs as atoms. Under the influence of Lucretius, Petrarchism became a tool for asserting the bond between poetry and matter, particularly for figuring poetic discourse as politically effective, an important concern for poets writing during the Wars of Religion. Chapter One, "A Replica of Love," looks at how Ronsard's *Sonnets pour Hélène* (1578) and *Discours des misères de ce temps* (1562) meld the tropes of love poetry with historical and political content. The second chapter, "Natural Resources," engages a lesser-known Pléiade poet, Remy Belleau, to argue that Belleau's lapidary collection, the *Pierres précieuses* (1576), adapts Lucretius's account of magnetism to figure poetic innovation as the driving force behind France's consolidation of political might, as well as the revivification of her cultural and natural resources.

The third and fourth chapters turn to seventeenth-century England to demonstrate the persistence of Lucretian poetics in a period more commonly associated with the birth of modern scientific atomism. "All in You Contracted Is," Chapter Three, argues that John Donne uses atomist cosmology to envision and construct the networks in which his poems circulated. Contrary to

common arguments that see in Donne's atomist imagery a hostile reaction to contemporary scientific innovations, I show that atomism is immensely productive for Donne as a way of envisioning literary networks. In my final chapter, "Poems and Fancies," I demonstrate that Margaret Cavendish's early atomist verse develops a Lucretian poetics that leads, in her later natural philosophical writings, to an imaginative epistemology in which fancy and the imagination, not experiment, are the proper tools for natural inquiry. By exposing the philosophical and literary stakes behind Cavendish's feminization of atomist cosmology and imaginative fancy, this chapter directly takes up the issues of gender and agency that run through the first three chapters.

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## Introduction

*Bodies Atomic: Lucretian Poetics in the Renaissance* reveals a forgotten atomist genealogy at the heart of the lyric tradition. Today, the Roman poet Lucretius is well known as a source of materialist thinking in the Renaissance, but I argue that Renaissance poets read Lucretius's versification of Epicurean philosophy, *De rerum natura* (*DRN*), as a meditation on the imagination, generating a line of atomist thought in and about verse. In Lucretius's descriptions of the atom – an invisible body situated at the tender intersection of the imaginary and the corporeal – Renaissance readers discovered a poetics that theorized how the resources of verse could elucidate material reality. On the one hand, Lucretian poetics helped them articulate poetry's purchase on material conditions, from patronage networks to politics. On the other, *DRN* asserted an intimate connection between poetry and natural philosophy, offering a vision of how poetry might constitute a natural philosophical method, even at a time when the rise of empirical scientific methodologies downgraded the capacity of the human imagination to conceive of and explain natural phenomena.

Epicurean philosophy and Lucretian poetry both make invisible particles of matter – atoms – the explanatory function for all natural phenomena. The difference between the two is that Lucretius proposes poetry and its imaginative resources as a solution to the paradox of invisible matter: the metaphors and analogies of poetry visualize the motion of atoms, while the beauty of verse makes abstruse Epicurean doctrine palatable to a wide public.<sup>1</sup> Intellectual and literary historians have long recognized that *DRN* links textuality and cosmology, formalizing the bond between poetry and matter in the repeated analogy of alphabetical letters and atoms.<sup>2</sup> And although the image that expresses poetry's philosophical and political usefulness – honey rimming a cup of wormwood – is equally famous, little work has been done on how emphatically *DRN* links lyric expression to social power, expressing poetry's capacity for worldly influence by emphasizing the seductive and persuasive power of verse.<sup>3</sup> Lucretius exploits atomist tropes and concepts in order to enact poetry's traction in both the natural and the social world. In the Renaissance, *DRN* theorized not just poetry's usefulness for Epicurean discourse and practice, but poetry's power more generally.

Because of the fundamental skepticism of atomist epistemology, Lucretius was able to give a more robust defense of poetry than other classical theorists of poetics influential in the Renaissance (such as Plato, Aristotle, and Horace).<sup>4</sup> Epicurus had argued that material reality is unknowable, and

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<sup>1</sup> The classic study of what is most often called Lucretius's analogical argument is Alessandro Schiesaro, *Simulacrum et imago: gli argomenti analogici nel De rerum natura* (Pisa: Giardini, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> The analogy occurs five times, at *DRN* I.823–29, I.196–98, I.912–14, II.688–90, and II.1013–14.

<sup>3</sup> Although his teacher Epicurus saw no place for verse in the disciplined philosophical life, Lucretius preferred poetic beauty to Epicurean rigor as the best way to encourage the dissemination of Epicurean thought, hoping to seduce readers to Epicureanism with the beauty of his verse. Lucretius writes that his versification of Epicureanism is like honey coating a bitter dose of wormwood: the poetry makes the philosophy palatable (*DRN* I.931–47). When Lucretius describes Venus seducing Mars to bring peace to Rome (*DRN* I.29–43), the same motifs of sweetness and poetic speech return to illustrate poetry's broader persuasive use in the domain of politics.

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle's *Poetics* is more concerned with generic markers than in producing a thorough defense of poetry, while Plato takes a stand against poetry by consigning verse to the category of false speech and kicking the poets out of his *Republic*. Horace takes a stronger view in favor of the didactic uses of poetry, and his “aut prodesse ... aut delectare” in the *Ars poetica* might sound like Lucretius's parable of the honey and the wormwood in *DRN*. However, Horace's claims cannot match the strength of Lucretius's because they lack the epistemological grounding of Lucretius's. In *DRN*, skepticism about the ability of human knowledge to grasp natural phenomena vitiates the possibility of truth claims and valorizes imaginative writing. Horace,

he proposed atoms as the fundamental unit of matter because they were simple enough to be a viable explanatory principle for all of nature's infinite variety. Lucretius, in turn, took this to mean that imaginative approaches to the "real" are more valid than those based on truth claims, because they reflect the fundamental unknowability of all things. Lucretius's arguments for the pre-eminence of the imagination and imaginative genres were universal, but because of *DRN*'s own subject matter they were most potent in the field of natural philosophy. That Lucretius defended poetry in a poem that itself integrated the practices of imagination and natural philosophy only made *DRN* a more powerful model in the Renaissance for thinking about the relation between poetry and natural philosophy.<sup>5</sup>

Looking to *DRN* for theories of the imagination rather than matter opens a new perspective onto the Lucretian poetics of the Renaissance, and allows me to give a very different answer to the question of what made Lucretius important to early modernity. Most modern historians have overlooked the importance of Lucretian poetics for the European Renaissance, focusing instead on the ways *DRN* introduced and propagated materialism. Scholarship has emphasized the impact Lucretius's depiction of atomism had on early modern science and the opposition it faced from Christianity, while literary historians have focused on the literary applications of Lucretian materialism and Epicurean philosophy, be it in a materialist account of renaissance philology and Lucretian reception history (Passannante); an exploration of the relationship of early modern sexuality to philosophical materialism (Goldberg); or, most ambitiously, the argument that the scientific and religious implications of materialism made *DRN* the "toolbox of modernity" (Greenblatt).<sup>6</sup> I, however, look to Lucretius for theories of imagination rather than matter in order to bring out the implications of Renaissance Lucretius that have been neglected in the existing secondary literature, such as the way *DRN* came to activate a series of political and epistemological engagements within the lyric tradition.

This project begins with Petrarch and concludes with Margaret Cavendish. The examples studied here – Petrarch, Pierre de Ronsard, Remy Belleau, John Donne, and Margaret Cavendish – cover a wide range of Renaissance lyric, from Petrarchism to "scientific" poetry to coterie poetry, and are chosen to illustrate a new way of tracking Lucretian influence in the Renaissance. Studies of Renaissance engagements with *DRN* still revolve around specific instances of translation and allusion, but these traditional models come up short in accounting for the poem's pervasive and submerged influence, which is obscured to modern criticism because of the vexed and covert nature

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*Satires, Epistles and Ars Poetica*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926), I.333–4.

<sup>5</sup> Again, in this Lucretius was singular. Aristotle, for example, argued in his *Poetics* that Empedocles was not to be considered a poet because even though he wrote in verse, his topic was natural philosophy. Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), *Poetics*, 1447b17–20.

<sup>6</sup> Gerard Passannante, *The Lucretian Renaissance: Philology and the Afterlife of Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). Jonathan Goldberg, *The Seeds of Things: Theorizing Sexuality and Materiality in Renaissance Representations* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009). Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011). Other important studies on Renaissance Lucretius and literature include Susanna Gambino Longo's, Valentina Proserpi's, and Alison Brown's work on Epicureanism in Italy; Ada Palmer's research on early manuscripts of Lucretius; Catherine Wilson's, Reid Barbour's, and Richard Kroll's work on Epicureanism and materialism in England; Jonathan Kramnick's recent article, "Living with Lucretius;" Gabrielle Starr's work on Margaret Cavendish and Lucretian aesthetics; Jacques Lezra on the event; Natania Meeker's study of materialism and reading in the eighteenth century; Stephen Clucas's work on "poetic atomism" in seventeenth century England; and the excellent *Cambridge Companion to Lucretius*.



of *DRN*'s Renaissance dissemination.<sup>7</sup> I suggest another form of engagement, in which dialogues with Lucretianism did not require an intimate knowledge of or response to *DRN* per se, but constituted a tradition of intertextual Lucretian reading. This reading of Lucretius flourished particularly in Petrarchan love poetry as a result of poets reading and interpreting Petrarch and Petrarchan poetry through a Lucretian lens. We don't know if Petrarch read Lucretius, but I show that later poets who had access to the newly rediscovered text of *DRN* read Petrarch through Lucretius, interpreting Petrarchism as Lucretian and themselves writing Lucretian love poetry in a Petrarchan style. Ronsard and Belleau, for example, developed a shared set of Lucretian tropes over years of reading and responding to each other's work, cultivating their own Lucretian vocabulary on the fertile ground of Petrarchan commonplaces.<sup>8</sup> They demonstrate how Lucretianism could be nurtured in conversation between two Renaissance poets instead of through constant reference to the figure of Lucretius or the text of *DRN*.

This sort of conversation bridges centuries and national traditions, which explains the diversity of my examples. *Bodies Atomic* shows that the conversation about Renaissance Lucretianism does not have to address Lucretian influence and *DRN*'s accessibility to early modern readers, but can instead focus on how Renaissance poets read and responded to each other's work through a Lucretian lens. In this spirit, this project can be understood as a history of reading backwards, as I track how Ronsard and Belleau read Petrarch and each other, how Donne read Ronsard, and Cavendish Donne, all through a Lucretian lens. This may help modern critics understand the broad diffusion of Lucretian ideas in a time when *DRN* itself was criticized, feared, and even banned, and when some of atomism's most attentive students did not know Latin. Cavendish, for example, claimed ignorance of Latin; because no full English translations were in circulation during her lifetime, she would have been unable to read *DRN*.

In taking up Lucretius's influence on the history of Renaissance poetry, this project necessarily engages two important debates in Renaissance literary historiography, the first concerning Petrarchism, the second concerning the relation between early modern literature and science. These two trajectories map onto the fate of the two tropes from *DRN* that speak most directly to Lucretian poetics, the persistent eroticization of poetry and politics, and the repeated analogy between atoms and alphabetical letters. Both shed light on how Lucretian poetics recasts materialism in terms of imaginative literature, and each, in different ways, interrogates how poetry figures in the material world.

Petrarchism is central to the history of Renaissance Lucretianism, a fact that has gone unacknowledged by secondary scholarship.<sup>9</sup> *DRN* has a particular sympathy with love lyric because it draws upon erotic language and love genres to dramatize lyric seduction and political suasion. The poem's forays into the language of pleasure and the genres of love powerfully articulate the

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<sup>7</sup> The important exception is Passannante's treatment of the ways that *DRN* elegantly theorizes its own atomized dissemination and reception. Passannante, *The Lucretian Renaissance*.

<sup>8</sup> Ronsard and Belleau were close friends and poetic interlocutors who dedicated many poems to each other. Belleau also published a commentary of Ronsard's *Second livre des amours* in 1560. *Rémy Belleau, Commentaire au Second Livre des amours de Ronsard*, ed. Marie-Madeleine Fontaine and François Lecercle (Genève: Droz, 1986).

<sup>9</sup> My initial suspicion that love lyric was a significant site for studying the Renaissance reception of Lucretius has been borne out by recent research on early manuscripts of Lucretius. A scholar at Texas A&M, Ada Palmer, has recently begun publishing the research that went into her dissertation on annotations in early modern copies of Lucretius. Palmer found that the most frequently marked passage in the 50 of 52 extant manuscripts of *DRN* is from Book Four's description of love's snares. Ada Palmer, "Reading Lucretius in the Renaissance" (Harvard University, 2009). It thus seems appropriate to study those who in the Renaissance most focused on love – the poets – to deepen a critical appreciation of Renaissance Lucretius.

symbiotic relation between the welfare of the state and the production of poetry. For example, in the hymn to Venus that opens Book One of *DRN*, Lucretius pleads for Venus to intervene with her lover, Mars, and bring peace to Rome:

effice ut interea fera moenera militiai  
per maria ac terras omnis sopita quiescant.  
nam tu sola potes tranquilla pace iuvare  
mortalis, quoniam belli fera moenera Mavors  
armipotens regit, in gremium qui saepe tuum se  
reicit aeterno devictus vulnere amoris,  
atque ita suspiciens tereti cervice reposta  
pascit amore avidos inhians in te, dea, visus,  
eque tuo pendet resupini spiritus ore.  
hunc tu, diva, tuo recubantem corpore sancto  
circumfusa super, suavis ex ore loquellas  
funde petens placidam Romanis, incluta, pacem.<sup>10</sup>

The vignette illustrates the persuasive power of erotic speech by framing the work of politics as a process of seduction. Using “honey” to describe Venus’s speech, Lucretius recalls his description of poetry’s seductive power, while the Venus’s words drop from her sweet lips into Mars’s open, eager mouth emphasizes the transition from visual to verbal seduction. As love’s wound – the province of love poetry – overtakes the warrior, the threat of warfare recedes. Lucretius’s troping of desire had implications for how Renaissance poets could theorize and practice politics in poetry. Alison Brown has written about the Italian reception of Lucretian visions of human society based upon the sections of *DRN* that explicitly address state building.<sup>11</sup> My project demonstrates that, thanks to Lucretian poetics, Renaissance writers could make political interventions using the tropes and language of love poetry.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Titus Carus Lucretius, *Titi Lucreti Cari De rerum natura libri sex*, ed. Cyril Bailey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947), I.29–40. Hereafter *DRN*. All Latin citations to Lucretius are from this edition, cited by book and line numbers. All English translations are from Lucretius, *The Nature of Things*, trans. Alicia Stallings (London: Penguin Classics, 2007). No book or line numbers will be given, because the English book and line numbers match the Latin.

Meanwhile, Holy One, both on dry land and on the deep,  
Make the mad machinery of war drift off to sleep.  
For only you can favour mortal men with peace, since Mars,  
Mighty in Arms, who oversees the wicked work of wars,  
Conquered by Love’s everlasting wound, so often lies  
Upon your lap, and gazing upwards, feasts his greedy eyes  
On love, his mouth agape at you, Famed Goddess, as he tips  
Back his shapely neck, his breath hovering at your lips.  
And as he leans upon your holy body, and you reach  
Your arms around him, Lady, sweet-talk him with honeyed speech,  
Pleading for a quiet peace for Romans ...

Ibid., I.29–43.

<sup>11</sup> Alison Brown, *The Return of Lucretius to Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> Even the passages in *DRN* that give a more demystified account of sex (Book Four, for example, with its brutal description of lust) were important to how Renaissance writers construed the politics of Lucretian

Reading *DRN* as a manifesto for the social potency of poetry, Renaissance poets opened up natural philosophy to the resources of poetic language. We usually think of Lucretius as introducing important elements of what Donne called the “New Science” into Renaissance thought – a vision of a mechanistic universe, an emphasis on matter, the exclusion of God from the control of the cosmos. Classic accounts of poetry in the period, like Nicolson’s classic *Breaking the Circle*, portray poets struggling to cope with and represent the shifting world picture. I show, to the contrary, that Lucretian poetics offered an alternative method for doing natural philosophy, one grounded in poetic fancy rather than ordered experiment. *DRN*’s poetic strategies were relevant to the imaginative epistemology that emerged in Renaissance debates about the nature of cosmology and science in resistance to both Platonism and the empirical and experimental values of early modern science. The same investment in imagination that makes Lucretian poetics valuable for conceptualizing the relation of poetry to networks of power also makes it useful for theorizing the relation of imaginative literature and human fancy to natural enquiry and natural philosophy, a particularly important counter-current to experimentalism’s stress on empirical observation.

In proposing these kinds of readings and this model of Lucretian influence, I add a new set of concerns to the usual accounts of intellectual historians and literary critics, who in my view concentrate too much, even within the field of literary studies, on materialism, the mechanical universe of atomism, and atheism. Take, for example, Stephen Greenblatt’s popularizing account of Lucretius in the Renaissance, *The Swerve*, which emphasizes the starkness of Lucretian materialism – in contrast to Christian spiritualism – in order to show that Lucretian materialism and atheism produce a modern subject grounded in objective scientific values rather than Christian ethics. Because my perspective on Lucretian poetics turns the discussion of Renaissance Lucretius from materialism to poetics and changes how I read the role of Lucretius in early modern poetry and science, my chapter on Cavendish (and, to a certain extent, the chapter on Donne) runs counter to Greenblatt’s narrative. I argue that Lucretian poetics produced an imaginative epistemology that opposed experimental values in favor of a vision of Nature and human reason in which fancy and the imagination, not experiment, were the proper tools for natural inquiry. It is important to remember that in *DRN*, Lucretius – following his teacher, Epicurus – was completely uninterested in giving the single, correct explanation of natural phenomena. Instead, the power of Lucretius’s versification of Epicurean philosophy lies in the multiplication of the imaginative possibilities supplied by the infinite combinations of atoms. Following Lucretius, seventeenth century natural philosophers like Margaret Cavendish eschewed truth claims, instead multiplying imaginative possibilities to produce a fanciful scientific method.

The most significant antecedent for my reading of a Lucretian poetics is the work of Daniel Tiffany, whose *Toy Medium* proposes to study the “transactions of materialism and lyric poetry.”<sup>13</sup> Like Tiffany, I propose a link between poetry and materialist philosophy, but whereas Tiffany undertakes a sweeping “critique of the iconography of materialism,” my argument focuses on the Lucretian impact on renaissance poetic history.<sup>14</sup> Because of this, *Bodies Atomic* is able to give a finely drawn account of Lucretian poetics in the context of Petrarchism and early modern science. Additionally, the work of Gerard Passannante and Jonathan Goldberg has significantly expanded narratives about how Lucretian influence functioned in the Renaissance: Passannante has given us an invaluable study of how *DRN* theorizes its own reception, and Goldberg raises complex points

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poetics. In Chapters One and Two, I show that Ronsard and Belleau used Book Four’s depiction of desire to explain the usefulness of lyric poetry for France’s political stability during the Wars of Religion.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Tiffany, *Toy Medium: Materialism and Modern Lyric* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 4.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

about importance that sex, pleasure, and desire have to Lucretian poetics.<sup>15</sup> Here, too, my work differs in its focus on lyric texts and poetic history. I have reconstructed the line of transmission for early modern Lucretian poetics by tracing the fate of crucial Lucretian tropes from Lucretius to Ovid to Petrarchan poetry and finally into the counter-discourses of early modern science. Elucidating the line of Lucretian poetics has caused my most important departure from Passannante and Goldberg, namely my critical reconsideration of early modern materialism.

While my focus is not congruent with much of the contemporary work on Renaissance Lucretius, my concerns are complementary. Work on materialism in studies of Renaissance Lucretius participates in a contemporary revival of interest in materialism across fields as diverse as philosophy, political science, literature, feminist studies, science studies, classical studies, and intellectual history, which have collectively shown interest in what has been called the “new materialism.”<sup>16</sup> Scholars have turned their attention to questions of the status and agency of objects, the vitalism of matter, the nature of virtuality, and much more.<sup>17</sup> The reasons for this interest are multiple. Within the field of Renaissance literary and cultural studies we might think of it as turn away from traditional accounts of the Renaissance, such as Kristeller’s, which emphasize human singularity and the rise of modern subjectivity; or, in a different vein, as a turn away from a longstanding focus on Platonism in Renaissance studies. My work responds to both of these cruxes, examining how poets theorized poetic agency and poetic power through Lucretian poetics, and focusing on Lucretian instead of Platonic poetics.

Of course, poets have always theorized the effects their poetry has in the world of social relations, and have always queried the relationship between imaginative literature and different discursive modes, such as natural philosophy. To argue that poets did this with Lucretius instead of Plato or Horace would be no more than a minor variation on a common theme. Instead, this project argues that Renaissance Lucretian poetics is interesting for what it tells us about Lucretian discourse in the Renaissance, not least of all the nature of Renaissance materialism. The way Ronsard, Belleau, Donne, and Cavendish manipulated Lucretian poetics in their work changes our understanding of Renaissance Lucretianism, allowing us to see that *DRN* was important not just as the vehicle for atomist philosophy, but as a model of poetics along the lines of Horace’s *Ars poetica* or Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Furthermore, this project demonstrates that Renaissance materialism was far more varied than scholars have previously thought, encompassing not just the sort of clear-cut materialism that prioritizes matter over all things, but also the theorization of the relation between imagination and matter. This imaginative materialism played an important role in early modern Europe both as a tool for articulating poetry’s political traction and as an important counter-discourse to the emerging experimentalism of early modern science. The Lucretian poetics produced by *DRN*’s vision of

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<sup>15</sup> Passannante, *The Lucretian Renaissance*; Goldberg, *The Seeds of Things*.

<sup>16</sup> The term “new materialism” embraces object studies, speculative realism, object oriented ontology, vibrant materialism, posthumanist studies, science studies, feminist materialisms, and more. Crucial theoretical texts include Bill Brown’s *Things*, Karen Barad’s work on quantum materialities, Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter*, Bruno Latour’s *We Have Never Been Modern*, Graham Harmon’s *Tool Being*, Quentin Meillassoux on Mallarmé, Gilles Deleuze’s *Logic of Sense*, Manuel Delanda’s *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*, Elizabeth Grosz’s *Space, Time and Perversion*. In literary studies, particularly in the Renaissance, many have turned to things and the role of objects and material culture in critical constructions of the period, while others, like Goldberg, Passannante, Greenblatt, and Tiffany (among others) focus on philosophical materialism, its presence and implications for the period.

<sup>17</sup> For a survey of this work, see Bruster, Douglas, “The New Materialism in Renaissance Studies,” in *Material Culture and Cultural Materialisms in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. Curtis Perry (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), 225–38. Margreta de Grazia, Maureen Quilligan, and Peter Stallybrass, eds., *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

atoms sinking and swerving in the void was, I suggest, just as important to the Renaissance as atomism's more commonly recognized scientific consequences.

Chapter One  
A Replica of Love: Petrarch and Lucretius in the Poetry of Pierre de Ronsard

O la mere d'Ené, ancestre des Romains,  
La seule volupté des Dieux & des humains,  
Qui peuples l'air, la terre, & la mer navigable,  
Et tout cela qui soubz le ciel habitable:  
Sainte et grande Venus, d'autant que ton amour  
Faict que tous animaux viennent en ce beau jour,  
Les nues & les vens, ô Deesse, te fuyent,  
La campagne en florist, & les undes en rient,  
Et la mer qui par toy douce et calme se rend,  
Luyst dessoubz ta clarté, qui sur elle s'estend  
Car si tost que le ciel le printemps nous rameine  
Et que le doux Zephir d'une amoureuse haleine  
Regaillardist les corps, les oyseaux tout premier  
Annoncent, ô Venus, ton retour coustumier,  
Et sentient ta vertu qui les point les courages:  
Les animaux aussi parmy les gras herbages  
Bondissent à grands saults, & d'amour furieux  
Passent les fiers torrens, pour te suyvre en tous lieux.  
Bref, par fleuves, par mers, & par haultes montagnes,  
Par les boys umbrageux, par les verdes campagnes,  
Poussant dedans les coeurs un amoureux desir,  
Tu maintiens toute espece en eternal plaisir.

(Joachim du Bellay, translation of *De rerum natura* I.1-22)<sup>18</sup>

In 1558, Joachim du Bellay completed the first translation of Lucretius into French, twenty-two lines from the beginning of *DRN*, for a collection of ancient sources to accompany Louis le Roy's translation of Plato's *Symposium*. This translation is one of a set of texts that demonstrates the Pléiade group's wide-ranging engagement with Lucretius, marking not only its first explicit textual manifestation but also its central themes: poetry, desire, and politics.<sup>19</sup> Like many Renaissance readers, the poets of the Pléiade were eager to incorporate *DRN* into their picture of the classical literary world, and translations were one way to introduced themselves to an important classical text

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<sup>18</sup> Joachim du Bellay, *Oeuvres poétiques*, ed. Henri Chamard, vol. 6 (Paris: M. Didier, 1970), pages 403, 405, 425. Du Bellay translated sections of the first twenty two lines of *DRN* at different times; hence the several page numbers in Chamard's edition. I have combined the excerpts to give a coherent sense of du Bellay's translation.

<sup>19</sup> On Lucretius and the Pléiade in general, see Lestringant, Frank, ed., *La renaissance de Lucrèce*, Cahiers Centre V.L. Saulnier (Paris: PUPS, 2010). Albert-Marie Schmidt, *La poésie scientifique en France au XVIe siècle* (Lausanne: Éditions Rencontre, 1970). Simone Fraisse, *L'influence de Lucrèce en France au seizième siècle: une conquête du rationalisme* (Paris: A.G. Nizet, 1962). Isabelle Pantin, *La poésie du ciel en France: dans la seconde moitié du seizième siècle*. (Genève: Droz, 1995). Grahame Castor, *Pléiade Poetics: A Study in Sixteenth-century Thought and Terminology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964). On Lucretius in du Bellay, especially *Regrets* 9 and the *Défense et illustration de la langue française*, see Jonathan Brook Haley, "Atomic Poetry: Materialist Rhythms in Lucretius, Du Bellay, and Mallarmé" (University of California, Irvine, 2007), 128. Jacqueline Vons, "Du Bellay, traducteur-interprète de Lucrèce," in *Presence de Lucrèce: Actes du colloque tenu a Tours (3-5 Decembre 1998)*, 1999, 21–36.

only recently available in full, after more than a millennium of knowing *DRN* only through secondary accounts and brief excerpts.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, as *DRN* circulated, Ronsard and others began to reconstruct the poem's influence, reading familiar classical, medieval, and early Renaissance literature through Lucretian eyes, and identifying – or imagining – traces of Lucretius in those texts.

Most important to the poetic fate of Renaissance Lucretianism were Lucretian readings of Petrarch. Each of the poets in this book read Petrarch, or Petrarchan poetry more generally, through Lucretius, reinforcing or reacting against what they saw as the Lucretian elements in Petrarchism. The intersection of Lucretian poetics and Petrarchism was important to the poetry of Ronsard, the premier poet of the Pléiade. This chapter lays the groundwork for the chapters that follow by describing the intersection of Petrarchism and Lucretian poetics in the Renaissance. An exemplary Renaissance reader of Lucretius, Ronsard demonstrates a deep and sustained engagement with *De rerum natura* (*DRN*), one that holds clues to the poetic reception of Lucretius in the Renaissance more generally. I argue that Ronsard persistently “lucretianizes” Petrarch in his poetry, and in his later poetry, extrapolates the lessons of Lucretian poetics from love genres to his more explicitly historical poetry.

### I. Bodies Atomic

In its first four lines, “Les petitz corps,” the thirty-seventh poem in Ronsard’s *Le Premier livre des amours* (1552), sketches a Lucretian universe:

Les petitz corps, culbutans de travers  
Parmi leur cheute en byaiz vagabonde  
Heurtez ensemble, ont composé le monde,  
S’entracrochans d’acrochements divers.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Renaissance readers only gained access to the entirety of the great Roman poem after its rediscovery by Poggio Bracciolini in 1418. The text entered wide manuscript circulation about 40 years later. On the early textual history of *DRN*, see David Butterfield, *The Early Textual History of Lucretius’ De Rerum Natura* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). On the Renaissance manuscript circulation see Ada Palmer, *Reading Lucretius in the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014). On early printed editions of *DRN* see Cosmo Gordon, *A Bibliography of Lucretius* (London: Hart-Davis, 1962). While this is the received history of *DRN*’s transmission and Renaissance reception, some scholars argue that *DRN* was more available during the medieval period than we think. See G. Gasparotto, “Il Petrarca conosceva direttamente Lucrezio: Le fonti dell’egloga IX, Querulus, del Bucolicum Carmen,” *Rivista dell’Istituto Nazionale di Studi sul Rinascimento*, Atti e Memorie della R. Accademia Patavina di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, già dei Ricovrati, 80 (1968 1967): 312. Rodney Lokaj, “Strepitumque Acherontis Avari. Petrarchan Descent to the Hades of Lucretius,” *Rivista Di Cultura Classica E Medioevale*. 48, no. 2 (2006): 339. On attested traces of Lucretius in the Middle Ages, see Michael Reeve’s chapter in Stuart Gillespie and Philip Hardie, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Ronsard and Belleau would have read Lucretius in one of Lambin’s edition’s of Lucretius (the first was published in 1563 in Paris and Lyon, and reprinted in 1564, 1565, and 1570). Montaigne also owned a Lambin edition. On the presence of Lucretius in Ronsard and Belleau’s libraries see M. Connat, “Mort et testament de Remy Belleau,” *Bibliothèque d’Humanisme et Renaissance* 6 (January 1, 1945): 328–56. M. Morrison, “Another Book from Ronsard’s Library: A Presentation Copy of Lambin’s Lucretius,” *BHR* xxv (1963): 561–66.

<sup>21</sup> Pierre Ronsard, *Les Amours (1552-1584)* (Paris: GF-Flammarion, 1981), 37, 1–4. Hereafter the first book of *Amours* will be referred to as 1552 *Amours*, with poem and line numbers. By the time the 1584 *Oeuvres* came out, Ronsard has revised the poem as follows: “Ces petits corps qui tombent de travers / Par leur descente en biais vagabonde, / Heurtez ensemble ont composé le monde / S’entr’acrochans de liens tous divers.” Pierre

Atoms, “petitz corps,” fall through space. Crashing into one another – ils “[h]eurtez ensemble” – their collisions make the world. The word *composé* links generation to poetic composition, and the fourth line plays on the Lucretian comparison of letters to atoms: the letters of the interlocking word pair “entracrochans d’acrochements” mimic the motion of atoms crossing each other in space.<sup>22</sup> The self-consciousness of the balanced wordplay gestures towards its careful composition, in tension with the declared randomness of the atoms in the void.

Ronsard is not explicating atomist cosmology, but the inside of his own body. “Les petitz corps” uses the metamorphoses of the poet’s emotions under the influence of a beautiful woman to index the creation of poetry. The body’s fragmented emotions are described as atoms, crashing together in the poet’s chest to produce poems.

L’ennuy, le soing, & les pensers ouvers,  
 Chocquans le vain de mon amour profond  
 Ont façonné d’une attache féconde,  
 Dedans mon coeur l’amoureux univiers.

(Ronsard 1552 *Amours* 37, 5-8)<sup>23</sup>

From the first to the second stanzas, the set of elements has changed: if atoms are the building blocks of the atomist cosmos – what Lucretius called *minima* –, these new particles, “l’ennuy, le soing, & les pensers ouvers,” are the *minima* of Renaissance love poetry, and have been from the moment Petrarch declared his poem to be made of “quei sospiri ond’io nudriva ‘l core” in the first of his *Rime*.<sup>24</sup> In Ronsard’s sonnet, these sighs and tears of the Petrarchan tradition are imagined as atoms, and the love the poet feels – “mon amour profond” – is in fact his amorous body, the void in his belly. The atomists argued that there is a *corps* and a *void*; in Ronsard’s sonnet there’s a *void* in the *corps*.<sup>25</sup> Under the sign of Venus, and unified by the *minima* from two different poetic vocabularies, Lucretian, and Petrarchan, Ronsard conflates atomist cosmology, Petrarchan commonplaces, and birth metaphors to depict the making of a poem. Poetic and atomist creation become one.

Ronsard, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Jean Ceard, Daniel Menager, and Michel Simonin (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), vol. I, page 43. Hereafter cited as Ronsard *Oeuvres*, with volume, and page or line numbers.

<sup>22</sup> For Lucretius, atoms and letters are basic elements, *minima* or *elementa*. The analogy of atoms and alphabetical letters appears multiple times in *DRN*. Here is just one example from the Book One: “quin etiam passim nostris in versibus ipsis / multa elementa vides multis communia verbis, / cum tamen inter se versus ac verba necessesit / confiteare et re et sonitu distare sonanti. / tantum elementa queunt permutato ordine solo; / at rerum quae sunt primordia, plura adhibere / possunt unde queant variae res quaeque creari.” *DRN* I.823-9. “Furthermore, all through these very lines of mine, you see / Many letters that are shared by many words – and yet / You must confess that words and liens from this one alphabet / Have sundry sounds and meanings. Letters only have to change / Their order to accomplish all of this – and still the range / Of possibilities with atoms is greater. That is why / They can create the universe’s rich variety.”

<sup>23</sup> In the 1584 edition: “L’ennuy, le soing et les pensers couvers / Tombez espais en m on amour profonde, / Ont acroché d’une agrafe feconde / Dedans mon coeur l’amoureux univiers.” Ronsard *Oeuvres* I, page 43.

<sup>24</sup> “... those sighs with which I nourished my heart.” Francesco Petrarca, *Petrarch’s Lyric Poems: The Rime Sparse and Other Lyrics*, trans. Robert M. Durling (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1976), 1, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Ronsard is preoccupied with the void, though with different results in different poems. In “Les Daimons,” he rejects the idea of the void absolutely, whereas in the sonnets he is often anxious to create empty spaces, which are figured as possibilities and potentialities for the creation of poetry.



“Ces liens d’or,” the sixth *Amour*, elaborates and intensifies “Les petitz corps,” departing from the explicit Lucretian context but dwelling further on the cosmopoetic genesis of love poetry. Again, the transposition of love poetry’s tropes onto atomist physics intensifies Ronsard’s focus on poetic creativity. In this poem, however, Ronsard begins not with the atomist cosmos but Petrarchan commonplaces, as the poet contemplates his lady’s many beauties.

Ces liens d’or, ceste bouche vermeille,  
 Pleine de lis, de roses, & d’oeuilletz,  
 Et ces coraulx chastement vermeilletz,  
 Et ceste joue à l’Aurore pareille:  
 Ces mains, ce col, ce front, & ceste oreille,  
 Et de ce sein les boutons verdeletz  
 Et ces yeulx les astres jumeletz,  
 Qui font trembler les ames de merveille:  
 Feirent nicher Amour dedans mon sein,  
 Qui gros de germe avoit le ventre plein,  
 D’œufz non formez & de glaires nouvelles.  
 Et luy couvant (qui de mon coeur jouit  
 Neuf mois entiers) et un jour m’eclouit  
 Mille amoureux chargez de traits & d’aisles.  
 (Ronsard 1552 *Amours* 6, 1-14)

Here the terms are less explicitly Lucretian, although the lady’s floating features recall the “tresses orines ... doigts rosins, & ces mains ivoyrines” that resembled atoms in “Ces petitz corps.” Here, these elements take on a more aggressive physical presence in this poem, inseminating the poet with love – they “[f]eirent nicher Amour dedans mon sein.”<sup>26</sup>

This “Amour” is no abstract concept, but the actual body of Cupid, heavy with eggs. Here the poem splits into a series of ambiguities. Both Cupid and Ronsard are pregnant, Cupid with his *œufs*, Ronsard with Cupid. It is Ronsard who broods over Cupid for nine months like a hen (“et luy couvant”). Finally, Ronsard gives birth, not to Cupid, but to the product of Cupid’s “œufs non formez & ... glaires nouvelles,” which emerge as “mille amoureux chargez de traits et d’aisles.” Love, the poem seems to say, means being pregnant with Cupid, who takes the opportunity to “jouit ... de [s]on coeur” while Ronsard brings him to term. This *jouissance* proves to be fertile: born into a book of *Amours*, the final *amoureux* are cupids, but, more importantly, little poems.

Ronsard’s depiction of poetic creativity in these sonnets is both conventional and unusual. Conventional because it drinks deeply from the fount of inspiration that was Renaissance Petrarchism, yet unusual for its unmistakable use of atomist cosmological imagery. Ronsard was innovative for pairing the two so explicitly – to my knowledge, no poets had yet done quite the same

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<sup>26</sup> This parallels another of the *Amours*, when Jove inseminates Juno: “Or que Juppïn epoint de sa semence, / Hume à longz traitz les feux accoustumez, / Et que du chault de ses rains allumez, / L’humide sein de Junon ensemence” (Ronsard 1552 *Amours* 127, 1-4). Ronsard here uses “traitz” in a secondary meaning of the word “draught,” but nonetheless evokes the Petrarchan “trait,” a beautiful feature that doubles as an arrow. Although they describe quite different scenarios, both the Jove episode and “Ces liens d’or” are working in the same conceptual universe. The Jove poem evokes the litany of mythic inseminations and rapes that abound in classical mythology and inform so many Renaissance love poems. “Ces liens d’or,” like the Jove poem and the whole tradition of mythological rape, emphasizes physical transformation, insemination, and pregnancy. In Ronsard’s sonnets, the mythological tradition has much in common with the cosmographic.

thing, nor would many follow Ronsard's example very closely – yet when Ronsard Lucretianized Petrarch, he was in fact making explicit Lucretian themes that were embedded in Petrarch to begin with. In the following pages, I will work through the literary history that could have brought Lucretius to bear so forcefully in the love poetry of Petrarch, who himself was unlikely to have had access to the full text of Lucretius.

Ronsard's atomist imagery magnifies the way Petrarch's *Rime* stages poetic creation with bodily fragmentation. Petrarch's adaptation of Ovid's Actaeon myth, *Rime* 23, was important to the Renaissance's conception of poetic creativity, because it made Actaeon's metamorphoses into a dramatization of tortured speech. The tale of Actaeon tells of a young man who is transformed into a stag and destroyed by his own hounds as punishment for seeing Diana at her bath.<sup>27</sup> Like Ovid's, Petrarch's text expresses Actaeon's – now the poet's – transformation as a function of sight, in which the forbidden vision of the lady wrenches her hapless watcher from the image of the self that anchors his identity.<sup>28</sup> In Petrarch's version, Actaeon is a figure for the poet, who is the object of the lady's aggression. When the lady sees the poet seeing her, she flings water at him:

et per farne vendetta o per celarse  
l'acqua nel viso co le man mi sparse.  
Vero dirò; forse e' parrà menzogna:  
ch'ì senti' trarmi de la propria imago  
et in un cervo solitario et vago  
di selva in selva ratto mi trasformo,  
et ancor de' miei can' fuggo lo stormo.<sup>29</sup>

The water will transform him into a stag, but the poet's first impression is of being taken out of his own image. In Diana, he sees a vision of himself, a hunter,<sup>30</sup> and this quasi-self transforms his self-

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<sup>27</sup> The Actaeon myth has many ancient sources and iterations. In lost works by Hesiod, Stesichorus, and Acusilaus, Actaeon is punished by Zeus for desiring to wed Semele. Phrynichus, Iophon, Cleophon and Aeschylus wrote tragedies on the subject that were subsequently lost. The only remaining literary version from the classical period is Euripides' *Bacchae*, in which Actaeon is killed for boasting that he is a better hunter than Artemis (lines 337-41). Apollodorus (3.4.4), Pausanias (9.2.3), and Hyginus (180.1-3) all describe Actaeon catching sight of Artemis/Diana as she bathed, as does Callimachus in the *Bath of Pallas* (lines 107-18). Diodorus Siculus 4.81.4 and Nonnus *Dionysiaca* 5.432-37, 44.278-45.3 give versions in which Actaeon attempts to rape or marry Artemis. Despite the many and varied ancient accounts of the episode, Leonard Barkan is right that “[w]hile Ovid's account of the meeting between Diana and Actaeon is by no means the first or even the most typical classical version of the story, it is the version that signals the entrance of the myth on the main stage of cultural history.” Leonard Barkan, “Diana and Actaeon: The Myth as Synthesis,” *English Literary Renaissance* 10, no. 3 (September 1, 1980): 318–319.

<sup>28</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum sensitively addresses these difficult questions of identity and metamorphosis in the medieval context in her book *Metamorphosis and Identity*. Discussing Lycaon's transformation into a wolf, she emphasizes that the character of the wolf is continuous with that of the cruel, already-beastly man: “The greed he carries into wolfhood was his already by custom and practice ... Lycaon's visage is an *imago*, a representation or similitude, of savagery; the term suggests both that the *vultus* portrays or bodies forth the inner self and that this wolf-person as *imago* is *imago* not of humanity's proper exemplar, the gods, but of a corruption, a bestiality, that is what Lycaon is. Lycaon the wolf is “same ... same ... same ....” Caroline Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity* (New York: Zone Books, 2001), 169–70.

<sup>29</sup> Petrarca, *Petrarch's Lyric Poems*, 23, lines 154–60. “... and, to take revenge or to hide herself, sprinkled water in my face with her hand. I shall speak the truth, perhaps it will appear a lie, for I felt myself drawn from my own image and into a solitary wandering stag from wood to wood quickly I am transformed and still I flee the belling of my hounds.”

image, or *propria imago*.<sup>31</sup> Actaeon *gains* self-consciousness when he sees Diana, an acquisition dramatized by his metamorphosis, which produces a gap between his identity (man) and his form (beast). This moment is thus tied to identity.<sup>32</sup>

The drama of recognition is not restricted to the Actaeon myth: the same play of self-consciousness and the sacred is present in the myth of Narcissus. Whereas Actaeon is punished for viewing divinity, Narcissus is punished for casting the same voyeuristic and divinizing gaze upon himself. Both myths (Actaeon indirectly) deal with identity and the confrontation with a spectral self: “this holy vision is a vision of the self.”<sup>33</sup>

Petrarch’s poem describes the immense pressure Actaeon’s seeing and metamorphosis put on speech. He will describe what happened, but he knows it will seem untrue (“Vero dirò; forse e’ parrà menzogna”). The trials of language are Petrarch’s specific focus: if the Ovidian myth is a story of identity and prohibition, Petrarch adds a dramatization of poetic identity and poetic creation to the thematic of metamorphoses. Actaeon’s pains, torments, and metamorphoses must be hashed out in verse. In Ovid, when Actaeon barges into the grove, Diana scatters water on his face and condemns him to silence:

...hausit aquas uultumque uirilem  
perfundit spargensque comas ultricibus undis  
addidit haec cladis praenuntia verba futurae:  
‘nunc tibi me posito uisam uelamine narres,  
sit poteris narrare, licet!’<sup>34</sup>

The goddess taunts him to a speech she well knows is impossible, but although her scattered water drops disperse the poet’s words, those words nonetheless become his love lyrics.<sup>35</sup> Although Petrarch’s *Rime* 23 does not include Diana’s paradoxical prohibition from and exhortation to speech,

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<sup>30</sup> Nancy J. Vickers, “Diana Described: Scattered Woman and Scattered Rhyme,” *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 2 (1981): 21.

<sup>31</sup> Barkan mentions an exceptional source on the role of image in the Actaeon myth. “Apollodorus (probably first or second century A.D.) offers a different pair of explanations: competition for Semele and the voyeuristic scene at the bath. To these two kinds of blasphemy, Apollodorus adds a remarkable detail: Actaeon’s dogs were so heartbroken by the loss of their master that the centaur Chiron was obliged to make an image (*eidôlon*) of the youth to pacify them.” Barkan, “Diana and Actaeon,” 325. Barkan is citing Apollodorus, *The Library*, 111.4, 4. This example is wonderful because it demonstrates the persistent importance of the *eidôlon* at the heart of the Actaeon myth, which manifests itself in the most unlikely ways. When Actaeon metamorphoses into a beast, he loses his human *eidôlon*, speech, and nature. Ironically, his dogs – the very beasts that unknowingly tear him to shreds – seem to acquire a human quality, the longing for the beloved image. The dogs, in a very human sense, accede to human vision, which is a memory vision. Like heartbroken lovers, their anguish requires an image of their beloved lost master.

<sup>32</sup> Barkan argues that as “Actaeon faces his own dogs unable to prove his own identity, we begin to see that the secret he witnessed when he saw Diana bathing is the secret of self-consciousness. Metamorphosis becomes a means of creating self-consciousness because it creates a tension between identity and form, and through this tension the individual is compelled to look in the mirror” *Ibid.*, 322.

<sup>33</sup> See *Ibid.*, 321.

<sup>34</sup> Ovid, *P. Ovidi Nasonis Metamorphoses*, ed. R. J. Tarrant (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), III.189–93. “... Diana took / and flung the water, and his face was drenched. / And as she cast the water of revenge / that soaked the young man’s hair, the goddess said, / in words that were an ominous presage: / ‘Now go, feel free to say that you have seen / the goddess without veils – if you can speak.’” Ovid, *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993), III.189–93.

<sup>35</sup> See Vickers, “Diana Described,” 269.

the entire poem is what that speech would be. Telling the story from Actaeon's side, speaking in Actaeon's voice, is what so many Renaissance poets do in their love poetry when they describe their *innamoramento*. The project of writing Petrarchan love poetry in the Renaissance can be broadly construed as a continued effort to break Diana's prohibition against speech. The moment of seeing the lady is the paradigmatic moment of Petrarchan love poetry, because the *innamoramento* that stuns the poet into love is also that which bids him speak. The lover's look and the lady's visual retort that fix the whole epistemology of love on the image and the glance derive from the movement of sight and violence between Actaeon and Diana. The look disperses the poet; from a reasonable man he becomes an uncontrollable body, a collection of scattered limbs, and only afterwards the writer of scattered rhymes. All this is to say that the mutual constitution of seeing and bodily disintegration in Ovid is the pre-condition, in Petrarch, for the founding of poetic identity.<sup>36</sup>

Lucretian vision theory grounds both Ovid's and Petrarch's focus on seeing, and Lucretian materialism is the base note to both poets' songs of bodily fragmentation. In Book Four of *DRN*, having described how mind and body are formed from atoms, Lucretius turns to images, the "rind" (*cortex*) or "films" (*membranae*) of atoms that stream from bodies.

dico igitur rerum effigias tenuisque figuras  
 mittier ab rebus summo de corpore rerum,  
 quae quasi membranae vel cortex moninitandast,  
 quod speciem ac formam similem gerit eius imago  
 cuiusque cluet de corpore fusa vagari.  
 (*DRN* IV.42–52)<sup>37</sup>

Just like bodies, images are material; they form from the thin films of atoms that peel off the surfaces of objects. Sight occurs when these rinds hit the eye; what we would call an intromission theory of vision, because it involves objects entering the eye, rather than the eye beaming sight outwards (extramission, the theory propounded by Plato).<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Vickers lays the groundwork for this conclusion by tracking the sequence of the word *spargere*, "to scatter," which accompanies both vision and physical disintegration. "[spargere] appears in some form (most frequently that of the past-participial adjective "sparso, -i, -a, -e") forty-three times; nineteen apply specifically to Laura's body and its emanations (the light from her eyes, the generative capacity of her footsteps) and thirteen to the speaker's mental state and its expression (tears, voice, rhymes, sighs, thoughts, praises, prayers, hopes)." *Ibid.*, 273–4. Her conclusion that "[t]he uses of spargere ... markedly gravitate toward 'I' and Laura" reinforces her point about Petrarchan identity, that diffusion and fragmentation are associated with the poetic "I." *Ibid.*, 274. The Italian "sparsi" is from the Latin "spargere," to sprinkle, to scatter. Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, "Spargo," *A Latin Dictionary* (Lewis and Short, n.d.). Spargo and its inflected forms appears numerous times in *DRN*, generally to describe liquids: tears, drops of blood, the foam of the waves carrying Venus. It also describes the dispersal and motion of atoms, first scent atoms, then, in the final book, sight atoms. "Principio omnibus ab rebus, quas cumque videmus, / perpetuo fluere ac mitti spargique necessest / corpora quae feriant oculos visumque lacesant." *DRN* VI.921-3. "In the first place from all things whatsoever which we see there must incessantly stream and be discharged and scattered abroad such bodies as strike the eyes and provoke vision."

<sup>37</sup> "Now there's another crucial fact I must explain – so mark / My words – that there are images of things – a skin, or *bark*, / As we call it, shed from objects, since it bears the same / Form and likeness of whatever thing from which it came."

<sup>38</sup> See *Timaeus* 45c. Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 1997).

For Lucretius, images exist at the border of materiality and immateriality, illusion and reality. Because they are generated by the form of the objects from which they flow, image atoms are secondary and not as massy as those that constitute bones or flesh. Thus the image atom hovers between the material and the immaterial. Lucretius’s account of how vision transmits the presence of object to eye through atom-films also explains how images can separate from bodies and deceive people. Flitting through the air, Lucretian images, what he calls *simulacra*, are capable of combining to form new images that don’t reflect a real object. Sometimes they are generated from thin air rather than from things. Incredibly fine, they are liable to infiltrate and trick the mind. Lucretius explains the deceptive potential of images by turning to an example similarly situated on the border between bodies and the imagination: sexual desire.

tum quibus aetatis freta primitus insinuatur  
 semen, ubi ipsa dies membris matura creavit,  
 conveniunt *simulacra* foris e corpore quoque  
 nuntia praeclari voltus pulchrique coloris,  
 qui ciet inritans loca turgida semine multo,  
 ut quasi transactis saepe omnibu’ rebu’ profandant  
 fluminis ingentis fluctus vestemque cruentent.  
 (DRN IV.1030–36)<sup>39</sup>

Lucretius emphasizes how detached from bodies these images are – it’s not just that this fantasy is an image-film, a *simulacrum*, but that an unidentified, even imaginary body generated it. This is the “some random body or other” (*e corpore quoque*). Nevertheless, or perhaps because of it, *simulacra* are able to stir the sleeping body with desire. As the passage so provocatively describes, erotic fantasies can produce a very real physical response. Lucretius presents desire as a category mistake, a confusion of material and immaterial. Desire feeds from the mistake of falling in love with images but actually making love to bodies.

Through Ovid, Lucretian images and atomist ideas entered literary circulation in the guise of mythical scenarios. Ovid’s myth of Narcissus, for example, adapts these passages on love from Lucretius’ Book Four, exploiting the underlying atomist principles of vision theory to dramatize his own interest in identity and transformation. In the passage above, Lucretius evocatively describes sexual desire as being like trying to quench thirst in a dream.

Ut bibere in somnis sitiens quom quaerit et umor  
 non datur, ardorem qui membris stinguere possit,  
 sed laticum simulacra petit frustra laborat  
 in medioque sitit torrenti flumine potans,  
 sic in amore Venus simulacris ludit amantis.  
 (DRN IV.1097–1101)<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> “For those in adolescence’s riptide, when Manhood has made / Seed in their limbs for the first time – then images invade, / Images of some random body or other – bringing news / Of a lovely face and radiant complexion’s rosy hues. / This irritates and goads the organs, swollen hard with seed – / Such that frequently, as if he’d really done the deed, / A youth floods forth a gush of semen so he stains the sheet.”

<sup>40</sup> “As in a dream, when a man drinks, trying to allay / His thirst, but gets no real liquid to douse his body’s fire, / And struggles pointlessly after mere images of water, / And though he gulps and gulps from a gushing stream, his throat is dry, / So Venus teases with images ...”

In Ovid's myth, Narcissus is a man such as this, who "seeks the idols of the waters and toils in vain." He is the lover par excellence: he would drink from the fountain of love but cannot catch up its waters in his hands. His desire is fueled by images and is thus insatiable. In Ovid's tale, the beautiful boy, tired from the chase, lies down by a fountain:

hic puer et studio uenandi lassus et aestu  
procubuit faciemque loci fontemque secutus;  
dumque sitim sedare cupit, sitis altera creuit,  
dumque bibit, uisae correptus imagine formae  
spem sine corpore amat, corpus putat esse quod [umbra] est.<sup>41</sup>

Catching sight of himself in the pool, Narcissus falls in love with the watery figure. He mistakes his own reflection (which Ovid calls an *umbra imaginis*, a shadow of an image) for the real body of another person and so is inflamed with love.

quid uideat nescit, sed quod uidet, uritur illo  
atque oculos idem qui decipit incitat error.  
*credule, quid frustra simulacra fugacia captas?*  
quod petis est nusquam; quod amas, auertere, perdes.  
ista repercussae quam cernis *imaginis umbra* est.  
nil habet ista sui; tecum uenitque manetque,  
tecum discedet – si tu discedere possis<sup>42</sup>

As in Lucretius, the lover mistakes an image for a real body. "He loves a bodiless dream. He thinks that it is a body, that is only a shadow." Narcissus is not a story only about solipsistic love, but *Lucretian* love. Narcissus' love isn't superficial because it is love of an image – even if it is his own – but because all love is superficial and based on images.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ovid, *P. Ovidi Nasonis Metamorphoses*, III.413–417. Tarrant renders the crucial "umbra" of the last line as "unda," but acknowledges that the Parisinus, Florentinus, and Laurentianus codices have "umbra." "It's here that, weary from the heat, the chase, / drawn by the beauty of the pool, the place, / face down, Narcissus lies. But while he tries / to quench one thirst, he feels another rise: / he drinks, but he is stricken by the sight / he sees – the image in the pool. He dreams / upon a love that's bodiless: now he / believes that what is but a shade must be a body." Ovid, *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, III.413–417.

<sup>42</sup> Ovid, *P. Ovidi Nasonis Metamorphoses*, III.430–436. Emphasis mine. "He knows not what he sees, but what he sees / invites him. Even as the pool deceives / his eyes, it tempts them with delights. But why, / o foolish boy, do you persist? Why try / to grip an image? He does not exist – / the one you love and long for. If you turn / away, he'll fade; the face that you discern / I sbut a shadow, your reflected form. / That shape has nothing of its own: it comes / with you, with you it stays; it will retreat / when you have gone – if you can ever leave!" Ovid, *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, III.430–436.

<sup>43</sup> For a similar point see Philip Hardie, "Lucretius and Later Latin Literature in Antiquity" in Gillespie and Hardie, *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius*, 120. Hardie emphasizes the importance of "ocular illusion" in the Lucretian text's explanation of sensual love, and locates the same accent in Ovid's myths, arguing that Narcissus is a purposeful representation of the lessons of Lucretian verse. "Lucretius' powerful analysis and evocation of the illusions of sense perception and desire in *DRN* 4 are nowhere put to more effective use than in Ovid's fable of the credulous boy Narcissus, duped both by aural and ocular illusions, and unable to cure himself of a desire incapable of satisfaction because it is aroused by sense perceptions that do not emanate from a substantial other. 'Credulous boy, why do you grasp in vain at fleeting phantoms?' asks the narrator (*Met.* 3.432), adopting the tone of the Lucretian didactic voice, but incapable of being heard by his

While the myth of Actaeon does not directly echo Lucretius, its way of imagining seeing draws upon the same dynamics of Lucretian vision so obviously adopted in the Narcissus myth. Both Actaeon and Narcissus, young men tired from the chase, catch sight of a prohibited vision. In each instance, the vision is one of the self – in Actaeon’s case, of self as the idealized hunter, Diana. In both, the encounter with the self/divinity is visual and governed by a single glance. Lucretius calls an image a *species*, which means both an appearance and, in a rare and predominantly Lucretian usage, a look, seeing, or sight.<sup>44</sup> Actaeon stumbles upon Diana in a grove suffused in sunlight, and the ‘sight’ that he catches of Diana, like the glimpse Narcissus catches of himself, is described as a Lucretian image – a *species* – a look based on a material theory of vision and an underlying atomic theory of nature. The water that Diana splashes at Actaeon makes the underlying atomist theory of vision explicit: the droplets she flings at Actaeon make explicit the materiality of the initial look. Thus, Actaeon’s *physical* fragmentation is a further manifestation of *visual* interaction.

This brings us back to Ronsard, who overlays an explicit Lucretian cosmology onto Petrarchan dynamics of sight and fragmentation, which, thanks to Ovid, were already imbued with Lucretian poetry and ideas. When Ronsard re-Lucretianizes Petrarch, he is also following Petrarch by intensifying poetic voice through a paradoxical emphasis on the fragmented body. Ronsard’s version of the Actaeon myth, Sonnet 120 of *Le Premier livre des amours*, leaves out the encounter with Diana altogether, instead focusing on Actaeon as lover, intensifying the poetic solipsism already found in Petrarch.

Franc de raison, esclave de fureur,  
 Je vay chassant une Fere sauvage,  
 Or’ sur un mont, or’ le long d’un rivage,  
 Or’ dans le bois de jeunesse et d’erreur.  
 J’ay pour ma lesse un long trait de malheur,  
 J’ay pour limier un violent courage:  
 J’ay pour mes chiens, l’ardeur, et le jeune âge,  
 Et pour piqueurs, l’esperoir et la douleur.  
 Mais eux voyans, que plus elle est chassee,  
 Plus elle fuit d’une course eslancee,  
 Quittent leur proye: et retournent vers moy  
 De ma chair propre osant bien leur repaistre.  
 C’est grand pitié (à mon dam je le voy)  
 Quand les valets commandent à leur maistre.  
 (Ronsard *Oeuvres*, I.120, 1-14)

The poem allegorizes a young man who, wildly in love, abandons all reason and gives himself up to the passions. He is not transformed into a beast and destroyed by his dogs as punishment for seeing the goddess. Rather, he is a maddened beast from the outset, driven by his amorous furor to the hunt (the pursuit of the beloved) and in the end destroyed by his own unmanageable emotions – *l’ardeur, le jeune âge* – that turn on him when they despair of catching their prey.

His ardor, however, fails to entrap the lady, and the rampant emotions turn against him to cause his own destruction and despair. We see this transition in the poem’s pronouns, which turn inexorably from the poet’s *je*, which, as the subject, controls the action of the first two stanzas, to

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fictional character. The whole of the Echo and Narcissus story may be read as a narrativisation of Lucretius’ teaching on the subjects of sensory illusion and desire.”

<sup>44</sup> Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, “Species,” *A Latin Dictionary* (Lewis and Short, n.d.).

the *eux* and *elle* of the third stanza, the objective *moi* that ends the third stanza, and, finally, the dehumanized object *ma chair* that starts the fourth. From focusing on an exterior object, the poet turns (grammatically as well as physically) in on himself. The heightened focus on self leads Ronsard to leave the lady out entirely; her only appearance in the poem is in the second-to-last line, as a pun: “à mon dam je le voy.” Ronsard’s damnation is his lady, his *dame*. We might even hear in this line a reference to Actaeon’s glimpse of Diana, Petrarch’s visions of Laura, with the Lucretian *species* lurking in both; a few changes and the phrase would read “je voy ma dame.”

Ronsard’s Lucretian sonnets move Actaeon’s metamorphoses inside the body, where his internal physical dynamics index the creation of poetry. In sonnet 9 of *Le Premier livre des amours*, “Le plus toffu d’un solitaire boys,” the poet’s body becomes the site of radical material transformations that generate poetry. These metamorphoses occur at the juncture of inside and outside, in the interplay of poetic and amorous spaces, the space of the verse and the space inside the breast. Ronsard describes his solitary wanderings through the woods, whose savage desolation is presented as a soothing counterpart to the stress of human society. In the course of the poem, however, the wooded landscape is compared to the topography of the poet’s innermost self, and its savage beauty is linked to the confined charm of a painted miniature.

Le plus toffu d’un solitaire boys,  
 Le plus aigu d’une roche sauvage,  
 Le plus desert d’un séparé rivage,  
 Et la frayeur des antres les plus coys :  
 Soulagent tant les soupirs de ma voix,  
 Qu’au seul escart de leur secret ombrage,  
 Je sens garir une amoureuse rage,  
 Qui me raffolle au plus verd de mes moys.  
 Là, renversé dessus leur face dure,  
 Hors de mon sein je tire une peinture  
 De tous mes maux le seul allègement,  
 Dont les beaultez par Denisonc encloses,  
 Me font sentir mille metamorphoses  
 Tout en un coup, d’un regard seulement.  
 (Ronsard *Oeuvres* I.9, 1-14)

The repetition of *plus* marks the savage inhospitality and radical distance of the natural landscape from the social. It is as far away as possible from human society. Only this radical otherness can soothe the poet’s lovelorn agony and take him outside of his pain. The *plus*, however, marks the poet as well as the natural world. An “amoureuse rage,” he writes, “me raffolle au plus verd de mes moys.” Using *plus* to describe his *moys*, the poet equates natural spaces – antres, rivages, boys – with himself, thereby spatializing his body and identity: the *moys* is *verd*, like the wood itself. The jagged strangeness that first identified the forest as outside in fact links it to the inside, the intimate spaces of the poet’s body and self. In this way, the outside and inside spaces reflect each other.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> The marvelous intimacy between inside and outside in Ronsard’s poem is much like what Blanchot finds in Rilke’s poetry: “Ne se pourrait-il pas qu’il y eût un point où l’espace fût à la fois intimité et dehors, un espace qui au dehors serait déjà intimité et dehors, un espace qui au dehors serait la réalité du dehors, telle que nous y serions en nous au dehors, dans l’intimité et l’ampleur intime de ce dehors?” Maurice Blanchot, *L’Espace littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), 138. Rilke called this experience *Weltinnenraum*, the world’s inner space: “Through all beings spreads the one space: / the world’s inner space. Silently fly the birds / all through us. O



The interior of the exterior in Ronsard speaks to both artistic representation and the dynamics of sight. In “Le plus toffu,” the alliance of inside and outside spaces is achieved through the motif of painting and visual description, which solicits the poet’s gaze and in turn generates his metamorphoses. The *plus* that describes both the poet’s breast and forest aligns the radically exterior wilderness with the picture that the poet pulls from the radical interiority of his breast. If the poet’s breast is *plus* just like the forest, then the anaphora that described it has less to do with exteriority and wilderness and more to do with description and depiction. In this way, the solitary woods are much like the portrait of the beloved. The forest is enclosed in description: “plus ... plus ... plus ... plus” hedges it in on all sides, to the extent that in the fourth line the *plus* breaks out of secondary position within the phrase to jump almost to the end of the line, creating a perfect bookend. In the same way, the picture of the lady is enclosed, once in depiction by the painter Denisot and again upon its enclosure in Ronsard’s body. She is released from the bodily enclosure when Ronsard pulls the picture from his *sein*, and she is released from the painting when he falls from the blow of her *regard*. The action of this “look” evokes more presence than the dumb mimeticism of a painting warrants, and with this word she is released from her imprisonment in silent and passive depiction. When the poet goes out into the natural world, he paradoxically also turns in, to visual description, whereas the lady is released out, from the enclosure of love (in Ronsard’s breast) and from static depiction to physical presence.

The connection of inside and outside yields motion and transformation. It is at the crossroads of these double moves that Ronsard’s transformations occur and where he feels “mille metamorphoses.” The metamorphoses, along with the *regard*, echo the look and metamorphoses that doom Actaeon, in that the man sees a vision of a woman and immediately feels himself breaking down. In “Le plus toffu,” they ensue not from a goddess’ wrath, but because of the intertwining spatial dynamics embodied in the paradox of the inside and outside *plus*, and the lady’s unexpected presence in description. *Innamoramento* is more than the moment of falling in love (the sign of this juncture is the lady’s devastating glance): it is the simultaneous movement in/out, inside or outside, inter-penetration and motion.

The motion between inside and outside and the ensuing in between space draws together the Lucretian strands of Ronsard’s poetry, because it emphasizes the space and motion that typify the Lucretian cosmos. These poems absorb the Lucretianism of Petrarch’s sonnets and Ovid’s myths – the focus on vision and fragmentation – but also incorporate the mechanics of atomism that Ronsard would have learned from his own reading of *DRN*. These elements – atoms moving in the void and the *clinamen* (that chance horizontal motion that initiates the formation of matter) – are not obvious in Petrarch. Transplanting the Ovidian grove into the space of the poet’s body, poems like “Les petitz corps” and “Ces liens d’or” draw Actaeon’s scattered body parts and Petrarch’s scattered rhymes into the body, which Ronsard introjects with atomist cosmology, melding the basic elements of Lucretian atomism – atoms, void, and *clinamen* – with the cosmos – sighs, tears, and sobs – of his love poetry, so that the swerve of atomic generation combines material and poetic creation. Ronsard stages this marriage of atomist cosmology and the tropes of Petrarchan love poetry within the intimate space of the poet’s love-worn body. Here, matter, void and creation coil together, and the

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I who want to grow, / I look outside, and it is in me that the tree grows!” Blanchot cites this August 1914 poem of Rilke’s in his text. I quote it from the English translation. Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 135. Blanchot calls it the “intériorité de l’extérieur,” which Rilke describes as when the infinite “pénètre si intimement que c’est comme si les étoiles qui s’allument reposaient légèrement en sa poitrine.” Blanchot, *L’Espace littéraire*, 139. Rilke and Blanchot identify the imbricated spaces of “Le plus toffu.” Ronsard’s “plus verd de mes moys” is the tree growing inside, the stars resting in his breast.

suspension in time and space produces physical metamorphoses that also represent the dynamics of writing.

## II. Writing the Amorous Universe

Lucretius gave Ronsard a way to put the worlds of poetry into dialogue with the worlds of natural philosophy, and ultimately, to express poetry's worldly significance and utility more generally. Using the language of cosmology for poetic creation and thinking poetic elements as natural elements makes of poetry a cosmos in dialogue with the physical cosmos, and thus makes poetry a question to the world. Poems from Ronsard's later collections, like "Plus tost le bal" and "Pardonne moy, Platon," give the poet's Petrarchan sighs and tears a (sometimes ironic) material presence in their figuration as the atoms that compose both the human body and the world of poems.

It is less that Ronsard's poems are materialized than that their analogy to the physical world pits the poetic against the real cosmos. Ronsard makes this point in "Pardonne moy, Platon," in which he playfully argues, against Plato, that natural philosophy must cope with the production of poetry as a material reality, rather than marginalizing or avoiding it. The poem lightheartedly dramatizes the implications atomist poetic cosmology has for poetry's relationship to the world in general, and the discourse of philosophy specifically. Assuming that poetry has a body calls into question Plato's schema of the natural world and, in so doing, forcefully introjects poetry into serious natural philosophical discourse. In a mock-philosophical tone, Ronsard tells Plato he must be mistaken about the impossibility of the void:

Pardonne moy, Platon, si je ne cuide  
Que soubz la vouste & grande arche des dieux,  
Soit hors du monde, ou au centre des lieux,  
En terre, en l'eau, il n'y ayt quelque vuide.  
Si l'air est plein en sa courbure humide,  
Qui reçoyt donq tant de pleurs de mes yeulx,  
Tant de souspirs, que je sanglote aux cieulx,  
Lors qu'à mon dueil Amour lasche la bride?  
(Ronsard *Oeuvres* I.81, 1-8)

Were there no void, where would his tears and sighs go? Ronsard disputes Plato's philosophical system on poetry's terms: the poetic trope of the poet's abundant tears and sighs, reconceived under the sign of Lucretius as having a material presence, proves the impossibility of the voidless universe. Ronsard imagines the world forced to adapt to poetry's terms, which are Lucretian: particle and void, tears and *vuide*. Platonic philosophy, Ronsard implies, doesn't make space for poetry, but atomism, whose notion of the void Plato was so anxious to refute, does. Like "Ces petitz corps," "Pardonne-moy, Platon" thinks the standard sighs and tears of love poetry in terms of atomic matter and void. In the final stanza, in an echo of the letter-atom analogy, Ronsard compares the materiality of his *souspirs* to the lines of his poetry: the heavens need a void to hold both his tears and their corollary and double, his verses. Atomism gives Ronsard's lyrics a material presence that will confront philosophy's disavowal of poetry's real-world significance.

Ronsard does not attempt a rigorous philosophical argument against Plato: his tone is unmistakably playful. The poem's charm comes from the coupling of an outlandish conceit with disingenuous naïveté. Whether Ronsard believes in one or the other philosophy is beside the point, which means that his valorization of poetic worlds by means of atomism, or against Platonism, operates despite or even in tandem with his ironizing of those very systems. This is demonstrated in

his promiscuous use of philosophical sources. Throughout his work, Ronsard uses nearly every philosophical tradition available to him. He draws from, to name only a few, Hesiod's *Theogony*, Thales, Genesis, and Plato's *Timaeus*, as well as later reworkings of those classic texts (Ficino's interpretation of Plato is an important influence) to describe the creation of the universe and the form of the natural world.<sup>46</sup> Efforts by critics to demand from Ronsard a clear philosophical position (Platonic? Aristotelian? Biblical?) or at least a clear trajectory (when does he shift from biblical models of creation to Platonism?) are inevitably frustrated.<sup>47</sup> They also miss the point, because Ronsard's almost innumerable philosophical sources are always subordinate to his poetic project, which is to say that Ronsard does not use atomism or Platonism to make truth claims about the universe or engage in philosophical debate, but musters their rich implications to evoke a poetic world.

The explicit philosophical stakes of "Pardonne moy, Platon" cast light on the way even more conventional poems put pressure on the power relations of poetic and natural worlds. In sonnet 26, "Plus tost le bal," amorous infidelity, framed in poetic terms as death by a new lover's eyes, threatens to destroy not only the possibility of a poem, but the harmony of the universe.

Plus tost le bal de tant d'astres divers  
 Sera lassé, plus tost la Mer sans onde,  
 Et du Soleil la fuitte vagabonde  
 Ne courra plus en tournant de travers:  
 Plus tost des Cieux les murs seront ouvers,  
 Plus tost sans forme ira confus le monde,  
 Que je soys serf d'une maitresse blonde,  
 Ou que j'adore une femme aux yeulx verds.  
 Car c'est oeil brun qui vint premier esteindre  
 Le jour des miens, les sceut si bien atteindre,  
 Qu'ature oeil jamais n'en sera le vainqueur.  
 Et quant la mort m'aura la vie ostée  
 Encor là bas je veulx aymer l'Idée  
 De ces beaulx yeulx que j'ay fchez au coeur.  
 (Ronsard *Oeuvres* I.26, 1-14)

The interdependence of the love-world and the natural world is so strong that should Ronsard's heart stray, the very bounds of the heavens will crack, forms will break down, and the world will

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<sup>46</sup> Isidore Silver points out that Ronsard's earlier poems tend to follow the *Timaeus*, whereas his later hew more closely to Genesis and move towards Aristotele's opinion that the universe is eternal. Isidore Silver, "Ronsard's Reflections on Cosmogony and Nature," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 79, no. 3 (1964): 224, 225–6. Silver conducts an exhaustive review of Ronsard's philosophical sources, while focusing mainly on the hymns. In *Ronsard's Ordered Chaos*, Quainton makes a similar point. Malcolm Quainton, *Ronsard's Ordered Chaos: Visions of Flux and Stability in the Poetry of Pierre de Ronsard* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), 7.

<sup>47</sup> Keller notes that "[t]out ceux qui ont étudié le syststème philosophique ou cosmologique de Ronsard ont été amenés, quelques-uns à regret, à constater son incohérence considérable" Luzius Keller, *Palingène, Ronsard, Du Bartas: trois études sur la poésie cosmologique de la Renaissance* (Berne: Francke, 1974), 61. It is unsurprising that Ronsard uses atomism as he does many other philosophical systems – inconsistently. Silver mentions that in a later work Ronsard refutes atomism with the lines "Le monde ne va pas, Comme dit Epicure / Par un cas fortuit, mais il va par raison / Chacun le peut juger, voyant vostre maison / Qui d'art regist la France, & non pas d'avanture." Cited by Silver, "Ronsard's Reflections on Cosmogony and Nature," 227.

undo itself. Love, and more particularly, fidelity, is linked with form, not only of poetry but also of the universe. By describing the material genesis of poetry (“petit tous”) in terms of the material genesis of the universe (“le grand Tout”), Ronsard puts poems and world in conversation through their shared principles of construction – fidelity, harmony. The presence and physical integrity of the poem derives from, and reinforces, the integrity and consistency of the natural world.

### III. Image and History

What attracted Ronsard to *DRN* was the way Lucretian poetics offered a toolbox of tropes and images to articulate how poetry could intervene in worldly affairs. This was not only a question of atomist cosmology: other elements from *DRN*, such as the love *simulacrum* and vision theory, offered ways of imagining how poetic discourse might have traction in political conflicts. This is how the Lucretian tropes of Petrarchan love lyric come to serve political ends in Ronsard’s *Discours des misères de ce temps* (1562) and *Sonnets pour Hélène* (1578).<sup>48</sup>

At first, the *Discours* and the *Sonnets* seem like very different sorts of texts with very different generic markers and social priorities. The *Sonnets* are Ronsard’s third and final collection of Petrarchan sonnets. The *Discours*, published in the same year as the *Continuation du Discours des misères de ce temps*, uses a prophetic tone to discuss the crisis and construction of French leadership in the context of the Wars of Religion. Both the *Sonnets* and the *Discours*, however, make poetic discourse effective as political discourse by developing the Lucretian imagery of Ronsard’s early sonnet sequences. Ronsard is particularly interested in envisioning how his poetry could be of use to his sovereign in the midst of the Wars of Religion. What this looks like is that the Lucretian tropes of love lyric appear in overtly political poetry, and that political interests abound in love poetry.

When the *Sonnets* came out in 1578, Ronsard was already in his mid-fifties, and the lady to whom it was dedicated, Hélène de Surgères, was no longer young herself. Ronsard brilliantly exploits the idea of the older man as Petrarchist, and the older woman as his beloved, by using Hélène’s age, or *âge*, as a clever way to discuss the problems of contemporary France – the *âge* (historique) in which both Hélène and Ronsard live. Thus, when Ronsard declares mid-way through Sonnet 12 of the *Premier livre des sonnets pour Hélène*, “Je me sens bien-heureux d’estre nay de son âge,” it could mean either at her age, or in the same historical period as her. And it is Lucretius who provides the pivot between old age – *âge* – and the problems of the historical age, *âge*. (Ronsard *Oeuvres* I.12, 9)

The Lucretian theory of vision and *simulacra* organizes the historical dynamic of the *Sonnets*, which muster what has always been at the core of myth – a temporality that transcends historical specificity through iterability – by eschewing materiality and embracing the Lucretian *simulacrum*. The *simulacrum* grounds the collection’s infinite doublings, which include the homophonic name Hélène as well as the mirrors and twins that crop up again and again. All this doubling participates in the doubleness of the *simulacrum*, which enables the effacement of the real woman – Hélène de Surgères, and establishes in her place the possibility of Hélène. Hélène the *simulacrum* is disassociated from the corporeal and thus temporally mobile – a string of Hélènes across time and across myth.

The duality of the *simulacrum*, which generates a material hierarchy but admits and encourages confusion between the real and phantasmatic, allows Ronsard to prioritize the French Hélène over Helen of Troy, even while admitting the priority of the Greek original. Ronsard does this by upending the relationship between original and copy. In Sonnet 12 the priority between original and copy is reversed when Ronsard compares his beloved to Venus.

#### Deux Venus en Avril (puissante Deité)

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<sup>48</sup> The *Sonnets pour Hélène* was never published as a standalone volume, but was included in the 1578 *Oeuvres*.

Nasquirent, l'une en Cypre, et l'autre en la Saintogne:  
 La Venus Cyprienne est des Grecs la mensonge,  
 La chaste Saintongeoise est une verité.  
 (Ronsard *Oeuvres* I.22, 1-4)

The upshot of this comparison, which could seem like base flattery, is that Ronsard construes a literary object – Hélène de Surgères – equal to Helen of Troy, even Venus. Through the doubleness of the *simulacrum*, he effects a spectacular *translatio imperii et studii*, transferring political legitimacy along with poetic content, and valorizes France as empire and French as a literary language in complex comparison with Troy and the depictions in both Latin and Greek of the Trojan war or of Venus. We can think back to the line with which I began my discussion of the *Sonnets*: when mid-way through Sonnet 12 Ronsard declares “Je me sens bien-heureux d’estre nay de son âge,” just as he declared in the fourth sonnet “Bien-heureux qui l’adore, et qui vit de son temps!” (Ronsard *Oeuvres* I.4, 14) The poet seems to be emphasizing the lady’s now-ness, her glorious contemporaneity. Nevertheless, as vehemently as Ronsard claims to fix Hélène in his present, his real goal is to locate her in Greece as well as in France.

What starts as a trope of love poetry – falling in love with images – becomes very adroitly in Ronsard’s hands a question of myth, imperial power, and populating an unstable political present with the solidity of mythical *imperium*. By using the tropes of love poetry to do this, Ronsard seems to be spelling out the ways that even the lightest of genres, the sonnet, can build history. The *Sonnets*, in short, valorize their own genre as well as French imperium. This illustrates an important way that Lucretius helps solve the problem of how poetry can bolster empire: by demonstrating that the ineffable – whether erotic images or love sonnets – can have real effects.

The *Sonnets pour Hélène* is full of violent and martial imagery hearkening back to the violent imagery Lucretius uses to describe sex in Book Four of *DRN*. In the *Sonnets*, the violence of desire speaks to the violence of the Wars of Religion, and many poems in the collection use the image of powder – gunpowder – to describe the visual impact of *innamoramento*.

Comme je regardois ces yeux, mais ceste fouldre  
 Dont l’esclat amoureux ne part jamais en vain,  
 Sa blanche charitable et delicate main  
 Me parfuma le chef et la barbe de pouldre.  
 Pouldre, l’honneur de Cypre, actuelle à resouldre  
 L’ulcere qui s’encharne au plus creux de mon sein,  
 Depuis telle faveur j’ay senty mon coeur sain,  
 Ma playe se reprendre, et mon mal se dissouldre.  
 Pouldre, Atomes sacrez qui sur moy voletoient,  
 Où toute Cypre, l’Inde et leurs parfums estoient,  
 Je vous sens dedans l’ame. Ô Pouldre souhaitee,  
 En parfumant mon chef vous avez combatu  
 Ma douleur et mon coeur: je faux, c’est la vertu  
 De ceste belle main qui vous avoit jettee.  
 (Ronsard *Oeuvres* I.41, 1-14)

The poem has three movements. In the they occur rather than the order of the lines, we begin with the poet looking into the lady’s eyes. The *mais* halfway through the first line bursts through the syntax of the sentence like her explosive glance, which is described as thunder – *fouldre* – or

lightning, an *esclat amoureux*. In the second movement, this bolt wounds Ronsard, who refers in the second stanza to the *ulcere* it creates.

Finally, in the third gesture of the poem, the lady heals her victim. Her hand, kinder than her eyes, throws a handful of perfume – *pouldre* – which heals the wound. The *pouldre* of the fourth and fifth lines refers explicitly to perfume, which commonly came in the form of a powder, but I’d like to suggest that it also echoes the *fouldre* and *esclat* of the first line, which could easily be the outcome of gunpowder. Certainly, the wound that the lady’s eyes create suggests the violence of weaponry. The gunshot eyes and the volley of perfume, then, operate in parallel: one powder wounds, the other heals. Once we’ve established that the powder refers to both, we can see that the lady’s glance – the *fouldre* – is made up of tiny particles, just like the perfume.

The third stanza gives the basis for the various powders (powdered perfume, gunpowder) of the first two stanzas: atoms. Indeed, the dynamics of sight from the first half of the poem draw directly upon Lucretius’ description of vision, up to and including the account of the amorous wound. The *ulcere* in line five gives us the key to locating Lucretius in this sonnet, for it is an explicit reference to the Lucretian account of desire in Book Four to which I have already referred. There, Lucretius describes how while the sleeper dreams, image films and erotic fantasies infiltrate his mind. Lucretius describes both the impact these images make upon the mind, and the resulting physical arousal, with the image of a wound.

Idque petit corpus, mens unde est saucia amore.  
Namque omnes plerumque cadunt in vulnus et illam  
Emitat in partem sanguis unde icimur ictu,  
Et si comminus est, hostem ruber occupat umor.  
(DRN IV.1048–51)<sup>49</sup>

The impact of the image injures the dreamer and his physical arousal is like the spurting of blood from a wound (which Lucretius says always yearns towards the object that caused it). Ronsard was particularly fond of this image of the amorous wound, and uses it repeatedly in his love poetry.

It is now clear that the powder is described as atoms at the beginning of stanza three because the entire poem frames sight, the pains of love, and the healing of love’s wounds in atomist terms. The look the lady gives Ronsard is Lucretian, a visual interaction based on almost infinitesimal image-atoms, and this is why *pouldre* – fine particles – is a good metaphor. The image that hits the lover is also made up of atoms, articulated here as powder, and the *fouldre* or “*esclat amoureux*” of the first two lines is the blow of an image upon an eye. The *fouldre* implies another powder, gunpowder, and the ensuing wound can only be cured in kind, with a powder of perfume.

The Lucretian motifs of sight that intersperse the *Sonnets* are energized by a new set of similarly violent metaphors. Sonnet 18 of the *Second livre des sonnets pour Hélène* vividly evokes the violent impression that the beloved makes upon the lover by describing a mastiff’s bite: “Un mastin enragé, qui de sa dent cruelle/Mord un homme, il luy laisse une image de soy/Qu’il voit tousjours en l’eau: Ainsi tousjours je voy/Soit veillant ou dormant, le portrait de ma belle” (Ronsard *Oeuvres* I.18, 4–8). The cruel bite reiterates the Lucretian idea that the impression of the beloved’s image in the lover is a wound that will canker forever, and also recalls the lovers who bite at each other because they cannot sate their lust.<sup>50</sup> Sonnet 22, also in the *Second Livre*, takes up the same image of the

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<sup>49</sup> “The body seeks what struck the mind with love and caused it hurt. / For as a rule, men fall toward the wound, and blood will spurt / Along the same trajectory from which we took the blow”

<sup>50</sup> The sonnet is based on a piece from the Greek Anthology by the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Byzantine Paulus Silentarius: “ἀνέρα λυσσητήρι κυνὸς βεβολημένον ἰῶ / ὕδασι θηρείην εἰκόνα φασι βλέπειν. / λυσσῶων

mastiff and links it explicitly with atomism, comparing the minute body of a mosquito that bites the lady to an atom, and then evoking the power of amorous sight at the end of the poem.

Cusin, monstre double aile, au mufle Elephantin,  
Canal à tirer sang, qui voletant en presse  
Sifles d'un son aigu, ne picque ma Maistresse,  
Et la laisse dormir du soir jusqu'au matin.  
Si ton corps d'un atome, et ton nez de mastin  
Cherche tant à picquer la peau d'une Deesse,  
En lieu d'elle, Cusin, la mienne je te laisse:  
Que mon sang et ma peau te soyent comme un butin.  
Cusin, je m'en desdy: hume moy de la belle  
Le sang, et m'apporte une goutte nouvelle  
Pour gouster quel il est. Hà, que le sort fatal  
Ne permet à mon corps de prendre ton essence!  
Repicquant ses beaux yeux, elle auroit cognoissance  
Qu'amour qu'on ne voit point, fait souvent un grand mal.  
(Ronsard *Oeuvres* I.22, 1-13)<sup>51</sup>

The mosquito's nose, long like an elephant's, also looks like a mastiff's muzzle; his tiny body is compared to that of an atom. The atom-mosquito is first prohibited from biting the lady, then exhorted to do so to bring the lover "une goutte nouvelle." The size of the tiny droplet parallels the mosquito's atom-body. The final lines of the sonnet change in tone and theme, as the lover addresses the insect directly. He wishes that his body could take the form of the mosquito's so that he could prick the lady's eyes. The mosquito-atom is an image-atom, a tiny particle that enchants the eyes and pierces the heart, "amour qu'on ne voit point." The phrase can be read two ways, both times as a clever commentary on the atom in general, which not only can one not see ("qu'on ne voit point") but also is an invisible dot, a *point* that cannot be seen ("on ne voit [pas le] point"). The prick of the mosquito is an atom's contact with the eye, the experience of which wounds and causes love.<sup>52</sup>

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τάχα πικρὸν Ἔρωσ ἐνέπηξεν ὀδόντα / εἰς ἐμέ, καὶ μανίας θυμὸν ἐλήισατο: / σὴν γὰρ ἐμοὶ καὶ πόντος ἐπήρατον εἰκόνα φαίνει, καὶ ποταμῶν δῖναι, καὶ δέπας οἰνοχόον." Translated as, "They say that a man bitten by a mad dog sees the brute's image in the water. I ask myself, "Did Love go rabid, and fix his bitter fangs in me, and lay my heart waste with madness? For thy beloved image meets my eyes in the sea and in the eddying stream and in the wine-cup." W.R. Paton, trans., *The Greek Anthology*, vol. 1 (London: Heinemann, 1916), 266. The insistence of water imagery seems to bear some echoes of Narcissus, and contemporaneous versions by Jamyn and Baif take place in the forest as the lover flees from all water, where he inevitably sees his beloved's image. Céard points out these contemporaneous works in his notes. Jean-Antoine Baif, *Œuvres en rime avec une notice biographique et des notes*, ed. Charles Joseph Marty-Laveaux (Paris: A. Lemerre, 1881), 114. Amadis Jamyn, *Les Œuvres poétiques d'Amadis Jamyn, revues, corrigées et augmentées pour la seconde impression...* (Paris: Par Mamert Patisson Imprimeur du Roy, au logis de Robert Estienne, 1589).

<sup>51</sup> The *cusin* of the first line is a *culex*, a mosquito, which, according to Céard's note (p. 1386, note 2), was commonly linked to the elephant in the 16<sup>th</sup> century because of its elongated proboscis.

<sup>52</sup> In first version of the *Sonnets pour Hélène*, originally published in 1578 in the *Oeuvres*, this sonnet (22 from the *Second Livre*) had some notable differences from what Ronsard included in his *Oeuvres*. Lines 12–14 read "Ne permet ... [a mon corps de prendre] cognoissance / Qu'un rien qu'on ne voit pas, fait souvent un grand mal." Ronsard conceives of the invisible particle as a "rien" and an "amour," perfectly evoking the material yet invisible atoms that wreak havoc in a man's heart.

The mastiff and the atom reverberate through these two sonnets, expressing the poet's obsession with Hélène in terms of Lucretian particulate image theory, which necessarily evokes the idea of love as an image, a dream, deception. The metaphors that describe Ronsard's desire for Hélène in terms of the atomic prick of images establish her as a spectral beloved, a Lucretian image. Perversely, the lover wants to do to the lady what she has done to him: impress his image upon her and cause her pain. Ultimately, the *mastin* in this poem is the same as the one in Sonnet 18, that mastiff associated with the beloved's persistent amorous image. The *cusin-mastin* is the *mastin* that bites the way an image sticks.

The *Discours* and its *Continuation* draw on the same Lucretian vision theory that undergird his love poetry like the *Sonnets pour Hélène* to articulate the political utility of poetic discourse. Ronsard adapts the Lucretian theory of particulate vision and images, with all its attendant implications about love and deception, to *prophetic* sight, and places the poet at the center of his poem as the only viable political seer. The two poems use a prophetic tone to discuss the crisis and construction of French leadership in the wake of the 1562 massacre at Vassy, when the slaughter of Huguenots set off the Wars of Religion. Ronsard, a moderate Catholic and the court's favored poet, shared the crown's vehement desire to consolidate power and resolve the wars between Catholics and Protestants. The *Discours* attempts to address the crisis of French leadership. Ronsard's goal is not just to record the "misères de ce temps" for posterity, but to exhort – plead, beg, even intimidate – the Queen into acting to quell the religious wars.

Scenes of sight dominate the *Discours*, and a vocabulary of blindness and vision articulates the possibilities for political leadership. The poem begins by evoking a France in crisis. Her dead kings are summoned from the grave to gaze disapprovingly at the ruins of the 1560s. Although the past can see into the present, the present is blind both to past and future. The fighting factions neither follow the examples of those dead kings, nor foresee the ruin that will come of such strife. As Ronsard writes, "C'est grand cas que nos yeux sont si pleins d'une nue / Qu'ils ne cognoissent pas nostre perte avenue, ... Et voyans nostre mal nous ne le voyons point." (Ronsard *Oeuvres* II.79-80, 86) Sight is the problem: the people of contemporary France are consistently figured as blind, ignorant, or asleep.

Although blindness isn't described in Lucretian terms, sight is. The salvational figure for such a people is she (Ronsard pins his hopes on the queen, Catherine de Medicis) who is capable of sight, of looking into the past and moving forward with clear eyes. Engaging with history – hindsight – will give Catherine the foresight necessary to guide the country to a better future.<sup>53</sup> Because Ronsard presents history as unified and governed by the logic of exemplarity, control can be had by a strong ruler who will model her behavior on appropriate *exempla*. Reading examples is presented as a mode of sight, and sight becomes the governing trope for thinking about and controlling history.

Ronsard entreats the Queen to take control of the politically disastrous conflict. These lines are excerpted from a longer passage because this cluster is a good demonstration of the language and tone the poet uses to urge on his Queen. Powder, as well as sand and dust, is associated with seeing and political dominion.

Mais vous, Royne tressage, en voyant ce discord  
 Pouvez, en commandant, les mettre tous d'accord,  
 Imitant le pasteur, qui voyant les armées  
 Des Abeilles voller au combat animées,  
 ...

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<sup>53</sup> On time in the "Misères de ce temps," see Edwin M. Duval, "The Place of the Present: Ronsard, Aubigné, and the 'Misères de Ce Temps,'" *Yale French Studies*, no. 80 (January 1, 1991): 13–29.



Il verse sur leurs camps un peu de poudre: et lors  
De ces soudars ailez le pasteur à son aise  
Pour un peu de sablon tant de noises appaise.

...

Donne que la poussiere entre dedans leurs yeux...

(Ronsard *Discours* in *Oeuvres* II, 197-200, 206-208, 233)

Ronsard uses two governing metaphors to express both the crisis and the solution – sight and powder. He proposes that the Queen should follow the example of the shepherd, who throws powder on bees to calm them (an image from Book IV of Virgil's *Georgics*). The queen could throw dust in the eyes of her subjects to bring about peace. Political domination as well as submission is framed in terms of seeing: the queen sees the conflict, and she can bring about unity by blinding her citizens with a mysterious dust.

The powder that grounds the *Discours*' description of prophetic sight is linked with the same Lucretian sight and atomist images that appear in the *Sonnets*. Ronsard constitutes poetry's political utility through the trope of sight that he develops in love poetry. The look that the lady casts upon the poet, the look undergirded by a whole tradition of Ovidian myth and Lucretian physics, becomes the prophetic sight that allows the poet to teach his queen good leadership and play an important political role in building his country's future. It is here that we see the ironic poetic manifesto of "Pardonne-moy Platon" put into play. Poetry intervenes into the political realm through Lucretian tropes. Though the *Discours* is not explicitly Lucretian, it operates within the same conceptual and poetic field as the more overtly Lucretian sonnets and is a good example of how far the influence of Lucretius reaches in Ronsard's oeuvre. That is to say, how Lucretius moves out of love poetry and expands upon the basis of Petrarchan Lucretianism. As in the *Sonnets*, the play of sight in the *Discours* clears a temporal space around the poet and empowers him to participate in politics. Specifically, the poet's literary relationship with ancient myth and his capacity to produce new exempla in the texts that he writes are metaphorized as a poetic sight that produces political prophecy. And although there's nothing like it in Lucretius, it is built upon Lucretian foundations.

At the precise center of the poem, a figure appears who is capable of drawing together all of these operations – sight, reading, writing, and leadership: a historian. Ronsard cries out to him in supplication,

O toy historien, qui d'ancre non menteuse  
Escrits de nostre temps l'histoire monstreuse,  
Raconte à nos enfans tout ce malheur fatal,  
Afin qu'en te listan ils pleurent nostre mal,  
Et qu'ils prennent exemple aux pechés de leurs peres,  
De peur de ne tomber en pareilles misères

(Ronsard *Discours* in *Oeuvres* II, 115-120)

The historian will truthfully record the horrors of the wars, transmitting them in writing to future generations who will take heed of the lessons of the past and rule well and peacefully. This historian is, of course, Ronsard himself, whose poem, the *Discours*, purports to provide a written account of the "misères de ce temps." The poet's linguistic facility gives him privileged access to literary and historical *exempla*, a capacity insistently metaphorized as sight. Because the poet can see into the past through *exempla*, he can muster a prophetic sight that will guide and salvage the future.

The poet's historical capacity is described with the same metaphors derived from Lucretian vision – the powder – that Ronsard develops in the *Sonnets pour Hélène* and uses to encourage the

queen at the beginning of the *Discours*. In the *Continuation*, Ronsard takes up the role of the historian that he carved out for himself in the first installment. The poem ends with a moment of prophecy when France appears before the poet's eyes.

Ainsi, par vision la France à moi parla,  
Puis tout soudainement de mes yeux s'en volla  
Comme une poudre au vent, ou comme une fumée  
Qui se jouant en l'air, est en rien consume  
(Ronsard *Continuation* in *Oeuvres* II, 445-8)

The metaphors of powder and sight unite poet and ruler, linking their functions and capacities. They also, however, indicate why, in the poem, it is the poet, rather than the Queen, who is construed as the successful visionary end of the *Continuation*, why he rather than she is graced by the vision of France. In the *Continuation*, Ronsard takes up the role of prophet and expresses his hope for France in a description of what he *sees* in the young prince. The poem ends with enigmatic lines that link his vision with powder: “Ainsi, par vision la France à moi parla, / Puis tout soudainement de mes yeux s'en volla / Comme une poudre au vent, ou comme une fumée / Qui se jouant en l'air, est en rien consumée” (Ronsard *Oeuvres*, II *Discours*, 445–8).<sup>54</sup> Ronsard's eyes are clear, he sees the future in the dauphin's face, but the vision dissipates like powder in the wind. The visual cloud that will save the French by subduing them is the same cloud that allows prophetic sight or poetic inspiration, and just as quickly disperses in the wind.

In the *Discours*, as in the *Sonnets*, poetry inhabits the axis between mythical past and imperial future: its kinship with the past through literature and myth combines with its imaginative capacity to figure the future. Good poetry – the *Discours*, ostensibly – could be the salutary history that saves the French nation. A spoken diatribe generated by and centering upon a dynamic *je*, the *Discours* – as a text as well as a genre – plays in the gap between history and epic, catastrophe and myth, a nation ruined and a nation built. The historian, Ronsard himself, is the hero of this skewed epic, promising a mythic future while filling the void of a ruined present with his prophecies. If the ship of state is in danger of being wrecked in the stormy waters of civil war – a metaphor Ronsard returns to again and again – then the works of a poet who writes the crisis might *anchor* the state. We see this in the homonym of *ancre* (ink) and *ancre* (anchor) in line 115.

Lucretius provides Ronsard with tremendous conceptual resources for thinking the purchase poetry might have on politics and poetry. But what should surprise us is less this – Lucretius is a scientific poet after all, one who overtly theorizes the power of versification in the material world – than the genres through which Ronsard exploits Lucretius. Passing over the much of *DRN* that most explicitly treats politics and natural philosophy, Ronsard fixed upon the passages about love, finding in them, and in their manifestations within the Petrarchan tradition – the most powerful poetic and theoretical statements of the Lucretian corpus.

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<sup>54</sup> The line continues “ou comme une fumée.” Given that Lucretius analyzes all physical phenomena in terms of atoms, the double simile does not preclude my atomist reading but signals a possible expansion.

Chapter Two  
Natural Resources: Stones and State in Remy Belleau's *Pierres précieuses*

Ne taillez, mains industrieuses,  
Des pierres pour couvrir Belleau,  
Luymesme a basti son tombeau  
Dedans ses Pierres precieuses.  
(Pierre de Ronsard's epitaph for Remy Belleau)<sup>55</sup>

I. Poetry and the State in Belleau and Lucretius

Remy Belleau provides an excellent case study in how thoroughly sixteenth-century poets responded to Lucretius's demanding vision of poetry's political role. Like Ronsard, Belleau was a careful reader of Lucretius whose poetry applies the Latin poet's language of pleasure to questions of politics. One of the lesser known but most innovative members of the Pléiade, Belleau was acknowledged by the other Pléiade poets as the most learned among them.<sup>56</sup> He wrote across traditions and took special pleasure in new and uncommon genres, producing among other things a translation of the Anacreontic odes, a pastoral compilation, a commentary on Ronsard's second book of *Amours*, sacred eclogues translated from the Song of Songs, poems about assorted small objects, and a collection of poems about precious stones.<sup>57</sup> This chapter focuses on the last of these texts, *Les Amours & nouveaux échanges des pierres précieuses* (1576) (*Pierres*), to argue that Belleau, a shrewd reader of Lucretius, discerns the implications that *DRN*'s forays into the language of pleasure and the genres of love have for politics and poetry. For Belleau – as for Ronsard – working through the text, language, and themes of *DRN* was a way to propose how poetry could participate in the stabilization and perpetuation of the turbulent French nation, wracked by the Wars of Religion.

Particularly in the *Pierres*, Belleau uses desire as a master metaphor for both politics and art, drawing inspiration from *DRN*'s persistently erotic tone. Lucretius had used the same tactics in his poem: expounding Epicurean philosophy in verse, he adapted Greek and Latin love lyric traditions to express the central Epicurean concept of *ataraxia* (mental calm) and its opposite, mental torment, through the tropes and vocabulary of love poetry. In *DRN*, the frenzies of lust constitute a vocabulary for everything from the cycles of Nature (in Book One) to the vagaries of sense perception (Book Four). Moreover, Lucretius's recourse to the figure of Venus makes even war and peace subject to desire: the goddess seduces warlike Mars to bring peace to the Romans. Thus – in a departure from Epicurus, who believed that one must remove oneself from the world to achieve *ataraxia*, an ideal accomplished at his garden school – Lucretius politicizes *ataraxia* as much as he

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<sup>55</sup> Ronsard's epitaph is cited in Remy Belleau, *Œuvres poétiques*, ed. Guy Demerson (Paris: H. Champion, 1995), V.310. Hereafter *Oeuvres*. All citations of Belleau are to this edition, except for citations of the *Pierres*, which are from Verdier's edition. Reference to poems will be made with volume number (for the *Oeuvres*), poem titles, and line numbers. Prose works will be cited with volume number, title, and page numbers.

<sup>56</sup> It seems that Belleau's reputation for learning was won at the expense of being a bit of a spoilsport. Du Bellay calls Belleau "savant et vertueux" in *Regrets* 145, but in his Ode 25, Ronsard plays on Belleau's name, writing that "Tu es un trop sec biberon / Pour un tourneur d'Anacreon." Joachim Du Bellay, *Les regrets précédé de Les antiquités de Rome et suivi de La défense et illustration de la langue française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), *Regrets* 145, line 2. Ronsard, *Oeuvres complètes*, I, 1–2.

<sup>57</sup> These works are, in the order mentioned, the *Odes d'Anacréon* (1556), *La Bergerie* (1565 with an addition in 1572), *Commentaire au Second livre des amours de Ronsard* (1560), *Discours de la vanité, pris de l'Ecclesiaste. Eclogues sacrees, prises du Cantique des Cantiques* (published with the *Pierres* in 1576), *Les petites inventions* (1556), and *Les Amours et nouveaux échanges des pierres précieuses: vertus & propriétés d'icelles* (1576).

eroticizes it.<sup>58</sup> In *DRN*, *ataraxia* gains political potency as a concept that can describe national unrest as well as individual turmoil.

In its Renaissance reception, *DRN*'s simultaneously erotic and political treatment of *ataraxia* yields two "plots," which map *ataraxia* and the peaceful state, or conversely, mental disturbance and the warring state, onto romantic scenarios. The first plot takes the form of a conventional courtship, where moderate affection and mutual compatibility yield stability and a healthy family. The second showcases the melancholic lover of Petrarchan verse, the youth whose burning passion usually goes unfulfilled, threatening to destroy him.

The key features of these double plots are also drawn from *DRN*, specifically from the hymn to Venus, which opens Book One, and from Book Four, with its mutually supporting accounts of vision and lust. The critical reception of *DRN* from the classical to the contemporary has tended to divide "good" from "bad" desire and align them with these two sections of the poem. With its idyllic springtime setting and capering young animals, the hymn has been understood as a positive vision of desire as natural profusion and healthy procreation. Construed as such, it stands directly opposed to the ravishing description of lust that dominates Book Four, which by contrast seems an even more scathing denunciation of desire, sex, and even love. In this reading, the Hymn's vision of nature – aroused by Venus to an unbroken cycle of desire and procreation – is that of the Epicurean garden writ large, a naturalist vision of *ataraxia*. Although the animals are driven by desire, Nature as a whole maintains her equilibrium because of their rutting. Book Four, on the other hand, offers a far more perverse and unsettling vision of lust. Here, the lover is plagued by amorous fantasies and ravaging desires. Unlike the naturalized desire of Book One, Book Four's lust is onanistic and sterile.

For Renaissance readers, nature's vigorous but balanced procreative cycles in the hymn evoked a pastoral vision of the well-governed state, whereas Book Four's raging but impotent lust was a fever-dream of war and civil unrest. The commonsense link between sexual desire and the state was no less compelling for being so simple: procreation. In Belleau's time, the Wars of Religion made issues of family and offspring all the more pressing; in a time of opposed Catholic and Protestant camps, royal marriages could govern the faith of a whole country. The generation of healthy heirs – hopefully within the legal bonds of marriage – is the foundation of monarchy, and it is in the context of this basic dynastic imperative that Lucretian dynamics of lust and state play out in several of Belleau's poems, which tap directly into this dichotomy of Lucretian desire to consolidate hierarchy and the means of producing civil power.

It is ironic that Lucretius, who worked so zealously to dismantle the power the gods held over men's minds, should serve to articulate divine and monarchical hierarchies,<sup>59</sup> yet this is precisely his function in Belleau's retellings of pagan and Old Testament stories, where the sexual peccadillos of rulers and rebels dramatize the success and failure of human governments. Belleau's poems about Ixion use Book Four of *DRN*'s account of lust to evoke the destruction of the hierarchies that stabilize human life – the family and the state – while the poems about Prometheus propose a stability grounded on artistic as well as sexual (re)production. Far from subverting Lucretius's project, they intensify the Latin poet's attention to the role poetry and poetic language could play in

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<sup>58</sup> On *ataraxia* in the Greek tradition from Democritus to Epicurus see James Warren, *Epicurus and Democritean Ethics: An Archaeology of Ataraxia* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002). On Epicurus's garden see Robert Pogue Harrison, *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), 71–82. R. E. Wycherley, "The Garden of Epicurus," *Phoenix* 13, no. 2 (1959): 73–77.

<sup>59</sup> Epicureanism is not, as is so often asserted, atheistic. Rather, Epicurus and Lucretius undermine divine influence by asserting absolute divine transcendence. The gods do not interfere with human lives because they do not care to, and their inscrutable lives are lived beyond the purview of humanity. Epicurus, *Epicurus, the Extant Remains.*, ed. Cyril Bailey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926), 83–5.

political stability. Each set of poems magnifies the prominence Lucretius's *DRN* gives poetry by adapting *DRN* Book Four's description of erotic images into a commentary on image making in general, not just the production of children, but also artistic production. By combining the image making that is procreation with the image making that is artistic creation, the Prometheus poems depict stable society as the pairing of procreative and creative acts.

Belleau's "L'Amour ambitieux d'Ixion" (published in 1572 in the pastoral compendium *La Bergerie*) gleefully describes the fall of a prideful man before the devastating ingenuity of a god: "Je chante d'Ixion l'emprise audacieuse : / L'impudence, l'orgeuil, et l'idole venteuse" (Belleau *Oeuvres* IV "L'amour ambitieux d'Ixion," 1–2). Like the myth, the poem tells a story about a man whose lusts for both blood and sex endanger not only the structures that support the institution of the family but also the boundaries between gods and men.<sup>60</sup> Jupiter forgives Ixion for the murder of his father-in-law, and as a token of mercy invites him to dine with the gods. Puffed up with pride and poisoned by ingratitude, Ixion has the gall to fall in love with Jupiter's wife, Juno. Outraged, the goddess tells her husband about the human's advances, and Jupiter concocts a punishment for the impudent Ixion, creating a fake Juno, an avatar of clouds, which he sends to the human (this is the "idole venteuse" of the first lines). Unaware that she is a replica, Ixion attacks and impregnates this "fille de la nuë," who later gives birth to the Centaurs (Belleau *Oeuvres* IV "L'Amour ambitieux d'Ixion," 237). Ixion's punishment is in keeping with his crime: having put on airs and grown intoxicated on the vapors of ambition, he falls for a creature of clouds and air.

What Belleau and Lucretius have in common is their reliance on the theme of lust to explore these frontiers – between humans and gods, bodies and images. The first two lines of *DRN* make this quite clear, while also reminding the reader that what is at stake is the foundation of great nations: "O la mere d'Enée, ancestre des Romains, / La seule volupté des Dieux & des humains."<sup>61</sup> Goddess, mother to one of the greatest mortals ever to live, lover of both mortals and deities and equally beloved by both, Venus with her charms charts the path between gods and men.

If the hymn to Venus is a naturalist portrait of social stability as vigorous procreation, Belleau's poem about Ixion offers a horrific counterpoint of wasteful lust and bastard genealogies. The poem paraphrases its account of lust directly from Book Four of *DRN*, using it to signal the dangers of ambition and breaking hierarchy. The description of Ixion's lust for the cloud-Juno reworks his explanation of sight, where the dynamics of perception are illustrated by a breathtaking description of sexual fantasy. Lucretius explains that sexual desire is produced by images – *simulacra* – constituted by the effluvia of atoms emanating from objects. Because they long for these images, lovers can never be satiated by bodies. This category mistake frustrates lust and makes sex a brutal affair:

quod petiere, premunt arte faciuntque dolorem  
 corporis et dentes inlidunt saepe labellis  
 osculaque adfligunt, quia non est pura voluptas  
 et stimuli subsunt qui instigant laedere id ipsum  
 quodcumque est, rabies unde illaec germina surgunt.  
 ... sic in amore Venus simulacris ludit amantis  
 nec satiari queunt spectando corpora coram,

<sup>60</sup> The Ixion myth appears in Pindar's second of the *Pythian Odes* (lines 21–48) as well as *Aeneid* (book 6: line 587) and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (book 12). In his notes, Maurice Verdier cites Diodorus of Sicily (*Bibliotheca Historica* 5: 69) and Aeschylus (*Eumenides* lines 719–20) as Belleau's likely sources. (Belleau *Oeuvres* 4: page 165, n. 2)

<sup>61</sup> du Bellay, *Oeuvres poétiques*, 6:VI, page 403.

nec manibus quicquam teneris abradere membris  
possunt errantes incerti corpore toto.  
(DRN IV.1078-84, 1101-4)<sup>62</sup>

From this sadistic spectacle of infinitely thwarted satisfaction Belleau identifies two crucial elements: that love is based on empty images rather than the solidity of real bodies, and the compelling description of the desperate lover teased by amorous *simulacra*.

Belleau's rendition of this passage paraphrases Lucretius closely. When Ixion sees the *idole* he mistakes her for the real goddess, substituting image for body as lovers do.

Il l'embrasse, et la baise, et comme furieux,  
Luy presse l'estomach, mord la bouche et les yeux,  
Les levres, et le col de la feinte menteuse,  
Appaisant les fureurs de sa flamme amoureuse  
D'embrassemens legers, et d'un baiser pipeur  
Sous le vif contrefait de l'image trompeur :  
Sucçotant, mordillant, à petites secousses  
Le coural imité de ses deux levres douces

(Belleau *Oeuvres* IV "L'Amour ambitieux d'Ixion," 183–190)<sup>63</sup>

Like the lover in Lucretius, Ixion is damned to paw and bite at a mere image. Jupiter's weapon, the "amoureux nuage" that stands in for Juno, is a Lucretian *simulacrum*, a love-image substituting for the real body that drives its admirer to frenzies of passion and violence.

Belleau is a particularly interesting instance in Lucretian reception history because he links two distinct tropes to intensify Lucretius's already notable emphasis on poetry into to a more robust idea of how poetry interacts with politics. "L'Amour ambitieux d'Ixion" broadens the implications of the Lucretian *simulacrum*, which in Belleau's hands discloses not just a theory of sight or lust (as in Lucretius) but also of the (re)production of art and political and social stability. In Lucretius, the *simulacrum* as amorous fantasy expresses the torments of a mind that has lost *ataraxia*. Belleau exceeds Lucretius, yoking the concepts of the *simulacrum* and *ataraxia* together in order to express artistic potential. For example, the *simulacrum*'s implications for aesthetic theory come into play in the description of Jupiter's airy artwork, the "ouvrage industrieux" he painstakingly crafts to fool Ixion. By making *simulacrum* into a theory of artistic production, Belleau comes full circle to the question that so interested Lucretius himself—how art, particularly poetry, participates in successful states.

By interpreting the *simulacrum* as an artistic as well as a sexual image, Belleau transcends the unsophisticated love plots in order to allegorizes political stability without ever mentioning sex. Instead, he foregrounds artistic production. Belleau's two poems about Prometheus, "Complainte de Promethee" (1572) and "Promethee, Premier inventeur" (1576), trace a similar narrative to Ixion's –

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<sup>62</sup> "... so closely pressing / What they long for, that they hurt the flesh by their possessing, / Often sinking teeth in lips, and crushing as they kiss, / Since what lovers feel is not pure and simple bliss – / Rather, there are stings beneath it, pains that shoot, / Goading them to hurt the thing that's made madness take root, / Whatever it may be ... / So Venus teases with images – lovers can't satisfy / The flesh however they devour each other with the eye, / Nor with hungry hands roving the body can they reap / Anything from the supple limbs that they can take and keep."

<sup>63</sup> The focus on kisses also owes much to the *Basia* of Johannes Secundus, from which Belleau drew much material and inspiration. On Belleau's use of Secundus in the *Bergerie*, see Georges Prévot, *Les Emprunts de Rémy Belleau à Jean Second dans ses "Baisers" (2e journée de la Bergerie)*, 1921.

an upstart tries to steal for man what rightfully belongs to the gods – but both poems have the opposite outcome. Like “L’Amour ambitieux d’Ixion,” they pivot on Lucretius’s explanation of amorous *simulacra*, but instead of the plot allegorizing mental and social unrest as lust, Prometheus is a new narrative about producing social stability through art.

Prometheus offers a positive model of image making as human creation and human creativity. His original creative act is the shaping of man himself with the fire he stole from the gods. Igniting the souls of the men he forms from clay, Prometheus transforms them from beasts to civilized and enlightened beings.

Qui premiere entreprit d’une main larronnesse,  
Mesme dedans le sein, et sous la main maistresse  
De ce grand Jupiter, de desrober le feu  
Pur, celeste, et divin, aux hommes incogneu  
Hommes vrayment grossiers, faits et poitris d’argille  
Molle, grasse, gluante, et terrestre, et fragile,  
Sujette à se casser en cent et cent morceaux,  
Hommes sans sentiment, semblables aux vaisseaux  
Que le potier gentil d’une masse assemblée  
Façonne en esbranlant la course redoublée  
Du moyeu de sa roüe, et ja tournant cent fois  
En ces vistes retours, les fait naistre en ses dois,  
Homme sans aër, sans feu, sans esprit, et sans ame,  
N’eust esté mon larcin qui rapporta la flame  
(Belleau *Oeuvres* IV “Complainte,” 45–58)

Before, men were like dry clay figures, thick with earth yet brittle and fragile. Like the potter at his kiln, Prometheus fires these dead forms, injecting breath and spirit into brute matter. The resolute materiality of Prometheus’s creations stands in opposition to Ixion’s airy lover and his offspring’s vacuous ambition. The materiality of Prometheus’s men – “molle, grasse, gluante, et terrestre” – bespeaks exactly the sort of animal vitality that both Jupiter’s Juno-*simulacrum* and Ixion’s “children” lack; earthiness is a sign of this man’s humility, the quality that marks the success of his society:

Qui a fait et basti des temples et des villes  
Rengé les citoyens dessous les lois civiles  
Et les peuples errans tous ralié en un,  
Fait fumer les autels, d’encens et de parfum ...  
(Belleau *Oeuvres* IV “Complainte,” 201-4)

Prometheus’s man creates a civil society that praises rather than threatens the gods: instead of breaking the heavens and rupturing hierarchy, these people live under peaceful laws, tilling the land and keeping their altars lit.

The making of man motivates Prometheus’s second creation: rings. “Promethee, premier inventeur” describes the birth of fine gem work: after Hercules frees Prometheus from his chains,

Mais le Destin voulut qu’en mémoire éternelle  
Du larcin recogneu de la flamme immortelle,  
Qu’il avoit prise au char du Soleil radieux  
Pour animer subtil son image terreux,

Qu'à jamais dans le doigt porteroit, attachée  
 Dans un anneau de fer, une pierre arrachée  
 Au sommet bruineux du roc Caucasien...  
 (Belleau *Pierres* "Promethee, premier, inventeur," 59–65)

In the "Complainte," Belleau is quite explicit that Prometheus is not only the maker of men, but the first artisan and creator of all the arts, a man "Bref qui pour enrichir les premieres beautez / Du monde malpoli a les arts inventez" (Belleau *Oeuvres* IV "Complainte," 215–16). Here, he emphasizes that Prometheus is the first to "mist la pierre en oeuvre / Dans un anneau de fer, industrieux manoeuvre" ("Promethee, premier inventeur" *Pierres* lines 67-8). The oeuvre/manoeuvre rhyme amusingly underlines the correlation between the crime – an undercover raid – and the creation.

Like all fine art forms, the fancywork of gems and rings participates in the glorification of the state, perpetuating power by ennobling it. Prometheus's ring thus marks and upholds his political achievement: the practice of gem work commemorates the creation of man and the foundation of civil society, but also supports that society. That first ring of Caucasian stone generates a long and increasingly illustrious tradition reinforcing the glory and might of kings.

Du fer on vint au cuivre, et à l'estain encor,  
 De l'estain à l'argent, et de l'argent à l'or,  
 Des pierres d'un rocher aux pierres plus eslites,  
 Emeraudes, Rubis, Diamans, Chrysolithes:  
 Et cela qui restoit pour marque d'un malheur,  
 Des Princes et des Rois fust la gloire et l'honneur.  
 (Belleau *Pierres* "Promethee, premier inventeur," 69–74).

Belleau nimbly reminds his readers that precious stones, no matter how murky their origins or occult their uses, are always a reminder of courtly economies and the grandeur and nobility of kings.<sup>64</sup> Procreative genealogies and artistic economies stabilize the state by re-producing it. Alongside *DRN*, which uses desire as a master metaphor for both nature and poetry, Belleau thinks about not just nature but also poetry as cyclical: not just genealogy but artistic traditions cycle, regenerate, and perpetuate when, as with Prometheus, a single act of creativity becomes an artisanal tradition, and what was elsewhere figured as sexual desire becomes creative force.

## II. Belleau's Venus

Belleau's final collection of poetry, the *Pierres*, proposes this artistic productivity as a vision of French patrimony. More than any of Belleau's other collections – even the *Bergerie*, with its idyllic vision of pastoral economies – the *Pierres* present a coherent vision of French poetry's social and political utility. Until recently, modern critics have disagreed, concluding that the thrust of the *Pierres* is sophisticated religious moralizing that culminates in the *Discours de la vanité*, with which it was published in 1576. In this reading, the stone poems represent either the vanities David renounces in the second half of the volume, or they are Christian symbols that presage its overt religious

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<sup>64</sup> The collection, display, and exchange of gemstones was particularly popular at Henry III's court. The king himself collected gems, as did Belleau, whose will includes a list of his treasures. Connat, "Mort et testament de Remy Belleau."



message.<sup>65</sup>

More recently, however, Jean Braybrook has offered a reading of Belleau that conceives of his poetry as a “remède contre la douleur de diverses sortes,” drawing particularly upon the ideas and vocabulary of doctors.<sup>66</sup> The present work nuances Braybrook’s argument – concerning Belleau’s understanding of poetry’s role in caring for the injured French nation – by emphasizing different sources for the poet’s “therapeutic” project.<sup>67</sup> In my reading, Belleau is less concerned with a specific knowledge discourse, but rather incorporates an extraordinarily broad swath of materials and traditions in the *Pierres* – from the lapidary to Lucretius, Petrarch to St. Paul – to elaborate a vision of social unity and mutually supporting political and artistic structures. Reading the *Pierres* this way accounts for the predominance of not just the language of medicine but also mythology, love poetry, and the occult uses of stones in Belleau’s poetry. Indeed, Belleau is attracted to Lucretius precisely because the Latin poet’s tropes function as aggregators for various discourses and thematics.

Belleau’s contemporaries recognized the *Pierres* as his most important collection.<sup>68</sup> The poet died in 1577, and his friends quickly brought out his *Oeuvres poétiques* (1578) in two pocket-sized volumes, placing the *Pierres* at the head of the first.<sup>69</sup> This arrangement, along with Ronsard’s famous epitaph for Belleau, which makes the *Pierres* his headstone, demonstrates the priority Belleau’s friends and colleagues gave the *Pierres* in his body of work.<sup>70</sup> It is not only a particularly good collection of poetry – combining as it does the styles Belleau perfected throughout his career – but a crystallization of the themes that traverse his poetry. A life’s work converges in the *Pierres*, which give Belleau’s vision of how poetry can effect a *translatio imperii et studii* in war-torn France.

Belleau’s stone poems have a metaphorical coherence that makes them particularly suited to this ambitious poetic mission. The gemstones of the *Pierres* bring together the metaphors of dead

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<sup>65</sup> Jean Braybrook, “Remy Belleau and the Pierres Precieuses,” *Renaissance Studies* 3, no. 2 (1989): 193–193 – 201. Claude Faisant, “Gemmologie et imaginaire: les *Pierres précieuses* de Remy Belleau,” in *L’invention au XVIe siècle*, ed. Claude-Gilbert Dubois (Bordeaux: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 1987), 83–106.

<sup>66</sup> Jean Braybrook, *Remy Belleau et l’art de guérir* (London: Versita, 2013), 18.

<sup>67</sup> On Epicureanism and “therapy” see Martha Nussbaum, *The Poetics of Therapy: Hellenistic Ethics in Its Rhetorical and Literary Context* (Edmonton: Academic Printing & Publishing, 1990).

<sup>68</sup> At least some of them also seem to have understood the debt that the *Pierres* owed to Lucretius. Jean Dorat’s prefatory verses paraphrase the hymn to Venus, making Venus the muse and guide for Belleau’s poetry. Dorat extrapolates the maritime overtones of Lucretius’s hymn to praise the exploratory and economic value of Belleau’s stones. According to Dorat, Belleau’s Venus is a modern mercantile rendition of Lucretius’s Venus, who controls land and sea. We know from Dorat’s dedication of Lambin’s edition of Lucretius that he not only knew *DRN* but also was a savvy reader of Lucretius and a skilled mimic. On Dorat and Lambin see Passannante, *The Lucretian Renaissance*, 87–8.

<sup>69</sup> Although no printed record tells us which friends published the *Oeuvres*, the editor’s introduction to the 1578 edition says that they are “ses plus familiers amis, gens d’honneur et de vertu, soucieux du renom et de la mémoire du défunt” (Belleau *Oeuvres* I, page 27). The version of the *Pierres* printed in the *Oeuvres* is much expanded from the original 1576 publication: the friends add ten more stone poems, the “Discours” in verse, and “Promethee, premier inventeur des anneaux & de l’enchasseuse des pierres.” Admired as it was in the sixteenth century, the *Pierres* went relatively unappreciated until the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

<sup>70</sup> Ronsard wrote a lovely testament to the man who had been one of his closest friends. As recorded in Belleau’s *Tombeau*, which was published in 1585 and contains 103 poems, it reads: “Ne taillez, mains industrieuses, / Des pierres pour couvrir BELLEAU, / Luymesme a basti son tombeau / Dedans ses Pierres precieuses” (Belleau *Oeuvres* V “Epitaph,” 1-4). The *Tumulus*, a collection of twenty-five poems written in Belleau’s memory, was published in 1577; almost every poem contains a mention of the *Pierres*. Belleau’s contemporaries considered the collection “comme son chef d’oeuvre,” writes Maurice Verdier, introducing the *Tumulus*. (Belleau *Oeuvres* V, page 303)

earth and buried books that dominate the Pléiade's presagings of national doom. As Ronsard writes in his liminary for Belleau's volume of Anacreontic odes: "Et pour venir à cest heur, ou malheur, combien depuis vingt ans avez vous veu de livres avortez en naissant, Plustost ensevelis sous les flancs de la terre, / Que jouir, bienheureux, des beaux rayons du jour?" (Belleau *Oeuvres* I, page 76). Rome's books were cut down in their maturity, buried in their country's battlefields, and France's are in danger of being aborted, relegated to the tomb before even seeing the light of day.<sup>71</sup> Like Rome's fallen soldiers and forgotten books, stones are buried in the earth. Reviving the lapidary genre for French literature, Belleau can bring the buried ghosts of ancient glory to life in contemporary France. Styling himself a new Orpheus, Belleau writes poems that animate the dead, bringing life from the soil. Symbolically, the stones represent the flowering of the French land, the regeneration of literary tradition, the enrichment of French language and literature, even the promise of material riches and French success abroad, in the lands of precious stones.

These metaphors of regeneration apply as much to literature as to the land. Each gemstone is a repository of lost or forgotten ancient knowledge, genres, and styles, which Belleau's poems awaken and revive. Introducing the tropes and transformations of Ovidian poetry, but also the idylls and trials of the Petrarchan lyric, into the lapidary tradition, Belleau writes a lapidary of mythological love poems.<sup>72</sup> And although he declares in a stock poetic boast that he will ascend to heretofore unreachable heights with his new writing, he instead delves into the ground, hewing newness from Solomon's mines and Orpheus' hell.

The *Pierres* pick up where the Prometheus poems left off, by envisioning Lucretian desire in the form of the magnet. Singular for its force rather than its beauty, "La Pierre d'aymant" is set apart from Belleau's other gems, representing the very power of animation that defines Belleau's poetic project and his new style. As Chayes has remarked, it is the only stone in the collection that does not require (or admit) any artistic working. It is not ornamental but "a plain metaphor of inner power."<sup>73</sup> Like Lucretius's Venus – who in the hymn is at once the muse of poetry, the object that spurs the lust and procreation of nature, and the broker of peace – Belleau's magnet is an emblem of force operating at all levels of France's vast material and mythical economies, combining amorous attraction, the drive towards peace, literary style, natural fertility, human curiosity, and Christian love. Indeed, although they are his last work, the *Pierres* were Belleau's first and only collection of love poetry. As Braybrook writes, "Prior to 1576, Belleau had not produced an individual collection of love poems, although he had written Petrarchist sonnets and *Baisers* in the manner of Secundus. At last, at the age of 48, he brings out his *Amours* – and writes, not of a woman, but of gems."<sup>74</sup> Rather than love poetry for stones, however, the collection is a love poem to France, with a stone, the magnet, as its romantic hero.

"La Pierre d'aymant" relies heavily on *DRN* to explain the magnet's mysterious force. Lucretius's description of the magnet crowns the section of Book Six that gives explanations for a

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<sup>71</sup> In "Elegie de P. de Ronsard, à Chretophle de Choiseul," which follows Belleau's "Epistre" and functions as a liminary verse to the collection, Ronsard uses the same image of buried books, "Tant de livres perdus, miserables de la guerre, / Tant d'arts laborieux, et tant de gestes beaux / Qui sont ores sans nom, les hostes des tombeaux" (Belleau *Oeuvres* I "Elegie de P. de Ronsard, à Chretophle de Choiseul," 101–104).

<sup>72</sup> Belleau's direct predecessor and contemporary in the genre were, respectively, Jean Lemaire de Belges and Jean de La Taille.

<sup>73</sup> Evelien Chayes, *L'éloquence des pierres précieuses: de Marbode de Rennes à Alard d'Amsterdam et Remy Belleau: sur quelques lapidaires du XV<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Champion, 2010), 211. The magnet was commonly included in classical, medieval and renaissance lapidaries as a precious stone. For a brief overview of lapidary lore about the magnet, see Claude Lecouteux, *Dictionnaire des pierres magiques et médicinales* (Paris: Imago, 2011).

<sup>74</sup> Braybrook, "Remy Belleau and the *Pierres précieuses*," 194.

wide range of natural phenomena – thunder, lightening, thunderbolts, waterspouts and whirlwinds, clouds, rainbows, earthquakes – and precedes the final passage of *DRN*, with its harrowing account of the causes of pestilence and the great plague of Athens. Its pride of place indicates that Lucretius, like Belleau, recognized that the magnet’s attractive force is a potent symbol for the important role desire plays in his vision of the world. Like Belleau, the Roman poet first impresses the reader with the astonishing qualities of the magnet: it can hold together chains of rings with its pervasive force. Before explaining how the magnet works, Lucretius repeats his explanation of vision from Book Four: “Principio omnibus ab rebus, quascumque videmus, / perpetuo fluere ac mitti spargique necessest / corpora quae feriant oculos visumque lacesant.” (*DRN* VI.92103)<sup>75</sup> The emission of atoms from bodies is also the cause of sounds, smells, and tastes. Belleau paraphrases all of these points closely (see especially lines 40–70).

The magnet seems an unlikely hero for a love poem, but in Belleau’s hands it is the very picture of heated desire. Evoking the link between amorous *simulacra* and the driving force of passion from Book Four, Lucretius himself implies that the magnet’s attractive powers are erotic, leaving Belleau to emphasize what is largely implicit in *DRN*.

Dans ce vuide aussi tost les premiers élémens  
De ce fer à l’Aymant par doux accrochemens  
Embrassez et collez, comme par amourettes  
Se joignent serrément de liaisons secrettes.  
(Belleau *Pierres* “La Pierre d’aymant,” 75–8)

The progression of the passage is pure Lucretius. Belleau begins with a single magnet, which releases a raft of atoms to animate and attract the iron. Drawn to the magnet, the iron fights its way through the (atom-filled) air. In this new “vuide” cleared by the iron, the atoms (“premiers elemens”) of the two stones can finally embrace. Their love manifests itself in “doux accrochemens” and a clinging embrace, “comme par amourettes / Se joignent serrément de liaisons secrettes.” Lucretian physics easily becomes an amorous science, and Lucretius a natural philosopher of love.

As in the hymn to Venus, where Venus seduces warlike Mars to procure peace for mortals, this attractive quality is fundamentally pacific, allowing the magnet to subdue bellicose iron.

Se voit-il rien çà bas plus dur et moins dontable  
Que ce métal guerrier? moins dous et moins traitable?  
Mais en ceste amitié le donteur est donté,  
Et le vainqueur de tout d’un rien est surmonté  
(*Pierres* “La Pierre d’aymant” lines 21–5).

Unifying and reconciling the two stones, the force of attraction proves to be the force of peace, and the magnet becomes an emblem for Christian peace in a world of strife. The “noeu d’amitié” that joins magnet to iron is that which Belleau would hope to see come about in France between Catholics and Protestants. The magnet is a model for human behavior:

Invention des Dieux! avoir tiré l’esprit  
D’un caillou rendurci, qui sans sçavoir apprit  
Aux hommes journaliers de tirer un message

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<sup>75</sup> “First of all, from every object visible and showing, / A stream of particles must be perpetually flowing / Particles that strike the eyes and trigger sight.”

Des jours, des mois, des ans, ruine de nostre âge!  
(Belleau *Pierres* “La Pierre d’aymant,” 175–8)

As Braybrook argues, “implicit in ‘La Turquoise’ and ‘La Pierre d’aymant ou calamite’ is a contrast between the mineral world and the human, in which Catholics and Protestants refuse to be reconciled.”<sup>76</sup> The magnet is the most perfect expression of the divine law of amity that governs all beings – humans as well as the heavens, animals, stones, and plants – and a constant reminder that men must respect that law or risk chaos on earth and divine displeasure. Ever since Adam and Eve ate the apple and introduced pain and death into God’s creation, men and women have defied and destroyed the divine harmony that would ensure their happiness. Humans fall, but the natural world (here the magnet) always retains the promise of harmony, a lesson it could teach to men if they would only take heed.

Belleau is equally interested in the magnet’s artistic implications, highlighting its history as an emblem of poetic inspiration. The magnet’s tender embraces have long served to illustrate the power of artistic inspiration, a tradition Belleau cites explicitly when he writes that the magnet “Cause que nous voyons et quatre et cinq anneaux / Suspendus dedans l’air d’accrochements nouveaux, / L’un à l’autre collez de liens invisibles” (Belleau *Pierres* “La Pierre d’aymant,” lines 203–8). This is drawn directly from Lucretius, who himself adapts the famous passage from Plato’s *Ion* where Socrates uses the example of iron rings suspended from a magnet to illustrate his point that the source of Homer’s literary genius is divine inspiration, not knowledge. The pull of the magnet illustrates the coursing charge of inspiration, the poetic form of the relationship between men and gods.

In *DRN*, too, poetic inspiration and political peace are inextricably linked. When Lucretius prays to Venus for a “quiet peace for Romans,” he connects an individual’s *ataraxia* to the peace of the Roman state. What motivates this expansion of Epicurean *ataraxia* are the poet’s needs: Lucretius requires quiet to write, and peacetime to foster the patronage systems that can bankroll, circulate, and consume his poetry. Venus will persuade Mars to cease war, bringing peace to Rome and thus to Romans: a détente gives the poet time for inspiration and writing, and also grants his patron, Memmius, the free time to pursue not only statecraft but his cultural pursuits like patronizing the arts, supporting poets like Lucretius and reading their work. This passage produces a circuit between national peace (global *ataraxia*), individual peace, and the poet’s craft, which converts new Epicureans who will in turn practice *ataraxia*.

It is a singularly practical vision of the conditions necessary to popularize Epicureanism in Rome, but its pragmatism did nothing to limit the implications it had for the construction of Lucretius’s poem or its reception in the Renaissance. Indeed, Renaissance poets were attracted to precisely this feature of *DRN*: the affiliation of poetic and political interests within the tropes and language of love poetry. For Lucretius, the disseminator of Epicureanism, the primary purpose of these erotic passages was to illustrate the benefits of *ataraxia*, but Lucretius the poet articulates the paired interests of state and poetry by inserting them into the very heart of Epicurean *ataraxia*. That this is done in his loveliest and most seductive language, in the most gorgeous passages about Venus, desire, and sex, only baited the hook. Renaissance poets were only too liable not only to read, treasure, and paraphrase the hymn to Venus but also to soak up its underlying claims about the relationship between poetry and politics. Belleau’s *Pierres* do just this, pressing Lucretian ideas even further than even the Roman poet went in *DRN*. As an emblem of artistic inspiration, romantic desire, and pacific power, the magnet integrates Venus’s functions in *DRN*’s hymn. Like Venus, the magnet is a lover, a peacemaker, and an emblem of poetic force.

Establishing the effectiveness of poetic force was useful for a poet as a way of putting poetry

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<sup>76</sup> Braybrook, “Remy Belleau and the *Pierres precieuses*,” 197.

into dialogue with political power. Executed correctly, both poetic craft and statecraft glorify the “grand Auteur” who constructed the universe in all its harmony. Of course, they also glorify the *petit*, that is, the king, who is the more immediate dedicatee and recipient of poems and goods that consolidate his might. Of all Belleau’s poems, the *Bergerie* best expresses this node, which sustains and stabilizes the state while encouraging the gentle arts of poetry as well as the industrious crafts of the villages. In its first half (published in 1565), this masterful pastoral poem depicts an idyllic country house and its surroundings, modeled on Joinville, the home of Belleau’s patrons, the Guise family. Life in this house is an idealized rhythm of conversation, recitation, meals, and crafts, as the gentle young ladies work at their needlepoint among marvelous tapestries and are visited by messengers and players who entertain them with poems, masques, and amorous discourse.

The poem is a cornucopia of crafts: it begins with a rapturous description of the tapestries that hang in the great terrace, then moves on to describe the occupations of the “bergeres,” the ladies in waiting, and finally the town that sits at the foot of the chateau. The young ladies occupy themselves with genteel and amorous handiwork:

... ces bèrgeres y travaillent sans cesse, l’une apres le labour  
industrioux de quelque gentil ouvrage de broderie, l’autre apres un  
lassis de fil retors, ou de fil de soye de couleur, à grosses mailles, &  
mailles menues, & croy pour servir de rets & de pantiere à surprendre  
& empestrer les yeux, ou le coeur de quelque langoureux berger:  
l’autre à filer la destinée de son amant desesperé, tournant de ses  
doigts mignars le fuzeau, vuidant et devidant son fil de bonne grace.  
Entre autres ye en avoit une qui faisoit un bouquet de marjolaine, de  
roses, de giroflee, de serpolet, & de pouliot ...

(Belleau *Oeuvres II La Bergerie*, page 39)

The surroundings and nearby town are similarly idealized, and equally full of the products of industrious activity.

... ceste ville est riche de toutes les commoditez que les bergers,  
chevriers, bouviers, laboureurs pourroyent souhaitter, fust pour  
trouver panetiere ouvrees & taillees au poinçon avec leurs écharpes,  
colliers herisiez de clous pour les mastins, houlettes tournees, polies,  
& bien serrees, fust de pince, fust de rochet, musettes au ventre de  
cerf à grand bourdon, embouchees de cornes de daim, ou de laton,  
fleutes, flageolets de canne de fureau, d’escorce de peuplier, cages  
d’ozier & de ronces escarrees & pertuifees avec une brochette rougie  
au feu, & éclissees de petits barreaux de troinelle pelee, garnies de  
cocasses de Limas pour servir d’abreuoir & d’augettes pour les  
oiseaux, couples de crein de cheval, sonnettes, jets, longues, veruelles,  
petites prisons de joncs mollets, pour enfermer des sauterelles,  
ceintures, rubans, bracelets, vans, fleaux, eclisses, oules, bartes,  
terrines, tiroüers, & toutes sortes de vaisseaux propres à la bergerie,  
vacherie, labourage ...

(Belleau *Oeuvres II La Bergerie*, pages 106-7)

This profusion of craft has long been cited as evidence of Belleau's mannerism, an expression of his fascination with artworks.<sup>77</sup> Although this is certainly true, I would argue that Belleau's obsessive descriptions also serve to link high art – particularly poetry – with crafts under the umbrella of state economy, more than to glorify artworks or subordinate seemingly “realist” descriptions of Joinville to the marvellous register of art.<sup>78</sup> The effect of the descriptions, especially when read in the context of Belleau's other works, is certainly greater than Demerson's characterization of mannerist art in his introduction to the *Bergerie*: “Ce que l'art maniériste tend à faire valoir, c'est sa technique; le plaisir et le but de l'art, c'est l'exhibition. Il puise son inspiration non plus dans la mimesis mais dans la phantasia, c'est-à-dire la faculté imaginante capable de produire des figurations sans référent visible.”<sup>79</sup> Instead, the *Bergerie* draws domestic entertainments, artworks, and crafts into the same orbit of description, intermingling the occupations of the nobility, the craftsmen, and the poet-shepherds. All are expressed through the idea of ingenuity, which is used to describe all the different spheres, and which is the lynchpin of the successful economy of the town.

As with so many of Belleau's poems, the larger issues at play in the *Bergerie* also relate to the glorification of his patrons. Belleau's circumstantial poetry, which valorizes the life cycles of nobility, is more than an empty patronage-driven tribute, but a way of articulating the links between those ruling the earth and the earth itself, the health of the king and the health of the land.<sup>80</sup> Poetry, the omnipresent medium of the *Bergerie* (but also foregrounded by the frequent compositions and recitations that make up most of the body of the text), is also a craft, one that cements the link between the artisans in the town and the gentle ladies in the castle.<sup>81</sup> With the good management of the noble household mirrored in the well-stocked village, the house and the maidens become an allegory for the state as a whole. The *Bergerie*, if you will, puts the *oikos* back into economy.

### III. Poets, Kings, and the Pleasures of Narrative

The *Pierres* are generically innovative, deploying a minor vein of natural history writing (the lapidary tradition), but grafting onto it an interest in political power.<sup>82</sup> Tapping into long traditions of natural

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<sup>77</sup> For Belleau and art and the artist in the *Bergerie*, see Jean Braybrook, “Remy Belleau and the Figure of the Artist,” *French Studies* 37, no. 1 (1983): 1–16. Rieu, “La Bergerie de Remy Belleau: une ‘fête’ poétique à la gloire des guises.” Jean Braybrook, “Space and Time in Remy Belleau's *Bergerie*,” *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 57, no. 2 (1995): 369–380. See also Demerson's Préface to the second volume of his edition of Belleau's *Oeuvres* for a reading of the *Bergerie*. For Belleau's contribution to the pastoral, see Joukovsky's chapter on Belleau in Alain Niderst, ed., *La Pastorale française : de Rémi Belleau à Victor Hugo* (Paris: Papers on French Seventeenth Century Literature, 1991). A general work on mannerism is Claude-Gilbert Dubois, *Le Maniérisme* (Paris: P.U.F., 1979).

<sup>78</sup> For this influential argument, see Michel Jeanneret, “Les oeuvres d'art dans ‘La bergerie’ de Belleau,” *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, 1970.

<sup>79</sup> Belleau *Œuvres* II, 35.

<sup>80</sup> Ronsard's 1555 “Hymne à Henri II de ce nom” 1555 is another poem that links the King's majesty to the abundant energies of his people and the riches of his dominions.

<sup>81</sup> The pastoral was the patronage genre par excellence for poets like Belleau. “En effet, le genre bucolique, loin d'être une invention récente, était devenu le cadre conventionnel du lyrisme officiel,” writes Demerson. Belleau *Œuvres* II, page XII.

<sup>82</sup> Although the continuation of the lapidary tradition is outside the purview of this chapter, it is worth mentioning the ways in which the link between stones, poetry, and politics continue into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although the lapidary tradition, with its pagan and magical associations, died out in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it was resurrected by the Romantics and taken up by the symbolists. By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and particularly in the post-war era, the lapidary became a useful way of redefining poetics. Anne Gourio's book, *Chants de pierres*, is a

philosophy, Belleau draws comparisons between political leadership and the control of nature. King David is the central figure in this constellation of political and natural power. In David, the famous biblical poet-king, royal and natural philosophical powers are easily wedded. As he recounts ruefully in Chapter 1 of Belleau's *Vanitez*,

J'ay porté d'Israel le sceptre dans la main,  
J'ay pressé sous le joug les ondes du Jourdain,  
J'ay fouillé, j'ay cherché pour sçavoir les raisons,  
Le tour et le retour des temps et des saisons,  
Ouvrant le sein fecond de la mere Nature,  
Qui donne le tetin à tout creature:  
Et croy que ce grand Dieu transmist ce vain desir  
Dans le cueur des humains, non pas pour le plaisir,  
Mais pour les travailler, et les tenir en crainte,  
Altevez de sçavoir sous honneste contrainte.  
(Belleau *Pierres* "Vanitez," 47-58)<sup>83</sup>

The parallel structure ("J'ay porté ... J'ay porté ... J'ay fouillé ...") stresses that political leadership – "J'ay porté d'Israel le sceptre dans la main" – couples seamlessly with the control of nature – "J'ay pressé sous le joug les ondes du Jourdain." David seeks out the natural mysteries, and his engagement with elements – fire, earth, water, air – and the frontiers between earth and sky are related to his human dominion and the establishment of his state. Although this last phrase might be more miracle than "science," the next lines explicitly describe human curiosity and research into the nature of things. This natural curiosity, mother of natural philosophy, does not liberate men from fear, but in a reversal of Lucretius, subjugates them to it and to divine constraint.

Espousing the ancient idea of the poet as expert in all human knowledge, Belleau also affiliates philosophy and poetry. In a poem dedicated to another royal tutor, author of a "Miroüer du Prince Chrétien," Belleau compares natural philosopher-poets to Kings. The prince

Nous apprend une autre science  
Plus seure, et dont l'experience  
Est vraie, et proufitable à tous  
Non pas la cause de l'humide,  
L'infini, le plain, ou le vuide ...  
(Belleau *Oeuvres* I "Miroüer du Prince Chrétien," 37–41)

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good overview of the uses to which poets put stones at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and in the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Anne Gourio, *Chants de pierres* (ELLUG, 2005). According to Gourio, stones "[s]urgie massivement dans la littérature poétique de la seconde moitié du siècle ... [ce qui] ne peut être dissociée du conflit mondial qui en est la toile de fond." Ibid., 8. This, of course, is much like the importance of stones in Belleau's work that concerns the Wars of Religion. For examples of 20<sup>th</sup> century stone poetry and prose, see Roger Caillois, *Oeuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008); Yves Bonnefoy, *Pierre écrite* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1965); Francis Ponge, *Le Parti pris des choses: précédé de douze petits écrits et suivi de poèmes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972); Paul Claudel, *La Mystique des pierres précieuses*. (Paris: Cartier, 1938); Pierre Reverdy, *Ferraille, Plein verre, Le Chant des morts, bois: (suivi de) Pierres blanches* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981). The secondary criticism is too extensive to list, but Gourio is a good place to start.

<sup>83</sup> It is perhaps no accident that the ancient Hebrew kings are such important figures for Belleau, and that David functions as the crossroads between the dynamics of political rule and natural science. Solomon was after all the fabled owner of the great mines that supplied his glittering constructions.

*Statecraft* and the poetic craft are both “science,” and although the King’s is grounded in practical application rather than esoteric investigation and thus accessible to experience (and immediately profitable), both have Nature as their ground and field of expertise. In his liminary poem to F. Jamot’s 1567 “Traicté de la goutte,” Belleau rehearses the same link between the science of the state and nature. Jamot’s treatise on the droplet participates in the great goal of both crafts, the quest to understand the human in order to improve mankind and society.

Celuy qui s’avance d’escrire  
 Les entresuittes d’un Empire  
 Qui roule à la faveur des lois,  
 Comme il fault que l’obeissance  
 Se rende ferue à la puissance  
 Du sceptre & de la main des Roys,  
 Celluy qui dedans l’air liquide  
 Recherche la cause du vuide,  
 Le tour & le retour des ans,  
 Et d’entreprises plus segrettes  
 Remarque les courses profettes  
 Du soleil, du ciel & des temps:  
 ....  
 A mon advis est fort louable,  
 Et d’une entreprise honorable  
 ....  
 Mais surtout grandement ie prise  
 Celluy qui d’humaine entreprise  
 Cherche cela qui est humain,  
 Discourant de nostre nature  
 Et de la noble architecture  
 De ce cors, pour le rendre sain  
 (Belleau *Oeuvres* I “R. Belleau Precepteur de Monseigneur  
 d’Ancenis à J.Helvis,” 1–30)

The poem pivots upon the placeholder “celuy” to link poet and king. They are alike, “he who” who investigates the nature of things: the search for natural causes and the establishment of laws are two modes of inquiry into the structure of the universe, which contribute to the “humaine entreprise,” to “cherche cela qui est humain.” Kingship is construed along the same channels as artistic production: kings and poets are alike in their knowledge and mastery, poets of the earth and kings as founders of social order.<sup>84</sup> As the tutor to Charles d’Elbeuf and poet to the Guise family, Belleau was ideally situated to appreciate (and benefit from) the similar interests of poetry and statecraft.<sup>85</sup> Nature, as Belleau and his contemporaries believed, was the realm of the poet, “Celui qui cherche la matiere, / L’esprit, et la cause premiere / Des semences de l’univers ...” in verse, but also of the king, who

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<sup>84</sup> The idea of poets as natural philosophers, or all-knowing, comes from Homer, and was popular with the Pléiade.

<sup>85</sup> For Belleau as a poet to the Guise, see Rieu, “La Bergerie de Rémy Belleau: une ‘fête’ poétique à la gloire des Guises.”



organizes nature – men, animals, land, plants – with his laws.<sup>86</sup> (Belleau *Oeuvres* I “R. Belleau Precepteur de Monseigneur d’Ancenis à J. Helvis...”, 1–3).

The link between poet and king goes beyond philosophy to the pleasures of narrative. The dedication to the *Pierres* reiterates the connection between poetry, nature, and kingship in terms of pleasure. Emphasizing the narrative pleasures to be derived from the new poetic style that he has invented in his *Pierres*, Belleau links the pleasure of philosophical discovery to the reading of poetry. The poet praises his sovereign as a Prince “qui prend plus de plaisir à découvrir des secrets de la Philosophie & choses naturelles, & qui plus honore ceux qui font exercise en ce mestier.” (Belleau *Pierres*, page 4) The King will glean a double pleasure from the book: readerly pleasure at the narratives of the poems, and the pleasure of discovering the world of stones.

Belleau gives two reasons for presenting the poems to his sovereign: Henry is fond of these riches from “l’Inde Orientale,” which circulate freely at court.<sup>87</sup> Precious stones, with their “vertus & beautez,” are “rare” and “digne” enough to be gifts for a king. Secondly, Belleau’s poems, culled from the “riche & sacré cabinet des Muses,” surpass gems because they are indestructible and eternal: “la violence des ans ne scauroit offenser, comme les vulgaires qui tirent leur naissance de la terre, sujettes à corruption.” (Belleau *Pierres*, page 4) Even the diamond is a child of the earth. What excites Belleau, however, is less the old cliché of immortal verse than the transformation of stones into poetry, which he describes in the rest of the introduction: a new mode of writing, “ceste mienne et nouvelle invention d’escrire des Pierres, tantost les déguisant sous une feinte métamorphose, tantost les faisant parler, et quelquefois les animant de passions amoureuses et autres affections secrètes, sans toutesfois oublier leur force, ny leur propriété particulière.” (Belleau *Pierres*, pages 4-5) Belleau’s stones are alive, animate: like people, they have stories, speak, and love.<sup>88</sup> In this way, animation allows for new types of stone-poems, but it also describes Belleau’s poetic process, which he describes as animating stones by writing them. The remains of the lapidary tradition – stones themselves – are tugged from the earth and live again at the touch of Belleau’s new style.

Belleau takes care to preserve the integrity of the lapidary tradition even while striving to “animate” it with a new poetic style. The newly animated stones retain their old characteristics – the medicinal and spiritual properties that filled the columns of lapidaries for millenia. Belleau takes pains not to forget this lore, “Ce que j’ay sogneusement receuilly de la fertile moisson des auteurs anciens qui en ont parsemé la memoire jusques à nostre temps.” (Belleau *Pierres*, page 5) It is a lovely image, a poet collecting memory’s harvest, the flowers and fruits of ancient authors. There was much to gather: the lapidary tradition that came down to Belleau was remarkably rich, spanning classical sources from Pliny to Galen down to the Christian lapidary of Marbode of Rennes.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> “R. Belleau Precepteur de Monseigneur d’Ancenis à J. Helvis Praeceptor de Charles Monsieur d’Aumalle, sur son Miroüer du Prince Chrétien,” 1–3.

<sup>87</sup> The collection, display, and exchange of gemstones was particularly popular at Henry III’s court. The king himself collected the gems, as did Belleau, whose will includes a list of his treasures. Connat, “Mort et testament de Remy Belleau.”

<sup>88</sup> Demerson’s article on the usage of the word “métamorphose” in 16<sup>th</sup> century France illuminates the implications of Belleau’s usage of the word. Although Marot uses the word in 1530, it is not until 1558 that “métamorphose” is in common usage.

<sup>89</sup> For more on the lapidary tradition, see Léon Baisier, *The Lapidary Chrétien*. (New York: AMS Press, 1969). Chayes, *L’éloquence des pierres précieuses*. J. Evans and M.S. Serjeanston, *English Mediaeval Lapidaries* (Early English Text Society, 1999). Paul Meyer, *Les plus anciens lapidaires français* (Paris: Franck, 1909). Scholars have taken pains to document Belleau’s sources: he was steeped in tradition, and had he only consulted Marbode (which seems unlikely), he would still have gleaned from the cardinal the collected wisdom of the ancients. Belleau is even aware of the pre-classical, Egyptian origins of the lapidary tradition, mentioning the Chaldeans as the progenitors of the tradition. Marbode, *De Lapidibus* (Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1977).

Belleau's innovation is one of style, not content, introducing the tropes and transformations of Ovidian poetry, first and foremost, but also the idylls and trials of the Petrarchan lyric into the lapidary tradition. Whereas Belleau's closest predecessor and contemporary – Jean de la Taille and Jean Lemaire de Belges – would write semi-allegorical, semi-scientific stone-poems, Belleau's are mythological love poems.<sup>90</sup> And although Belleau declares – in a stock poetic boast that preeningly claims “newness” while borrowing language from Hesiod – that he will ascend to heretofore-unbreached heights with his new writing (avec “pennes plus haultaines”), he instead delves into the ground, hewing newness in Solomon's mines and Orpheus' hell. Using the Ovidian and Petrarchan traditions to put pressure on the lapidary, Belleau will revive Lucretius as an object lesson for his new style.

This innovation produces the readerly pleasure about which Belleau writes in his dedication. As he writes in the 1576 *Discours*, readers “y prendront plus de plaisir que si je les eusse simplement descriptes, sans autre grâce et sans autre enrichissement de quelque nouvelle invention.” (Belleau *Pierres* 1576 “Discours,” 123–6) Because they appeal directly to the reader, the stones' forces are a shortcut around problematic pagan sources even as they draw from them, and reinforce Christian mores even while reworking the Christian cosmos. Readerly pleasure marks the success of Belleau's poems, indicating that he has successfully revived ancient texts, transformed the occult properties of minerals into the narrative efficacy, and circumvented any application of stone lore that could promote the purposes of false religion.

The greatest problem of reviving ancient sources is religious, which Belleau addresses by framing his new style as a Christian one. After the dedication and liminary poems, the book of *Pierres* opens with a “Discours des pierres précieuses.” It appears in prose in 1576 but is replaced in the 1578 *Oeuvres* by a longer verse version; Belleau's friends must have found it in his posthumous papers. Both go into greater detail than the dedication about adapting material from the ancients. In 1576, Belleau writes that

[e]scrivant ce petit discours des Pierres précieuses, j'ay bien voulu  
suyvre, avec toute religion, l'opinion des anciens auteurs qui nous  
ont laissé, par leurs doctes et divins escrits, les vertus et propriétés  
particulières d'icelles, comme provenantes des Planètes et de l'influs  
céleste des Estoiles ...

(Belleau *Pierres* 1576 “Discours,” 1-8)<sup>91</sup>

A relatively straightforward homage to ancient sources is quickly complicated, however, when Belleau expands upon his religious reservations about the ancients (“avec toute religion”). Apparently, certain ancient philosophers claimed that stone lore was a “vanité ... à la superstitieuses religion, loix et ordonnances des Prestres Caldés, qui nous ont pu entretenir de telle folle et légère créance.” (Belleau *Pierres* 1576 “Discours,” 9–12) The 1578 version is even more provocative:

Qui [prestres Caldés] ont ceste caballe en l'Egypte fondé

<sup>90</sup> Jean de La Taille, *La géomance abrégée de Jean de La Taille de Bondaroyz .... pour sçavoir les choses passées, présentes et futures. Ensemble le Blason des pierres précieuses, contenant leurs vertus et propriété* (Paris: L. Breyer, 1574). Jean Lemaire de Belges, *La couronne margaritique* (Lyon, 1549).

<sup>91</sup> The 1578 verse reads “Recherchant curieux la semence première / La cause, les effets, la couleur, la matière, / Le vice, & la vertu de ce thresor gemmeux, / J'ai saintement suyvi la trace de ces vieux / Qui premiers ont escrit que les vertues sacrées / Des pierres, s'escouloyent de l'influs des planètes.” (Belleau *Pierres* 1578 “Discours,” 1-6)

A fin d'entretenir les peuples ignorans  
 sous telles vanitez et signes apparans,  
 Pour les espouvanter et les tenir en crainte  
 De quelque opinion, fust-elle vray ou feinte.  
 (Belleau *Pierres* 1578 “Discours,” 10–14)

The Chaldean priests use the mystery of natural phenomena (“signes apparans”) to terrify their subjects and subjugate them to religion. As far as Belleau is concerned, it is this subtle manipulation of natural signs that falsifies Chaldean religion. The opinions themselves – in terms of natural science – could be true or false (*feint* or *vray*), or mere opinion. Truth is not an essential quality, but the product of its use, and here it is the use of the ideas that is at stake – insights into nature are true or false by virtue of their relationship to religion. The truth status of ancient knowledge is destabilized because it is organized under the banner of “superstitieuse religion.” Used in the service of paganism, centuries of knowledge about stones and stars are mere opinion. Revived by Christian writers, the same “facts” are true. In this light, Belleau’s dedication to the king takes on new dimensions: the new writing of stones is a Christian preservative against ancient error, but it is also more generally about the control of natural science and the errors and manipulations of religion. In short, about power. Of course the king would be interested.

With his ancient sources, Belleau confronts the troubled relationship between religion, knowledge, and politics, precisely the challenge faced by sixteenth-century France in the Wars of Religion. According to Lucretius’ rousing tirade against religion in Book One of *DRN*, it was from precisely such religious oppression (and its partner, political oppression) that Epicurus saved the Greeks:

Humana ante oculos foede cum vita iaceret  
 In terris oppressa gravi sub religione  
 Quae caput a caeli regionibus ostendebat  
 Horribili super aspectu mortalibus instans,  
 Primum Graius homo mortalis tollere contra  
 Est oculos ausus primusque obsistere contra  
 ...  
 quare religio pedibus subiecta vicissim  
 opteritur, nos exaequat victoria caelo ...  
 (*DRN* I.62-7, 78-9)<sup>92</sup>

Men live in fear because they do not understand the operations of the heavens and earth, and, attributing them to obscure whims and powers of the divine, fall captive to religious beliefs.<sup>93</sup>

<sup>92</sup> “When human life to view lay foully prostrate upon earth crushed down under the weight of religion, who shewed her head from the quarters of heaven with hideous aspect lowering upon mortals, a man of Greece ventured first to lift up his mortal eyes to her face and first to withstand her to her face ... Therefore religion is put under foot and trampled upon in turn; us his victory brings level with heaven.”

<sup>93</sup> “Quippe ita formido mortalis continet omnis, / quod multa in terris fieri caeloque tuentur / quorum operum causas nulla ratione videre / possunt ac fieri divino numine rentur.” (*DRN* I.151–154) “Fear in sooth takes such a hold of all mortals, because they see many operations go on in earth and heaven, the causes of which they can in no way understand, believing them therefore to be done by divine power.” Or, as he says to Memmius, chiding him prematurely for abandoning Epicurean teachings: “Tutemet a nobis iam quovis tempore vatum / terri loquis victus dictis desciscere quares.” (*DRN* I.102–3) “You yourself some time or

Belleau, too, sees how the wondrous properties of stars and stones could be used to hold a people in thrall to a false religion, and, like Lucretius, proposes to escape the terror of these signs from the sky through a new and different study of nature. In the “Épitaphe de François de Lorraine, Duc de Guyse” from the first day of the *Bergerie*, Belleau describes God’s majesty and humanity’s fear at great length.

C'est luy seul qui retien, qui conduit, & qui guide,  
 Ce que dessus la terre, & dedans l'air liquide  
 Et ce qu'au fond des eaux vit, souspire, & se meut,  
 ...  
 Et ne sert d'avoir peur des pestes de l'Autonne,  
 Des fievres de l'esté, puis que sa faux moissonne  
 En tout tems nostre vie, & qu'on ne peut charmer  
 Les tourbillons rouans de l'écumeuse Mer,  
 Le foudre ny l'esclair, les vens ny les orages,  
 Rien ne sert de sçavoir augures, ou presages,  
 Voir trembler le poumon des boucs, ou des aigneaux.  
 ...  
 Puis que nos iours, nos ans, nostre mort, nostre vie  
 Est de la main de Dieu ou conduite, ou ravie,  
 Puis que les feux du Ciel, le fort, & le destin,  
 Menteurs ne peuvent estre auteurs de nostre fin.

(Belleau *Oeuvres* II “Épitaphe de François de Lorraine, Duc de Guyse,” 15–32)

The list of fears is extremely Lucretian, but whereas the Roman poet locates the antidote to fear in the comprehensive explanatory power of atoms, Belleau finds relief from fear in God, that is, a christianized atomism whereby the true Christian god, but only he, will calm fear with his very omnipotence. In the “Tombeau de Monsiegnour François de Lorraine, Duc de Guise & Pair de France” in the *Premier Journée* of the *Bergerie*, Belleau explores the contours of human fear. Men are indeed “prisonniers de la mort” (Belleau *Oeuvres* II, 13–14), subject to God’s whim, but it is precisely His absolute control that should reassure them. The inadequacy of human speculation, which finds its support in God’s absolute control, is Belleau’s consolation.

Tackling the same quandrary as Lucretius, Belleau emerges with different tactics grounded in Christian faith. Nevertheless, it is from the pagan Lucretius that Belleau will take inspiration for his Christian lapidary poetics. In the *Discours*, Belleau explains the relationship of natural knowledge and religion. Even if ancient priests used an appearance of truth (the vast knowledge of philosophers and poets about stones and stars) to hide falsity (the errors of pagan religion), Belleau holds the writings of the ancients in the highest esteem and pledges to honor their memory. The ancient wisdom will be redeemed through a Christian revivification that transforms human understanding of precious stones. Despite his critique of pagan religion, Belleau’s deep admiration of – and debt to – the ancients touchingly manifests itself as a pressing sense of duty. His text, he says, is “pris de la meilleure part de ceux qui en ont escrit, tant pour honorer leur mémoire que pour vous faire participans de mon petit labeur.” (Belleau *Pierres* 1576 “Discours,” 117–120) Whereas Lucretius argues that only clear and penetrating insight into the causes of things will allay fear for those held in

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other overcome by the terror–speaking tales of the seers will fall away from us.”

thrall to the mysterious manifestations of a cruel nature,<sup>94</sup> Belleau suggests that combining the empirical wisdom of the ancients with a reverential comportment towards these signs – a Christian gaze and narrative practice – will uncover the authentic wonders of nature:

Toutefois ne voulant faire tort aux cendres et précieux restes de la vénérable antiquité, comme d'Orphée et autres, je me suis proposé les ensuyvre, non pour vous déguiser le faux sous une apparence de vérité, mais pour tousjours admirer les oeuvres de ce grand Dieu, qui a divinement renclos tant de beautez et de perfections en ces petites créatures: remettant tout à l'expérience de la force et vertu d'icelles, et discrétion du lecteur.

(Belleau *Pierres* 1576 “Discours,” 13-21)

Orpheus, who made the rocks sing with his lyre, is an important touchstone for Belleau, who will not, however, use his beautiful music in the service of false religion. Belleau's music is not the lyre's: he will write poems that marvel at the glory of God's works and purport to put the reader in contact with the unadulterated majesty of creation.

In short, Belleau keeps the natural wonders of the ancient lapidarists, but does away with their claims to knowledge. He does not attempt to derive natural laws from the earth, but presents its gemstones to provoke wonder. In this, he echoes centuries of theological writings about the distinction between the Old and New Testaments, the subjection to Jewish law and the simple clarity of Christ's new rhetoric, but displaces onto paganism the characteristics usually associated with the Old Testament. The true religion has nothing to hide, and nature's wonders unfurl themselves as quickly before the simple and admiring gaze of a Christian as they hid from the flawed erudition of pagan investigations.<sup>95</sup> Braybrook sees this emphasis on wonder as an espousal of the role of ancient divine poets who revealed truths mythically rather than empirically, appealing to the imagination rather than reason “in order to make readers receptive to ideas and possibilities they would otherwise have excluded.”<sup>96</sup> Although Belleau certainly abandons reason for a different sort of engagement with nature, his is less a reprise of the ancient theological poets than a re-positioning of poetry vis-à-vis Nature.

By focusing on wonder rather than knowledge, Belleau opens a field for what he calls the “la force et vertu” of stones. The term “force” combines two categories: the traditional properties and magic of gemstones (provoking valor, curing the flu, enforcing chastity ... Belleau himself lists these properties at great length in his poems) and Belleau's animative narrative style. “Force” is an idea broad enough to encompass the dynamics of natural wonder as well as literary style, by appealing to the direct effect of stones upon the human mind and imagination – their force, which is to say, their medicinal and magical properties. Given that this “force et vertu” consists of precisely the properties

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<sup>94</sup> “Hunc igitur terrorem animi tenebrasque necesses / non radii solis neque lucida tela diei / discutiant, sed naturae species ratioque.” (*DRN* I.146–8) “This terror then and darkness of mind must be dispelled not by the rays of the sun and glittering shafts of day, but by the aspect and law of nature”

<sup>95</sup> Erasmus' 1516 *Paraclesis* is exemplary of 16<sup>th</sup> century texts which drew a distinction between the complex, obfuscatory rhetoric and the plain persuasion of New Testament rhetoric. Erasmus' emphasis on pious curiosity and the transformative power of the text also resonate with Belleau's description of lapidary force. Desiderius Erasmus and John C. Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation; Selected Writings. With The Life of Erasmus*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1965).

<sup>96</sup> Jean Braybrook, “Science and Myth in the Poetry of Remy Belleau,” *Renaissance Studies* 5, no. 3 (1991): 277–81.

that the ancients catalogued in such detail, how does Belleau imagine his poems to be presenting stones any differently? What makes his treatment singular and allows him to clearly display the stones' forces?

The answer lies in the literary corollary of force, animation, which is announced in the title of the collection: the “nouveaux échanges.” Unlike the ancients or his Christian contemporaries, Belleau writes stones under the guise of change, animating them and giving them stories to live out; The *Pierres* describe the metamorphoses of stones, their “échanges.” In the course of these transformations the stones metamorphose from myth to rock, narrative to “force.” The most inanimate things, stones, are through the magic of poetry elements of metamorphic narrative. In the process, real stones become stone poems and their natural powers narrative force. Language replaces stone and stone is made word. This is perhaps Belleau's rendition of Saint Paul, who uses the metaphor of stone and heart to describe the transformation the Gospels effected from Jewish law. “[E]pistula nostra vos estis scripta in cordibus nostris quae scitur et legitur ab omnibus hominibus manifestati quoniam epistula estis Christi ministrata a nobis et scripta non atramento sed Spiritu Dei vivi non in tabulis lapideis sed in tabulis cordis carnalibus.”<sup>97</sup> Writing stone poems allows Belleau to write wonder on hearts rather than dead stones.

The first *Pierre*, “L'Amethyste, ou Les Amours de Bacchus et d'Amethyste,” best renders the transfer between narrative and natural force. The poem describes the genesis of amethysts from the solidified tears of the eponymous nymph, turned to stone after she supplicates Diana to save her from Bacchus' lust. As her body stiffens, her tears fall like hail and land on the Indian sand, where they turn to rocks.<sup>98</sup> Bacchus, distraught and enraged, plucks one of the grapes from his crown and squeezes its juices onto the stone,

[q]ui depuis en vertu de ce germe divin  
N'eut le visage teint que de couleur de vin,  
Violette, pourprine en memoire eternelle  
Du Dieu qui pressura de la grappe nouvelle  
Le moust qui luy donna la couleur & le teint,  
Dont l'Amethyste encor a le visage peint.  
(Belleau *Pierres* “l'Amethyste,” 59-64)

The amethyst gemstone is a distillation of the emotions and narrative of the Amethyst myth, because the forces that the stone bears are drawn from the mythical scenario: the bearer of an amethyst will never be become inebriated from wine, and if someone finds an amethyst on Indian gravel, he will turn into a stone, losing life and voice, just like the nymph.

Construing the powers of stones as derived from their origin myths sets Belleau apart from all other lapidary lore, which standardly held that stones derived their miraculous powers from their relationship with the stars. The idea that magnets might draw their force not from stars but from the earth itself didn't gain much of a foothold until Gilbert's *de Magnete* (1600). Stones were thought to

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<sup>97</sup> Robert Weber and Roger Gryson, eds. *Biblia sacra : iuxta vulgatam versionem* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 2 Corinthians 3:2–3. “You are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but in the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.” Michael D. Coogan, Marc Z. Brettler, and Carol A. Newsom, eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha: New Revised Standard Version*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 2 Corinthians 3:2–3.

<sup>98</sup> There are other examples in ancient myth of women turning to stone: Niobe, for example. Medusa famously turns men to stone with her eyes. A counterpart of the petrification theme is Pygmalion, who vivifies a stone statue.

be linked to the heavens, and to share the qualities of their celestial counterparts, yet in Belleau's Amethyst poem the miraculous properties of stones spring from the solidified saps of myth, and thus the amethyst stone's force derives from narrative development rather than astral synchronicity. This is true of all Belleau's *Pierres*, in which stones have occult properties not because they are influenced by the stars but because of narrative accretion, because they have stories. Stones are less stone-stars than objects that come to be through a mythical transformation. Narrative force supplants the astral, often appearing in the poems (as in the Amethyst poem) condensed in the figure of hardened juices – saps, ambers. This difference is notable because instead of static unities of earth and cosmos, Belleau produces *mobile* meanings through flexible mythical narrative. Thus, although Belleau's new style serves a Christian worldview, his method relies on pagan underpinnings whose implications destabilize the ties between heavens and earth that underly Christian cosmology.

The most complete expression of Belleau's Lucretian poetics, the *Pierres* crown a lifetime's engagement with *DRN*. The collection's dexterous reworking of Lucretian tropes and concepts demonstrates that Renaissance poets were not only attentive to *DRN*'s powerful integration of the interests of poetry and those of the state, but were able to adapt Lucretius's lessons to their own themes and circumstances. Lucretius embedded poetry, its methods, and its interests into *ataraxia* by framing Epicurean philosophy in the terms of love poetry. This gave Renaissance poets familiar but powerful tools for envisioning poetry's place in national politics, a particularly pressing question during the Wars of Religion. Belleau's stone poems (a category which ought to include the two poems about Prometheus) hew to Lucretius's vocabulary of love and his accent on politics but move away from rendering it in love plots (as in the Ixion poems) to focus on the Venusian power of desire as a pure force – amorous, pacific, and poetic – that the new styles of Pléiade poetry could produce and wield. This shows that in sixteenth-century France, Lucretius's poem was far more than a set of static images or tropes; rather, *DRN* was a conceptual workbook whose virtuosic poetry welcomed imitation, but whose images also invited new adaptations.

## Chapter Three

### “All in You Contracted Is”: Atomist Cosmology and Literary Networks in John Donne’s Poetry

#### I. Fragmentation and Coherence

In a 1612 letter to his friend and frequent correspondent Sir Henry Goodyear, Donne compares the exchange of letters to atoms crisscrossing in the void.

In letters that I received from Sir H. Wootton yesterday from Amyens, I had one of the 8th of March from you, and with it one from Mrs. Danterey, of the 28th of January: which is a strange disproportion. But, sir, if our letters come not in due order, and so make not a certain and concurrent chain, yet if they come as atoms, and so meet at last, by any crooked, and casual application, they make up, and they nourish bodies of friendship; and in that fashion, I mean one way or other, first or last.<sup>99</sup>

Donne transfers the Lucretian analogy between atoms and alphabetical letters to letters in the epistolary sense.<sup>100</sup> Mining that analogy, he invokes the *clinamen* – the chance and causeless horizontal motion that brings free-falling atoms together – in order to accentuate the power of epistolary correspondence. Even though the atomist *clinamen* occurs unexpectedly, with a “casual” instead of a “causal” order, the swerving atoms still form bodies. In the same way, letters arriving out of order still form a body of friendship. The passage invokes Lucretius in other ways as well: the materialism of atomist thought underlies the suggestion that friendship is a physical as well as spiritual bond (the “body of friendship” formed by letters), while the very syntax evokes atomist cosmology. Repetitive, often inverted, choppy, and broken up with a multitude of commas, the second half of the paragraph mimics the atomist cosmos it evokes, much like Ronsard’s atomist sonnet, “Les petitz corps,” where letters and atoms each “s’entracochans d’acrochements divers.”<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Letter XLIV To Sir Henry Goodyer, 14 April 1612. John Donne, *Letters to Severall Persons of Honour* (New York: Sturgis & Walton Company, 1910), 64.

<sup>100</sup> The analogy occurs in *DRN* at I.823– 29, I.196– 98, I.912– 14, II.688– 90, and II.1013– 14. Here is just one example from the first book: “quin etiam passim nostris in versibus ipsis / multa elementa vides multis communia verbis, / cum tamen inter se versus ac verba necessest / confiteare et re et sonitu distare sonanti. / tantum elementa queunt permutato ordine solo; / at rerum quae sunt primordia, plura adhibere / possunt unde queant variae res quaeque creari.” (*DRN* I.823–9). “Furthermore, all through these very lines of mine, you see / Many letters that are shared by many words – and yet / You must confess that words and lines from this one alphabet / Have sundry sounds and meanings. Letters only have to change / Their order to accomplish all of this – and still the range / Of possibilities with atoms is greater. That is why / They can create the universe’s rich variety.” On Lucretius and analogy and cosmopoetics there are many sources. Schiesaro, however, is the most comprehensive. Schiesaro, *Simulacrum et imago*.

<sup>101</sup> In “Les petitz corps,” Ronsard depicts the inside of his body as an atomist cosmos:

Les petitz corps, culbutans de travers  
Parmi leur cheute en byaiz vagabonde  
Heurtez ensemble, ont composé le monde,  
S’entracochans d’acrochements divers.  
L’ennuy, le soing, & les pensers ouvers,  
Chocquans le vain de mon amour profond  
Ont façonné d’une attache féconde,



Donne's letter draws considerable rhetorical strength from the very atomist notion that most offended the Christian sensibilities of the Renaissance: the idea that a random swerve of matter – not God – dictates creation. By contrast, in his sermons and divine poetry, Donne joins the ranks of seventeenth century thinkers like Nicholas Hill and Pierre Gassendi, who Christianized atomism by inserting a divine center into the materialist chaos.<sup>102</sup> There, Donne abandons contingency for control, recasting the randomness of atomist cosmology in Christian terms, as a movement of contraction and coherence, using the threat of materialist disintegration to dramatize divinity's power to make chaos into harmony. Donne's Christianized atomist cosmology emphasizes hierarchy, the concentration of power, and the helplessness of atoms – or humans – at the mercy of an all-powerful God. Instead of a fragmented atomist cosmos, the Christian God holds the pieces of the world together.

Atomist imagery is abundant in Donne's poetry, often appearing in contradictory ways. The underlying consistency of Donne's engagement with atomism lies in its application to questions of writing. Donne used atomism's cosmological imagery to depict the networks in which his poetry circulated, and atomist imagery is most common when he depicts and reflects upon textual circulation – from patronage networks to letters to friends. This includes both his criticisms of what he considered to be bad or inefficient verse, as well as his experiments with creating more viable models. Thus, on the one hand, Donne will develop a scathing critique of Petrarchism using imagery of atomist fragmentation, and on the other, he will envision idealized patronage networks as the Christianized atomist universe, with the lady patroness at the center of the chaotic cosmos. In both cases, Donne uses the world-picture of atomist philosophy to envision and produce the networks in which his texts circulated. That shifting cosmological models matched the political, religious, and cultural instability of the period made them all the more appropriate as metaphors for textual circulation.

Donne's invocations of Christianized atomism in the sermons (frequently to dramatize the resurrection of the body) emphasize the fragmentation of brute matter and the coherence imposed upon it by God. A rather tone-deaf marriage sermon compares the decomposition of a corpse to the motion of atoms. Fragmented by decay, the body is nevertheless mustered back together to sit, whole, at God's side in heaven:

Where be all the splinters of that Bone, which a shot hath shivered  
and scattered in the Ayre? Where be all the Atoms of that flesh,  
which a *Corrasive* hath eat away, or a *Consumption* hath breath'd, and  
exhal'd away from our arms, and other Limbs? In what wrinkle, in  
what furrow, in what bowel of the earth, ly all the graines of the ashes  
of a body burnt a thousand years since? ... What cohaerence, what  
sympathy, what dependence maintaines any relation, any  
correspondence, between that arm that was lost in Europe, and that

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Dedans mon coeur l'amoureux univers

Sonnet 37, lines 1-8, Ronsard, *Les Amours (1552-1584)*. For a longer reading of this poem, see Chapter One.

<sup>102</sup> Geoffrey Keynes, *A Bibliography of Dr. John Donne* (Cambridge: Clarendon Press, 1973), 270–1. Hill's volume, the only he ever published, was the subject of mockery from the time of its publication in 1601; Ben Jonson's epigram 133 derides its "atomi ridiculous." On the reception of Hill's work, see Gillespie and Hardie, *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius*, 244. On Gassendi and the seventeenth century revival of atomism, see Antonia LoLordo, *Pierre Gassendi and the Birth of Early Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

legge that was lost in Afrique or Asia, scores of yeers between?<sup>103</sup>

The passage compares the body to the cosmos and the soul to God. In this parallel, the atomist system is a metaphor for the body after death, when the soul has fled and the flesh decomposes. Where the living body once had “cohaerence,” “sympathy,” “dependence,” and “correspondance” – in short, “relation” – dead it is atomized, disconnected particles of meat. This chilling evocation of decaying flesh pillories atomism for its denial of divine control over matter.

Despite the considerable gruesomeness of the sermon’s language, its rhetoric tends toward a final resolution: the reassurance of God’s power to re-compact any body, no matter how scattered, at the Resurrection.<sup>104</sup> Even when the soul has left the body, Donne affirms that the flesh still has a center – God. “[A]nd still, still God knows in what Cabinet every seed-Pearle lies, in what part of the world every graine of every mans dust lies, ... and in the twinkling of an eye, that body that was scattered over all the elements, is sate down at the right hand of God, in a glorious resurrection.”<sup>105</sup> In the terms of the metaphor, Donne has reassured his listeners not only of the body’s resurrection but also God’s absolute control over nature, including over those pesky godless atoms.

Bodily disintegration and divine resurrection speak not only to the religious principle of resurrection, but to the positive potential of Christianized atomist imagery in general – the powerful image of particles coming together to form a whole.<sup>106</sup> The sermon preached at Saint Paul’s on Easter, 1626 on 1 Corinthians 15:29 is a paradigmatic example of the trope (Donne repeats its wording several times in later sermons). Here, Donne explores the ways that the divine recollection of man’s body can translate to a mortal motion of repentance and conscience:

God that knowes in which Boxe of his Cabinet all this seed Pearle lies, in what corner of the world every atome, every graine of every mans dust sleeps, shall recollect that dust, and then recompact that body, and then reinanimate that man, and that is the accomplishment of all. In this resurrection, from this Dispersion and scattering in sin, the way is by Recollection too: That this sinner recollect him himself, and his own history, his own annalls, his own journalls, and call to minde where he lost his way, and with what tendernesse of conscience...<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> November 19, 1627, marriage sermon for the Earl of Bridgewater’s daughter, 5. Italics Donne’s. *John Donne Sermons*. 2012. Brigham Young University Digital Collections. 7 October 2012.

<http://lib.byu.edu/digital/donne/>. All citations to Donne’s sermons are to this electronic text archive, which is based upon the John Donne, George R. Potter, and Evelyn M. Simpson, *The Sermons of John Donne. Vols 1-10*. (University of California Press, 1953).

<sup>104</sup> Several of Donne’s contemporaries used similar analogies between atoms and the souls and bodies of sinners. Clucas explains that “More’s atoms were not ‘merely passive’, but ‘rouse up themselves on high’. Thomas Traherne’s atoms, too, rouse themselves up, and become analogous with the regenerated soul of the sinner.” Stephen Clucas, “Poetic Atomism in Seventeenth-Century England: Henry More, Thomas Traherne and Scientific Imagination,” *Renaissance Studies Journal of the Society for Renaissance Studies* 5, no. 3 (2008): 338.

<sup>105</sup> Easter, 1626 Sermon, 22.

<sup>106</sup> These are favorite themes of Donne’s. On disintegration, see for example the 1627 sermon on Matthew 22:30, or the 1629 Christmas sermon on John 10:10. A similar anxiety is expressed in the holy sonnet, “Thou hast made me.”

<sup>107</sup> Easter, 1626 Sermon, 22. See also Holy Sonnet VII, where Donne writes “At the round earth’s imagined corners, blow / Your trumpets, angels, and arise, arise / From death, you numberless infinities / Of souls,

The recollection of scattered bodies at the resurrection demonstrates God's power and the ascendancy of spirit over matter's decay, but the motion of recollection is also available to the repentant sinner, who can "recollect himself" through the process of recuperating and charting his own past sins. Conscience, operating through memory, recollects the self that man has scattered in sin. The sermon expands the possibilities for Christianized atomism by taking a gesture usually belonging to God alone and making it available to the lay believer. It is not only God who can recollect man (man's body, at the Resurrection), but man himself who can recollect those scraps of his life that have scattered like atoms in memory. Donne's account of human recollection emphasizes textuality: the sinner recollects his "own history, his own annals, his own journalls," gathering together the traces of his life as if from written texts. The atomist imagery of fragmented bodies that had supported Donne's description of the resurrection of the body is seamlessly re-purposed for fragmented texts.

## II. Petrarchism and Patronage

The atomist imagery in the sermons is a far cry from the atomist imagery in Donne's letter to Goodyear, and yet the sort of thinking Donne does in the sermons about bodily disintegration and divine resurrection speaks to the way Donne thought about human writing – in atomist terms. For example, several poems to patrons use atomist imagery much like the Christianized atomism of the sermons to describe productive patron-poet relationships. Just as God contracts man's body at the resurrection, Donne implies, powerful patrons could "contract" socially marginal poets into their employ. A verse letter Donne wrote to the Countess of Huntingdon around 1605 explains how.<sup>108</sup>

But, as from extreme heights who downward looks,  
 Sees men at children's shapes, rivers at brooks,  
 And lose the younger forms; so, to your eye  
 These (Madam) that without your distance lie,  
 Must either mist, or nothing seem to be,  
 Who are at home but wit's mere atomi.  
 But, I who can behold them move, and stay,  
 Have found myself to you, just their midway;  
 And now must pity them; for as they do  
 Seem sick to me, just so must I to you.  
 ...  
 Yet neither will I vex your eyes to see  
 A sighing ode, nor cross-armed elegy.  
 I come not to call pity from your heart,  
 Like some white-livered dotard that would part

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and to your scattered bodies go ...” (1-4) For similar wording, see the sermon preached at Saint Paul's on Whitsunday, 1629 on Genesis 1:2: “So he keeps an eye upon every graine, and atome of our dust, whither soever it be blowne, and keeps a roome at his owne right hand for that body, when that shall be reunited in a blessed Resurrection...” *John Donne Sermons*, 17. Also, In the “Obsequies to the Lord Harrington,” Donne remarks that “God knows where every atom lies.”

<sup>108</sup> Some argue earlier, as Donne would have known her for some time, because her mother married Sir Thomas Egerton and brought the three Stanley sisters into the household where Donne was a secretary. The poem could have been written after her marriage in 1603.

Else from his slippery soul with a faint groan,  
And faithfully, without you smiled, I were gone.

...

Who first looked sad, grieved, pined, and shew'd his pain,  
Was he that first taught women to disdain.

As all things were one nothing, dull and weak,  
Until this raw disorder'd heap did break,  
And several desires led parts away,  
Water declined with earth, the air did stay,  
Fire rose, and each from other but untied,  
Themselves unprison'd were and purified;  
So was love, first in vast confusion hid,  
An unripe willingness which nothing did,  
A thirst, an appetite which had no ease,  
That found a want, but knew not what would please.

(Donne *Complete English Poems* "To the Countess of Huntingdon," 11-19, 21-6, 35-46)<sup>109</sup>

The beginning of the poem is odd and convoluted, and its context requires some explication. It begins, without prelude, with a description of the New World, the "unripe side of earth," where men live like those who would have populated Paradise in Adam's time. How they have persisted in such a state to this day is unclear; it is as if they lived so far from Paradise that news of Adam's sin and expulsion had not yet reached them. Fallen, but not yet saved, having as little heard of Christ's coming as they had of Adam's fall, these primitive men "want the reward, yet bear the sin."

The first lines of the poem only come into focus, however, after considering the second and third sections excerpted here (from line 21 onwards), so I will start with them. Donne invokes Petrarch to describe how he will *not* write his poem. He will not praise the Countess by pretending to love her, begging attention by moaning and calling out for pity. No, Donne scorns this poetic mode: such a love is fatally weak, inciting women to scorn rather than to love. In this poem, Petrarchism is an impotent discourse, running contrary to its objectives both in love and in patronage: why invoke love to seduce a lady or cajole a patroness when it makes the lover a "raw, disorder'd heap" and teaches "women to disdain"?<sup>110</sup> The Petrarchan discourse of desire is so unappealing that it guarantees its own failure, driving women away so that desire goes unfulfilled, a "thirst, an appetite which had no ease."

The critique of Petrarchism responds to the real practical considerations of an impoverished poet – how to inveigle patronage and reinforce social relations in the common genre of both lovers and courtiers – but it also takes imagery and motivation from Donne's critique of atomist philosophy, an important component of what he called the "New Science" or "New Philosophy."<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> All references to Donne's English poems are to John Donne, *The Complete English Poems of John Donne* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971). For the ease of those readers using different editions, I will cite line numbers, indicating the poem's title only if it might be unclear from the preceding text.

<sup>110</sup> An in-depth argument about Donne's Petrarchism (and "counter"-Petrarchism) is Heather Dubrow, *Echoes of Desire: English Petrarchism and Its Counterdiscourses* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

<sup>111</sup> Marotti and others have written eloquently about the ways that Elizabethan poets used Petrarchan forms for political means, addressing the Queen and jockeying elegantly for position at her court. However, Elizabeth's death and the ascent of James I to the throne demanded a shift away from erotics in the versification of court and patronage politics. Arthur Marotti, *John Donne, Coterie Poet* (Madison: University of

In his poetry, Donne often depicts himself as a man living in a world falling apart. The disintegrating religious, social, and philosophical systems around him could be gracefully – albeit distressingly – expressed in images of fragmentation taken from the resurgent atomist philosophy, which imagined a world in which atoms careened in the void, independent of any God or gods. As is well documented in the secondary scholarship, both Donne’s sermons and his poetry draw their spectacular vistas of disunity from the innovations of natural philosophy. The most famous expression of this is “The First Anniversary” of “An Anatomy of the World,” where the new-fangled enquiries of the New Philosophy come to stand for any and all disharmony:

And new philosophy calls all in doubt,  
The element of fire is quite put out,  
The sun is lost, and th’ earth, and no man’s wit  
Can well direct him where to look for it.  
And freely men confess that this world’s spent,  
When in the planets and the firmament  
They seek so many new; they see that this  
Is crumbled out again to his atomies.  
‘Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone,  
All just supply, and all relation;  
Prince, subject, father, son, are things forgot...  
(Donne *Complete English Poems*, 205-14)

The perspectival shifts of natural philosophy, unseating the sun and putting the earth in its place, investigating new worlds, and shuffling elements, has destroyed the coherence of the world, which crumbles out into “atomies.” Atoms are figures not just for nature but for all relations. The shift in relations between sun and earth infects all relationships – social, political, and familial. “This is the world’s condition now.”<sup>112</sup> Atomism is privileged in this description as a metaphor for incoherence itself, and thus for all the other shifts in cosmic perspective. In much of Donne’s writing, atomism is the image par excellence for incoherence because the chaotic motion of atoms functions as a metaphor for the loss of proper relation.

The verse letter to the Countess of Huntingdon uses atomist imagery to parody the standard tropes of Petrarchan love poetry. In the second of the stanzas quoted above, Donne’s description of chaos reframes Petrarchan desire in terms of fragmented matter: the desire that the lover feels, which makes him break down into sad looks and groans, is compared to the “several desires” that break up the original matter of chaos. The stanzas are parallel in language and motifs, implying that both poetry and matter break down when they feel “love” and “desire.” Donne criticizes Petrarchism because he correctly identifies the Lucretianism of the Petrarchan tradition, the way in which amorous symptoms – tears, sighs, roving distraction – fragment the poet’s body, evoking the breakdown of matter that dissolves the cosmic order.

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Wisconsin Press, 1986). Arthur Marotti, “‘Love Is Not Love’: Elizabethan Sonnet Sequences and the Social Order,” *ELH* 49, no. 2 (Summer 1982): 396–428.

<sup>112</sup> Marjorie Nicolson’s classic account of seventeenth-century poetry and the New Science, *Breaking the Circle*, established the way that the cosmologies of the New Science provided fitting metaphors for fragmentation, the broad social transformations and transitions that destabilized early seventeenth-century England. The changing face of the globe and the attendant transformation of trade and of market, the death of Queen Elizabeth, and shifts in religious and social relations. See Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *The Breaking of the Circle: Studies in the Effect of the “New Science” on Seventeenth Century Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960).

The lover Donne describes in the letter to the Countess of Huntingdon could be a parody of Petrarch via Pierre de Ronsard, a poet whom Donne read and admired.<sup>113</sup> Ronsard had projected Lucretian cosmology onto Petrarchan tropes, reimagining the body's elements as poetic matter – the sighs and rhymes of Petrarchan verse. But where Ronsard emphasizes the productive conjunctions and couplings of his poetic atoms, here Donne highlights the fragmentation behind those same amorous sighs, taking the atomist tropes that have assimilated to love poetry and uncovering their allegiances to atomist materialism and its fragmentary world picture. Donne's "sighing ode" and "faint groan" skewers the "scattered" quality of Petrarch rhymes and sighs ("Voi ch'ascoltate in rime sparse il suono di quei sospiri ond'io nudriva 'l core"<sup>114</sup>).

If Donne's "sighing ode" and "faint groan" skewers the sighs in the first line of Petrarch's *Rime*, or, for that matter, Ronsard's "ennuy, le soing, and penses ouvers," his "raw disorder'd heap" exposes how these amorous symptoms – tears, sighs, roving distraction – fragment the poet's body and evoke the fragmentation of atomist matter. Donne declines to play the Petrarchan lover to the Countess because he doesn't want to "fall apart," to act out, in amorous fashion, the same jarring fragmentation of matter that characterized the new world picture of the seventeenth century. In this poem, Petrarchan verse comes to represent both cosmic incoherence (scattered matter) and the disruption of patronage systems (scattered rhymes) that Donne so hopes to avoid.

Thinking this way about Petrarchism and atomism reframes the beginning of the poem, when Donne praises the Countess and disparages those poets (himself as well as others) who address love poems to her.

But, as from extreme heights who downward looks,  
Sees men at children's shapes, rivers at brooks,  
And lose the younger forms; so, to your eye  
These (Madam) that without your distance lie,  
Must either mist, or nothing seem to be,  
Who are at home but wit's mere atomi.  
But, I who can behold them move, and stay,  
Have found myself to you, just their midway;  
And now must pity them; for as they do  
Seem sick to me, just so must I to you.

(Donne *Complete English Poems*, 11-19)

Donne's rather garbled description of the natives in the New World allows him to illustrate the Countess of Huntingdon's superiority to him, the suppliant poet. Only when we reach the next stanza, where Donne lists the poetic sins that he will avoid, like playing the groveling Petrarchan lover, does it become clear that he is comparing these distant natives to poets. These scribblers, living outside the Countess' circle, are so distant from her that they appear as a mist, or nothing. Even in their own spheres – "at home" – they are trifling poets, "wit's mere *atomi*" (Donne's italic). Donne, who is also an outsider, though rather more familiar, lies halfway between them and the Countess in the visual comparison. "But, I who can behold them move, and stay, / Have found

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<sup>113</sup> On Donne and Ronsard, see H. M. Richmond, "Ronsard and the English Renaissance," *Comparative Literature Studies* 7, no. 2 (June 1, 1970): 141–60. Richmond mentions in particular the similarity between Donne's "Air and Angels" and Ronsard's elegy "Mon corps est plus leger que n'est l'esprit," which is notable because Ronsard's discussion of *démons* is indebted to the important Lucretian erotic concept, the *simulacrum* (an erotic fantasy). *Ibid.*, 147, note 21.

<sup>114</sup> Petrarca, *Petrarch's Lyric Poems*, 1, 1–2.

myself to you, just their midway.” Donne can see them because, like them, he is a poet, and socially peripheral. He realizes, with dismay, that as bad – small – as they seem to him, so he seems to the Countess. The perspectival scale is equated, roughly, with social standing.

The source of Donne’s metaphors for the Countess’ celestial perspective is the “suave mari magno” passage that begins Book Two of *DRN*.<sup>115</sup> In this passage, Lucretius describes the comfort and calm of watching a shipwreck from a high cliff. The distance allows the experience to be purely visual; the spectator maintains emotional calm even though the sailors suffer below. Thus the Countess, “from extreme heights,” looks down at the poets. Donne further emphasizes the Countess’s perspectival ascendancy by drawing upon the broad premise underlying Lucretius’ poem, that atoms are invisible to the naked eye and so must be described by analogy to visible things.<sup>116</sup> To make his point, the Roman poet compares atoms to motes in the sun.<sup>117</sup> Donne adopts the same image to express the invisibility of the poets in the Countess’ eyes, establishing the Countess’ superiority and defining the abjection of poets with atomist *minima*. This a vision of social proximity and remove, collection and dispersion, with atomism refigured as a picture of the social rather than natural world, the poets playing atoms, “mere nothings,” from the dark side of the earth, and the patroness the celestial midpoint of a fragmenting universe.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> “Suave, mari magno turbantibus aequora ventis, / e terra magnum alterius spectare laborem; / non quia vexari quemquamst iucunda voluptas, / sed quibus ipse malis careas quia cernere suave est, / suave etiam belli certamina magna tueri / per campos instructa tua sine parte pericli.” *DRN* II.1-6. “It is sweet, when on the great sea the winds trouble its waters, to behold from land another’s deep distress; not that it is a pleasure and delight that any should be afflicted, but because it is sweet to see from what evils you are yourself exempt. It is sweet also to look upon the mighty struggles of war arrayed along the plains without sharing yourself in the danger.” On the Lucretian motif of shipwreck, see Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997). Frank Lestringant, “Lucrèce, la Renaissance et ses naufrages,” in *La Renaissance de Lucrèce*, ed. Frank Lestringant (Paris: PUPS, 2010), 7–15. The thoughtful layering and contrasting of Lucretian images and themes indicates that Donne was intimately familiar with the *DRN*. There is no record that Donne owned a copy of *DRN*, but he would have had ample opportunity to read it. He could have borrowed it from Ben Jonson, who owned a copy he annotated heavily. (On Jonson’s annotations see C.H. Herford, E. Simpson, and P. Simpson, eds., *Ben Jonson*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1925), 225–8.) This scenario is not unlikely, given that Donne seems to have borrowed or acquired his copy of Nicholas Hill’s book on Epicurean and Democritian philosophy from Jonson. Keynes, *A Bibliography of Dr. John Donne*, 271.

<sup>116</sup> *DRN* II.112–120.

<sup>117</sup> Donne does the same thing in Elegy 18.

<sup>118</sup> Donne is quite fond of referring to himself as a nothing, particularly to the powerful and those to whom he is indebted. In a verse letter to the Countess of Bedford (“I”Have written then”), he refers to himself once again as nothing in order to humble himself before a rich and powerful patroness. “[N]othing, as I am, may / Pay all they have, and yet have all to pay ...” (Donne *Complete English Poems*, 7-8) To Sir Henry Goodyer he writes, “Sir, if I were any thing, my love to you might multiply it, and dignifie it: But infinite nothings are but one such: Yet since even Chymeraes have some name, and titles, I am also, ‘Yours.’” Donne, *Letters to Severall Persons of Honour*, 286–7. The sermons use the same language of nothing to compare man to God. See the sermon preached at Saint Paul’s on 2 Corinthians 5:20. “But shall man, betweene whom and nothing, there went but a word, *Let us make Man*, That Nothing, which is infinitely less then a Mathematicall point, then an imaginary atom, shall this Man, this yesterdayes Nothing, this to morrow worse than Nothing ...” *John Donne Sermons*, 16-17. Here, atoms (imaginary, which we might here read as “invisible”) are evoked to give an impression of nothingness. The sermon preached on Christmas day of 1629 on John 10:10 again compares man, in his smallness, to an invisible atom. “God is too large, too immense, and then man is too narrow, too little to be considered. for, who can fixe his eye upon an Atome? and he must see a lesse thing then an Atome, that sees man, for man is nothing.” *John Donne Sermons*, 4.

To what effect this superposition of a critique of Petrarchism – framed in atomist terms – and the praise of the Countess as a celestial figure with near-divine purview – also framed in atomist terms? Atomism captures a dialectic in Donne’s poetry, between fragmentation – of the natural world, of the human body, of the social body – and the necessity of re-establishing coherence through language, especially poetry. In this poem, Donne is reflecting on how to write effective verse – whether in love or patronage – in the waning of Petrarchism. The poem stages the failure of Petrarchism to achieve this goal while simultaneously proposing a new model. Instead of groveling before her, Donne praises the countess as a quasi-divine figure, whose Christian virtue operates as a power of contraction on the marginal and impoverished poets surrounding her. In the failed Petrarchan model, love, construed as erotic desire, drives the poet/lover to despair and fragment, producing his scattered rhymes. In Donne’s new model, adapted from Christian discourses about atomism like those in the sermons, human love is construed along the lines of the divine love that God exerts on the body at the resurrection. The human equivalent is virtue. In such a model, a virtuous patroness, who would be completely uninterested in erotic advances from a Petrarchan poet, executes the gesture of social contraction that characterizes patronage.

Donne adopts Lucretianism in particular as the vehicle for a renovation of Petrarchism because whereas Petrarchism emphasizes the inaccessibility and frustration of desire, Lucretius offers a vision of how to write relation. Why Lucretius is so important to Donne’s project is clarified by contrasting the Lucretian view of love and poetry to the Platonic. Platonizing verse strives to transcend earthly desires but also earthly mediums – towards an ideal that necessarily cannot be achieved in the mortal terms of love and lust nor the mortal medium of verse. In platonic poetry, the lady is never possessed, the relation is never consummated, and intimacy is never achieved except as subsumed into transcendence. In Petrarch, the paradigmatic case, Mary is substituted for Laura. In this trajectory of relationality, poetry exists as part of the striving towards an ideal, but has no place at the site of transcendence. There is no writing at the site of the idea (just as, in negative theology, there is no language adequate to God). Donne, however, wants to write at the very moment of intimacy, not simply towards it. This is not a question of writing consummated love instead of desire (a common account of Donne’s difference from Petrarchism)<sup>119</sup> but rather of writing as a site of intimacy itself, the interlocking of letters as the embrace of lovers or, in the case of letters to patrons, the center point of a contracting cosmos. With his analogy of atoms and letters, Lucretius places writing at the heart of conjunction itself. For Lucretius, poet that he was, writing doesn’t break down at the intimate, but thrives there; that is its site, its home.

Using the cosmological model of atomist diffusion and Christian contraction as a discourse for patronage is Donne’s revision of Petrarchism. In Donne’s new model, adapted from Christian discourses about atomism, love is not construed erotically but along the lines of divine love. Manifesting itself in humans as virtue, this purified love contracts and coheres the poet the same way God compacts the decaying body at the resurrection. In such a model, the comprehensive motion of love-as-virtue entails the gesture of social contraction that characterizes patronage. This love partakes of virtue rather than eroticism; the lady’s implied partner is not the poet-lover of Petrarchism but a socially ambitious poet. Donne does significant work on the concept of virtue, revisioning it as a desexualized love, which instead of sexual congress, seeks towards spiritual coherence. Virtue becomes a force of pure relationality. As he writes in the verse letter to the Countess of Huntingdon: “Why love among the virtues is not known / Is, that love is them all contract in one.” (Donne *Complete English Poems*, 129-30)

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<sup>119</sup> There is certainly more space in Lucretianism than Platonism for that kind of erotics, not least of all because Lucretius’s spectacular account of sex and desire in Book Four of *DRN* provided a model. Like Lucretius, however, Donne proves himself less interested in lust than in coherent union.



Portraying patronage networks through Christianized atomism puts significant pressure on the figure of the patron, or patroness, who is tasked with a divine function. At the center of the poetic cosmos, the patron occupies God's seat. The criticisms of Donne's "Anatomy" focus on this problem, attacking the way Donne construed Elizabeth Drury as an exemplar of virtue and a figure for cosmological and moral coherence. Readers found Donne's conceit overblown and inappropriate to its subject: Ben Jonson famously said that "The First Anniversary" was "profane and full of Blasphemies," adding that "If it had been written of ye Virgin Marie it had been something."<sup>120</sup> Jonson was absolutely right that young Elizabeth had become a divine figure (and Donne agreed, supposedly responded that he described "the Idea of a Woman and not as she was").<sup>121</sup> Jonson's remark is particularly apt for detecting the cosmological core of Donne's description of Drury, who functions as a sort of world soul in the poem. "The Anatomy" transfers to Drury – as an exemplar of virtue – the power to consolidate matter scattered out by the New Science. "This is the world's condition now, and now / She that should all parts to reunion bow, / She that had all magnetic force alone, / To draw, and fasten sund'red parts in one ..." (Donne *Complete English Poems*, 219-22) Unfortunately, Drury has died, and in this poem it is her death that spells the world's demise because only she, that pattern of female virtue, could have reunified lost matter with her "magnetic force." Drury's death is the world soul's flight from the body of the globe.

Responding to the hostile reception of the "Anatomy," Donne fleshed out his logic of exemplarity and the relationship between virtue, women, and the motion of contraction. A verse letter to the Countess of Huntingdon ("Man to God's image") explains that a lady can exert a quasi-divine force of contraction because virtue has contracted itself in her:

If the world's age and death be argued well  
 By the sun's fall, which now towards earth doth bend,  
 Then we might fear that virtue, since she fell  
 So low as woman, should be near her end.  
 But she's not stoop'd, but raised; exiled by men  
 She fled to heaven, that's heavenly things, that's you;  
 She was in all men thinly scatter'd then,  
 But now a mass contracted in a few.

...

Though you a wife's and mother's name retain,  
 'Tis not as woman, for all are not so;  
 But virtue, having made you virtue, is fain  
 To adhere in these names, her and you to show.

(Donne *Complete English Poems*, 17-24, 29-32)

The trope is the same as in the "Anatomy:" cosmological shifts speak to disintegrating moral structures. Exiled by men, virtue has fallen along with the sun. That fall, however, is actually an ascent, because she finds a home in women, low in the eyes of the world, but so virtuous as to be revered in heaven. Ever careful, Donne clarifies how the word "woman" could come to stand for "virtue:" "virtue, having made you virtue, is fain / To adhere in the name 'woman.'" The word itself

<sup>120</sup> Ian Donaldson, ed., *Ben Jonson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 596. On the hostile reception of the "First Anniversary" of Donne's "Anatomy of the World," see Ramie Targoff, *John Donne, Body and Soul* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 87.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

collects virtue's meaning in it, mimicking the gesture by which the Countess "contracts" virtues: actual virtue inheres in the Countess just as "virtue" in the word "woman."

### III. Amorous Atomies

This line of thought about Lucretius and Donne casts new light on even the most famous and commented of Donne's poems. Many of Donne's secular poems draw upon Lucretian cosmological models drawn from Lucretius. In the same way that the sermons obsessively describe the body rotting after death before God calls it back together, many of Donne's cruelest poems push Petrarchism to its crass extremes in order to show how horribly it fails to produce relationships, and in both the poems glorifying love and in those bemoaning the loss of love, Donne uses an atomist vocabulary to dramatize the fragmentation and coherence of bodies done and undone by language.

Using the motif of oath breaking to dramatize the breakup of a relationship, Donne's "The Expostulation" casts light on the connection between Petrarchism, atomist philosophy, and written language. The poem shows the language of Petrarchan love cheapening the holy compacts that language can make. As in the verse letter to the Countess of Huntingdon, where Petrarchan verse fails to establish patronage relations, the "sighs" and "oaths" and "tears" of Petrarchan verse do nothing to seal a compact of love, instead disintegrating into broken promises.

Are vows so cheap with women, or the matter  
whereof they are made, that they are writ in water  
and blowe away with wind? Or doth their breath  
Both hot and cold, at once make life and death?  
Who could have thought so many accents sweet  
Form'd into words, so many sighs should meet  
As from our hearts, so many oaths, and tears  
Sprinkled among, all sweeten'd by our fears,  
And the divine impression of stolen kisses,  
That seal'd the rest, should now prove empty blisses?  
Did you draw bonds to forfeit? sign to break?  
Or must we read you quite from what you speak,  
And find the truth out the wrong way?

(Donne *Complete English Works*, 9-21)

Donne finds that his Petrarchan vows were meaningless – or rather, that the vows extracted from women with Petrarchan tools are meaningless. Vows are material, only as reliable as the matter onto which they are inscribed. "The matter whereof [oaths] are made" is like water or wind, woman's tears and woman's sighs. The kisses that "seal" these oaths are as little binding as those fleeting breaths.

Donne exploits the commonplace of faithless woman to equate broken oaths and foul language with the fragmentation of the body.<sup>122</sup> The faithfulness of lovers speaks to the success or failure of love language: when language breaks down, we are left with the same sort of base materialism – atomist chaos – as when social unities disintegrate in "The Anatomy"

But oh her mind, that Orcus, which includes

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<sup>122</sup> Donne's poems document many crises of faithfulness. See, for example, "Woman's Constancy," "Twicknam Garden," and "The "Valediction of my Name in the Window."

Legions of mischiefs, countless multitudes  
of formless curses, projects unmade up,  
Abuses yet unfashioned, thoughts corrupt,  
Misshapen cavils, palpable untruths,  
Inevitable errors, self-accusing loaths:  
These, like those atoms swarming in the sun,  
Throng in her bosom for creation.  
(Donne *Complete English Works*, 24-30)<sup>123</sup>

In Elegy 13 (to Julia), Orcus, the God of the underworld and punisher of broken oaths, reigns over the bodies crowded with cracked and broken words.<sup>124</sup> Julia's body is a fully textualized vision of an atomist cosmos, with fragments of language crowding inside her "like those atoms swarming in the sun," but her *minima* are not held together by any divine – or chance – intervention. Her texts, to use the language of the sermons, are not "recollected," nor, to use the language of the letters, do they come together haphazardly to "form a body of friendship."

Donne will use the Lucretian analogy between atoms and letters several times to discuss women's bodies. The very cruel second elegy, "The Anagram," compares the features of a woman's face to the alphabet. The conceit is that the woman would be beautiful if we could rearrange and exchange her features the way we shuffle letters in an anagram. "Though all her parts be not in th' usual place, / She hath yet an anagram of a good face. / If we might put the letters but one way, / In that lean dearth of words, what could we say?" (15-18) Essentially, Donne has transposed the Lucretian analogy of letters to atoms into the world of the blazon, making it letter to feature. In this, Donne echoes the wonderful Lucretian passage on loving ugly women.<sup>125</sup>

As with Donne's sermons and patronage poems, these hellish visions have a heavenly counterpart. The broken oaths and fragmented bodies of Donne's anti-Petrarchan poems find a contrast in poems and letters that give an idealized vision of productive relationships and coherent writing. "The Ecstasy," for example, describes the physical and spiritual unity of lovers in terms just as atomist as the broken oaths of Elegy 18. Two lovers lie upon a riverbank, which is evocatively described as "pregnant," implying a sexual congress that the poem does not describe. (Donne *Complete English Poems*, 2) Hands and "eye-beams" intertwined, the lovers' souls go out of their bodies to "negotiate" an amorous treaty. (Donne *Complete English Poems*, 11-12) Over the course of the day, the lovers come to understand that love is not just sex – physical conjunction – but spiritual conjunction as well.

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<sup>123</sup> This poem's parallels with Ronsard's "Les petitz corps" are astounding, although Donne once again gives a negative version of broken language to contrast Ronsard's idealized vision of poetic creation and amorous infatuation.

<sup>124</sup> Lucretius refers to Orcus twice, in reference to the underworld (*DRN* I.115; VI.762).

<sup>125</sup> "nam faciunt homines plerumque cupidine caeca / et tribuunt ea quae non sunt his commode vere. Multimodis igitur pravas turpique videmus / esse in deliciis summoque in honore vigere .... nigra melichrus est, imunda et fetida acosmos, / caesia Palladium, nervosa et lignea dorcas, / parvula, pumilio, chariton mia, tota merum sal, / magna atque inmanis cataplexis plenaque honoris ... at tumida et mammosa Ceres est ipsa ab Iaccho, / simula Silena ac saturast, labeosa philema. / cetera de genere hoc longum est si dicere coner." (*DRN* IV.1152–6, 1160–3). "...For desire makes men blind / And generally they overlook their girlfriends' faults, and bless / These women with fine qualities they don't in fact possess. / That's how it comes that we see girls – malformed in many ways / And hideous – are petted darlings, objects of high praise .... The black girl is *brown sugar*. A slob that doesn't bathe or clean / Is a *Natural Beauty*; *Athena* if her eyes are greyish-green. / A stringy beanpole's a *gazelle*. A midget is a *sprite*, / *Cute as a button*. She's a *knockout* if she's a giant's height ..."

But as all several souls contain  
 Mixture of things, they know not what,  
 Love, these mixed souls doth mix again,  
 And makes both one, each this and that ...  
 We then, who are this new soul, know,  
 Of what we are composed, and made,  
 For, th'atomies of which we grow,  
 Are souls, whom no change can invade.  
 (Donne *Complete English Poems*, 33-6, 45-8)

Bodies have their elements, souls their atomies; each is made up of smaller particles, which allows them to combine given love's alchemical force, mixing again to make a new unity.<sup>126</sup>

Donne imagines love as the contraction of two souls, two bodies, by a merging of their elements, or "atomies." Donne often uses the play of perspective to emphasize the coherence of this new unity. In "The Flea," Donne declares that the tiny flea, having sucked the blood of each a man and a woman, is their marriage bed. The body of the flea has mingled the elements of the two, and now contains their whole universe.

Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare,  
 Where we almost, nay more than married are.  
 This flea is you and I, and this  
 Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is;  
 Though parents grudge, and you, we're met,  
 And cloistered in these living walls of jet.  
 (Donne *Complete English Poems*, 10-15)

The flea is whole world, a cloister for love, safe from disapproving parents and prudish mores. In "The Canonization," he will goad a heckler who mocks his love: "Call us what you will, we are made such by love;/ Call her one, me another fly ..." (19-20) It is a show of bravado: the lover turns every slur thrown at him into gift by demonstrating that it is love's magic that made them so, not the insult. They are no worse for being flies, because as flies they inhabit a close, private space of union.

The fly, like the flea, is a trick of scale, playing smallness off as coherence, unity, or safety. This relies on the quick switch of perspective from great to small, a play of scale that recalls the one Donne uses in some of his sermons, when he contrasts God and man.<sup>127</sup> Tellingly, the sermons resort to a language of atoms to demonstrate man's smallness and God's vastness. "God is too large, too immense, and then man is too narrow, too little to be considered, for who can fixe his eye upon an atome, and he must see a lesse thing then an atome that sees man, for man is nothing."<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> The words "element" and "atom" in Donne's work have some overlap, but generally signify different things. "Element" generally applies to Empedocles' four elements: earth, air, water and fire. Atoms generally designate either atomist thought in general, with its rejection of the divine and materialist core, but also can apply to things of a small size. "Element" does often have atomist overtones, especially when used as a verb. As a verb, "element" can apply to the conjunction of small – atomic – particles.

<sup>127</sup> Marvell does a similar thing to great effect in "Upon Appleton House," when, discussing kings, politics, and revolution, he abruptly switches perspective and we are no bigger than a blade of grass, among the grasshoppers.

<sup>128</sup> 1629 Christmas Sermon on John 10:10. John Donne's Sermons, 4.

In this sermon, scale is normative: small is bad, and greatness good. In the love poems, however, smallness is a great virtue, because the small can be comprehensive. Nicolson's witty description of possible responses to the shocking size of the new seventeenth-century cosmos clarifies the appeal of atomism: "One group of our seventeenth-century ancestors ... had suffered from agoraphobia, another from claustrophobia. Faced with the new expanses, some want their small cupboards back, while others are kings of the new infinite space."<sup>129</sup> Atomism becomes a crucial vocabulary for expressing both of these possibilities: the vastness and the smallness of the world. On the one hand, the horror of a million atoms in the void, on the other, the poignant tininess of the atom.

Lucretian atomism plays an important role in Donne's poetry as his preferred figure for writing and the conceptual underpinning for his understanding of what writing does. In his poems and letters to friends, Donne was comfortable using unadulterated atomist cosmology to talk about the haphazard conjunctions of letters among friends, but in his patronage poems, he christianized atomism to dramatize how a patron could harmonize and cohere a poet's world. Although most contemporary accounts of Donne's atomism focus on how he reacted to the New Science of his time, Donne's primary use of atomism was to envision and produce the networks in which his texts circulated.<sup>130</sup> This writing of literary networks allowed him to intervene in and benefit from social networks, rearticulating his relationship to cultural communities and annexing social power to the craft of writing. Furthermore, Donne was supremely aware of the Petrarchan mediation of Lucretius described in Chapter One, which he manipulates in order to intervene in literary history and test out a new idiom for lyric poetry in the aftermath of Petrarchism.

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<sup>129</sup> Nicolson, *The Breaking of the Circle*, 168.

<sup>130</sup> One exception to this rule is David Hirsch's article on atomies in Donne's work. Hirsch argues that atomism's "theory of essence," that is to say its principle of basic and indestructible particles of matter, helped Donne to "allay his persistent materialistic anxieties surrounding death and resurrection" by providing the poet with a stabilizing center and "limit to the dissolution of somatocentric identity." David Hirsch, "Donne's Atomies and Anatomies: Deconstructed Bodies and the Resurrection of Atomic Theory," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 31, no. 1 (1991): 69-70.

Unlike most modern critics, Donne's contemporaries seem have recognized the importance of Lucretian cosmopoetics to his work. Henry Valentine, Donne's elegist, wrote the following lines after Donne's death:

If that Philosopher, which did avow  
The World to be but Motes, was living now:  
He would affrme that th'Atomes of his mould  
Were they in severall bodies blended, would  
Produce new worlds of Travellers, Divines,  
Of Linguists, Poets: sith these severall lines  
In him concentred were, and flowing thence  
Might fill againe the worlds Circumfrence.

Henry Valentine. "An Elegie Upon The Incomparable Dr. Donne" (lines 33-40), in Valentine hits the same points I have argued here: the worldmaking power of verse, the powerful concentration of matter *and* language in atomist cosmology, and the contraction and expansion of atoms. Valentine implies that Donne, like Lucretius, was committed to a cosmopoetics that wrote worlds into being out of fragmented materials.

Chapter Four  
Poems and Fancies: Margaret Cavendish's Lucretian Poetics

I. Reading for Lucretius in the Epicurean Revival

In her early atomist poetry, Margaret Cavendish, who has attracted critical attention as the first early modern Englishwoman to publish natural philosophy,<sup>131</sup> proposes a radical Lucretian poetics that links the practice of poetry with the investigation of nature. This poetics comes to underwrite her method in natural philosophy as well as in verse. Despite her calculated comments to the contrary, Cavendish believed that poetic fancy and natural philosophy went hand in hand, insofar as poetic fancy constituted an alternative method to experimentalism for doing natural philosophy. Asserting the fundamental unreliability of contemporary forms of experiment like the microscope, Cavendish drew upon Lucretius to come to the conclusion that imagination was the most valuable form of natural inquiry because it did not pretend to rest upon or achieve a fundamentally inaccessible knowledge.

In Cavendish's work, poetry's capacity for doing natural philosophy depends upon a Lucretian conception of nature and poetry, which she lays out in her first published book, the 1653 *Poems, and Fancies* (*P&F*). Like Lucretius's *DRN*, *P&F* versifies the atomist cosmos, envisioning nature as endlessly shifting, combinatory, and pleasurable. Cavendish, like Lucretius, links textual composition and natural organization, modeling her poetic style on nature itself. The word Cavendish uses to describe this relation between nature and text is "fancy," which is both a poetic and a cosmological principle.<sup>132</sup> Cavendish takes fancy to be the fundamental principle of both nature and verse, so the variety and changeableness that characterizes the motion of atoms also defines her verse. Like nature, which is infinite in its variety, Cavendish's literary texts emphasize the fertility and changeability of the imagination and the proliferation and variety of style.<sup>133</sup> For Cavendish, this means that poetry can express nature better than experiment because poetry can enquire into nature not by delving the earth but by partaking of nature's motions, albeit in textual form. This fanciful poetry – the kind of poetry practicing Lucretian poetics – does natural philosophy.

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<sup>131</sup> Very few others even practiced it. Anne Finch, Viscountess of Conway, is one of the exceptions. On Conway, see Paula Findlen, "Ideas in the Mind: Gender and Knowledge in the Seventeenth Century," *Hypatia* 17, no. 1 (2002): 183–96. Sarah Hutton, *Anne Conway: A Woman Philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). On Cavendish's philosophical company more generally, see the work of Broad and Hutton. Jacqueline Broad, *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>132</sup> The term fancy was a common term in Cavendish's time (her own husband, William Cavendish, Duke of Newcastle, published his own book of "Phanseys," dedicated to his wife), but Cavendish theorizes the term. William Cavendish Newcastle, *The Phanseys of William Cavendish, Marquis of Newcastle, Addressed to Margaret Lucas, and Her Letters in Reply*. (London: Nonesuch Press, 1956).

<sup>133</sup> Many critics have noticed Cavendish's poetics of variety. Among those, Chalmers, Bowerbank, and Cottegnies and Weitz link it to Lucretius in particular. Hero Chalmers, "Flattering Division?: Margaret Cavendish's Poetics of Variety," in *Authorial Conquests: Essays on Genre in the Writings of Margaret Cavendish*, ed. Line Cottegnies and Nancy Weitz (London: Associated University Presses, 2003), 123–44. Sylvia Bowerbank, "The Spider's Delight: Margaret Cavendish and the 'Female' Imagination," *English Literary Renaissance* 14, no. 3 (1984): 392–408. Line Cottegnies and Nancy Weitz, introduction to their edited volume, *Authorial Conquests: Essays on Genre in the Writings of Margaret Cavendish* (London: Associated University Presses, 2003). Richard Nate differs, arguing that Cavendish's rhetoric of variety is paradoxically supported by her rhetoric of plainness. Richard Nate, "Plain and Vulgarly Express'd: Margaret Cavendish and the Discourse of the New Science," *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 19, no. 4 (2001): 403–17.

Lucretius was a compelling source for these ideas for several reasons. First, the Roman poet himself integrated the practices of fancy and of natural philosophy by putting atomism into verse; in this way, Lucretius's poem was a model for Cavendish's own fanciful scientific poetry.<sup>134</sup> Second, the repeated Lucretian analogy between atoms and alphabetical letters laid the groundwork for Cavendish's poetics, which relies upon the analogy between nature's motions and textual fancies. Third, the overwhelmingly feminized tone of *DRN*, brimming as it is with imagery of Venus, implied the feminine character of atomist cosmology and poetry; this made Lucretian poetry a friendly model for a woman writer.<sup>135</sup> In much the same way that Lucretius's Venusian imagery dramatizes and reinforces the principles of his cosmology and his poetics, Cavendish's defense of women's writing generates the concepts and images that illustrate the principles of her Lucretian poetics. The defense of women's writing and thinking is an important theme in Cavendish's poetry and natural philosophy; she sharpens her critique of experimentalism with parodies of the exclusively masculine Royal Society and highlights the differences between her imaginative method and their experimentalism by stressing feminine imagery.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Although it is generally agreed that Cavendish was inspired by *DRN*, the fact that she disavowed any knowledge of Latin has discouraged critics from studying the relation very closely. No English translation of *DRN* was published in England until 1656, when Evelyn released his translation of Book I, and for a full translation early modern readers had to wait until Thomas Creech's 1682 translation. Lucy Hutchinson's translation, completed sometime in the late 1640s or 1650s, was not circulated until much later, when she sent a copy of the manuscript with a dedication to Arthur Annesley, first Earl of Anglesey, in 1675. There is no evidence that Cavendish had access to Hutchinson's translation before that date. Nevertheless, many critics point to *DRN* as the inspiration for *P&F*. Emma Rees writes that "Lucretius's generic influence may be traced throughout the whole of *Poems, and Fancies*, not being confined to Cavendish's explicitly atomist poems." She further focuses on the properties of verse: "it is not Cavendish's choice of subject-matter so much as its mode of presentation-in-verse which is of key importance." Emma Rees, *Margaret Cavendish: Gender, Genre, Exile* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 4–5. Gabrielle Starr writes that "Cavendish models her first poetic enterprise, *Poems, and Fancies* (1653), after Lucretius's *De rerum natura*." Gabrielle Starr, "Cavendish, Aesthetics, and the Anti-Platonic Line," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 39, no. 3 (2006): 297. "[M]any ... echoes of Lucretius throughout these three volumes, suggests her familiarity with his Epicurean poem and with his philosophy." Anna Battigelli, *Margaret Cavendish and the Exiles of the Mind* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 57.

<sup>135</sup> Many critics have noticed that in the seventeenth century, women such as Cavendish herself, Lucy Hutchinson, Ann Finch, and Aphra Behn, were particularly drawn to Epicurean thought, but as yet few have ventured a decisive answer as to why.

<sup>136</sup> There has long been debate over whether Cavendish's natural philosophy is "feminist" or not: whether or not, as Boyle puts it, Cavendish's natural philosophy proposed what she calls an "alternative, female way of knowing." Deborah Boyle, "Margaret Cavendish's Nonfeminist Natural Philosophy," *Configurations* 12, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 196. At least as Boyle characterizes it, both sides of the debate are working with a flawed definition of feminism, imagining it as a doctrine that concerns *exclusively* women, as if something "feminist" would completely exclude the participation of males, transgender, and other gender identities. I, however, would define "feminist" as any philosophical, political, or other position that works to include women, usually in areas previously dominated by men. Feminism is an inclusive rather than exclusive principle, which would never define any viewpoint as excluding men or any other gender identity and including only (cis) women. I take this to be the thrust of Cavendish's feminine imagery as well, which supports a vision of nature and poetry that does not exclude men in any fundamental way. That Cavendish parodies the Royal Society's priggish male members in *The Blazing World* or uses feminine imagery for fanciful poetry in *P&F* does not mean that she ever intended her way of writing poetry or doing natural philosophy to be exclusively feminine. Certainly, nobody has ever accused Lucretius of proposing a purely feminine way of writing poetry or doing natural philosophy just because he writes so compellingly about Venus.

Understanding the role Lucretius plays in Cavendish's work requires re-evaluating the nature of atomist influence upon seventeenth century English thought. The dominant critical frame for interpreting both Cavendish's early atomist poetry and the role of atomism of her later natural philosophy has been the Epicurean revival that took place in England in the 1650s.<sup>137</sup> Margaret Cavendish and her husband, William Cavendish, Duke of Newcastle, were instrumental in the dissemination of the new mechanistic philosophy developed in France by Gassendi, Mersenne, Hobbes, and others. Often called the Newcastle Circle, many of these thinkers were intimates of the Cavendish family's Parisian salon in the 1640s, and Cavendish herself is often credited with introducing England to the new atomist thought with two volumes she published in England in 1653: the collection of atomist poems, *Poems*, and the *Philosophicall Fancies*.

This narrative demands revision on two fronts. First, as Reid Barbour has convincingly demonstrated, atomism was a significant presence in the Stuart court far before the 1650s, expressing itself largely in poetry.<sup>138</sup> Despite atomism's reputation for atheism, atomist concepts and imagery were vehicles for diverse political and religious perspectives.<sup>139</sup> Second, as I have argued in the preceding three chapters, *DRN* transmitted a strand of atomist poetics from Ovid to Petrarch into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in France and England. I argue that Cavendish's

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<sup>137</sup> Several prominent interpreters of Cavendish's work have taken this line, and it is quite often presumed without comment in work on Cavendish. For example, both Battigelli and Sarasohn present Cavendish's atomism as a straightforward reaction to Epicureanism. Anna Battigelli, *Margaret Cavendish and the Exiles of the Mind* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 9. Lisa Sarasohn, *The Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish: Reason and Fancy During the Scientific Revolution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 2. On the Epicurean "revival" in England, Robert Kargon's is the classic account. Robert Kargon, *Atomism in England from Hariot to Newton*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966). See also Richard W. F Kroll, *The Material Word: Literate Culture in the Restoration and Early Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991). More recently, Stephen Clucas has analyzed the presentation of fire atoms in the works of several English thinkers in order to contest Kargon's assertion that the revival of atomist thought in England drew inspiration primarily from Pierre Gassendi's atomism. Stephen Clucas, "The Atomism of the Cavendish Circle: A Reappraisal," *The Seventeenth Century* 9, no. 2 (1994): 247–73.

<sup>138</sup> On atomism in poetry see Clucas, "Poetic Atomism in Seventeenth-Century England: Henry More, Thomas Traherne and Scientific Imagination."

<sup>139</sup> Barbour and Clucas show convincingly that atomism was as handy a metaphor for royalists as it was for parliamentarians and Puritans. Ibid. Reid Barbour, "The Early Stuart Epicure," *English Literary Renaissance* 23, no. 1 (1993): 170–200. Barbour argues that not only was atomism present in the Stuart court, but it was a touchstone, challenging "early Stuart culture to clarify or to redefine its positions, especially on such vital issues as the nature of sovereignty, of divinity, and of freedom." Ibid., 171. On atomism and political identity see David Norbrook, "Margaret Cavendish and Lucy Hutchinson: Identity, Ideology and Politics," *In-Between: Essays and Studies in Literary Criticism* 9.1–2 (2000): 179–203. Critics who read atomism as a metaphor for Cavendish's politics include Battigelli, Rees, and Chalmers. Battigelli argues that Cavendish uses atomism as a metaphor for "the body politic and for the mind." Battigelli, *Margaret Cavendish and the Exiles of the Mind*, 40. She is not interested in atomism as "a theory of matter" but as an "explanatory discourse for the political and emotional turmoil that surrounded" her, mainly a number of tragic events in her personal life such as the consecutive deaths of her family members and the uncertainty she experienced during the years of exile. Ibid., 39–40. Rees's chapter on *DRN* and *Poems, and Fancies* argues that "a specifically Lucretian approach to poetry is fundamentally political, in that it grants unpopular or subversive ideas the possibility of a public platform." Rees, *Margaret Cavendish*, 4. Despite Rees's attention to the formative role of *DRN* on Cavendish's poetics, like Battigelli, she maintains that Cavendish's atomism is "dependent on politico-religious sympathies." Ibid., 7, n. 9. Chalmers argues that the "delight in disorder" trope, exemplified in Herrick's work but also present in Cavendish's poetry, has royalist overtones. Chalmers, "Flattering Division?: Margaret Cavendish's Poetics of Variety."



Lucretian poetics takes its inspiration not from the Epicurean revival understood as the new interest in mechanistic philosophy, but from Lucretian ideas about the relation between poetry and philosophy. Of all the authors discussed in this project, it is Cavendish who comes closest to Lucretius's own project of writing natural philosophy in poetry.

## II. Disorder as Order: Cavendish's Lucretian Poetics

Like *DRN*, *P&F* purports to render in verse the atomist underpinnings of the natural world. It explains many things – which atoms make fire, which sickness, why the sea moves, what makes an echo, and much more – but the poems that describe the atomist basis of thought itself are at the heart of the collection. These poems describe the shape and motion of the atoms that constitute poetic fancies, explaining how Lucretian poetics springs from Lucretian cosmology. The form of the poems gives a taste for how poetry stylistically enacts the atomist basis of its fancy. Take, for example, “On Loose Atomes,” a four line poem from *P&F*:

In every Braine loose Atomes there do lye,  
Those which are Sharpe, from them do Fancies flye.  
Those that are long, and Aiery, nimble be.  
But Atomes Round, and Square, are dull, and sleepe.<sup>140</sup>

The poem's regular rhyme bespeaks the rapid unspooling of thoughts and fancies. Typical of *P&F* – as of *DRN* – is the bracingly direct didactic voice, anxious to explain the physical grounds for the images contained in the poems. Although quite short, this poem's forthright rhymes have the propulsive quality of a longer text (and bring to mind some of the more expansive pieces in *P&F*). This exuberance suggests that this one poem is but a small piece – an atom – of a much larger poetic cosmos.

Cavendish's debt to Lucretius is broad and suffused in *P&F*.<sup>141</sup> Yet despite the obvious

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<sup>140</sup> Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Poems and Fancies, 1653* (Menston: Scolar Press, 1972), 10.

<sup>141</sup> A selection from the critics: Cavendish's feminine characterization of nature may echo Lucretius's Venus. Lara A. Dodds, “Poore Donne Was Out’: Reading and Writing Donne in the Works of Margaret Cavendish,” *John Donne Journal* 29 (2010): 133–74. We might see echoes of Lucretius's Hymn to Venus at several points in *P&F*. (Particularly “Nature calls a Councell,” a domestic vision of creation of the world, and “A World in an Eare-Ring” (“There *Earth-quakes* be, which *Mountaines* vast downe fling, / And yet nere stir the *Ladies Eare*, nor *Ring*. / There *Meadowes* bee, and *Pastures fresh*, and *greene*, / And *Cattell* feed, and yet be never seene,” Lines 17-20) echo the Hymn to Venus. Rees points out that “elsewhere in *Poems, and Fancies*, Cavendish “enjoys a good-natured nod to the eulogistic opening of *De rerum natura*. ‘Venus is a Tinkers Wife, we see,’ she declares in ‘The Fairy Queen,’ continuing: ‘Not a goddesse, as she was thought to be; / When all the world to her did offerings bring, / And her high praise in prose, and verses did sing’ (Poems, 150).” Rees, *Margaret Cavendish*, 7, n. 11. citing Margaret Cavendish, *Poems, and Fancies: Written by the Right Honourable, the Lady Margaret Countesse of Newcastle*. (London: printed by T. R[o]ycroft. for J. Martin and J. Allestrye at the Bell in Saint Pauls Church Yard, 1653), 150.) The “Suave, mari magno” passage from Book II of *DRN* is referenced as well: see the poems, “Similizing the Mind” and “Similizing Thoughts.” Even more striking is this passage from *The Blazing World*: “And sitting down with a quiet mind, since before she could not stand nor sit still; for her troubled, and rough thoughts drove her from one end of the room to the other, like a ship at sea, that is not anchored nor ballasted, or with storm tossed from point to point ...” Margaret Cavendish, *The Blazing World and Other Writings* (London: Penguin, 1994), 51. This raises questions – which sadly must be taken up at another point – about *ataraxia* and the construction of authorial personae; Cavendish's focus on exile might speak to the Epicurean concept of *ataraxia*. The play “The Convent of Pleasure” gives a feminized

Lucretianism of *P&F*, asserting Cavendish's Lucretian debts can be a rather murky enterprise. Tracking Lucretius in early Renaissance texts is often difficult, and this is even truer for work on Cavendish, who always asserted that she could not read Latin.<sup>142</sup> Because the complete text of *DRN* was not yet circulating in full English translation at the time of *P&F*'s composition, Cavendish would have been unable to read *DRN* in its entirety before composing her own atomist poetry.<sup>143</sup> However, she would have had access to Lucretian ideas and poetry not only from conversations in her salon, frequented in Paris by the leading lights of mechanical philosophy,<sup>144</sup> but also from the lyric tradition,<sup>145</sup> and from the excerpts of Lucretius that were available in English translation.<sup>146</sup> Often, the only way to gain entry to the storehouse of Cavendish's Lucretian debts is through the keyhole of a borrowed image, a briefly mentioned atomist principle, or a conceptual crux.

One such crux stands out above the rest as foundational for Cavendish's poetics and for the

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version of Epicurus's garden. The heroine is "not a Votress to the Gods but to Nature." Margaret Cavendish, *Paper Bodies: A Margaret Cavendish Reader*, ed. Sara Mendelson and Sylvia Bowerbank (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2000), 103. Monsieur Take-pleasure, a character in the same play, could be the figure for crass hedonism – as opposed to the ladies' moderated pleasures taken from Mother Nature, rather than gluttony. Finally, Rees has given a reading of Cavendish's "Melancholy and Mirth" as a rendering of contrasting versions of Lucretius. Rees, *Margaret Cavendish*, 69–71.

<sup>142</sup> Passannante has argued that to read for Lucretius in the Renaissance we can do no more than track his traces, and his recent book demonstrates such a method. Passannante, *The Lucretian Renaissance*.

<sup>143</sup> See note 3.

<sup>144</sup> Known as both the Newcastle and the Cavendish circle, the salon – including Hobbes, Descartes, Mersenne, and Gassendi – convened in Paris in the 1640s. On the group, see Clucas, "The Atomism of the Cavendish Circle: A Reappraisal." Lisa Sarasohn, "Thomas Hobbes and the Duke of Newcastle: A Study in the Mutuality of Patronage before the Establishment of the Royal Society," *Isis* 90, no. 4 (1999): 715–37. On Cavendish's debt to the mechanistic philosophy of her guests, see Sarah Hutton, "In Dialogue with Thomas Hobbes: Margaret Cavendish's Natural Philosophy," *Women's Writing* 4, no. 3 (1997): 421–32. On the English context of mechanistic philosophy, see Robert Kargon, "Walter Charleton, Robert Boyle, and the Acceptance of Epicurean Atomism in England," *Isis* 55, no. 2 (June 1, 1964): 184–92.

<sup>145</sup> While in the 1650s major discussions of atomism largely centered on philosophical attempts to incorporate Epicurean thought into a Christian worldview or attempts to develop a materialist and mechanical philosophy, Lucretian ideas about the relationship of poetry and nature were also available to Cavendish in the lyric tradition. Scholarship has documented the Lucretian influence on English poets as important as Chaucer, Donne, and Spenser, but without proposing the lyric – particularly Petrarchan – line traced in this project. Lara Dodds' work on Cavendish and Donne suggests that this particular relationship could cast light on how Cavendish read atomism in the work of contemporary poets. Dodds, "'Poore Donne Was Out': Reading and Writing Donne in the Works of Margaret Cavendish." Lara Dodds, *The Literary Invention of Margaret Cavendish* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 2013).

<sup>146</sup> Many English works contained translated passages from *DRN*, so there are many possible sources. In her work on probable sources for Cavendish's Lucretian references, Rees assembles several, mostly contemporary treatises and longer poems: "Several versions and critiques of parts of Lucretius's doctrine were available to Cavendish, notably Robert Greville's *Nature of Truth* of 1640, and Kenelm Digby's *Two Treatises*, which followed four years later (Fleischmann 19-20). Du Bartas's *Holy Days and Weeks*, to which Cavendish had indirect access, is a sixteenth-century adaptation of Lucretian style and phrasing (Fleischmann 20-21; Bush 294). George Sandys's 1615 work, *A Relation of a Journey begun Anno Domini 1610* contained five translated quotations from *De rerum natura*, and more excerpts appeared in Hakewill's *Apologie of 1635*, the mid-century Epicurean revival continuing with the publication in 1656 of John Evelyn's partial translation of *De rerum natura*, and Walter Charleton's *Epicurus's Morals* (Fleischmann 86-90, 21; Kroll 47-51)." Rees, *Margaret Cavendish*, 5–6. In addition, Florio's translation of Montaigne contained many passages from Lucretius. See also: Clucas, "Poetic Atomism in Seventeenth-Century England: Henry More, Thomas Traherne and Scientific Imagination."

way she thought about the relation between poetry and natural philosophy. Cavendish's repeated reference to Lucretius's analogy of atoms and alphabetical letters is fundamental to her own analogy of poetic fancy and nature.<sup>147</sup> In *DRN*, letters exist in their relation to each other in texts the same way atoms exist in their relation to each other in nature.

atque eadem magni refert primordia saepe  
cum quibus et quali positura contineantur  
et quos inter se dent motus accipiantque;  
namque eadem caelum mare terras flumina solem  
constituunt, eadem fruges arbusta animantis,  
verum aliis alioque modo commixta moventur.  
quin etiam passim nostris in versibus ipsis  
multa elementa vides multis communia verbis,  
cum tamen inter se versus ac verba necessest  
confiteare et re et sonitu distare sonanti.  
tantum elementa queunt permutato ordine solo;  
at rerum quae sunt primordia, plura adhibere  
possunt unde queant variae res quaeque creari.  
(*DRN* I.816-29)<sup>148</sup>

For Lucretius, the principle of both nature and writing is variety – the innumerable arrangements of letters and things. Everything springs from these variations in placement and changing interactions. Cavendish expresses this Lucretian principle in her own terms, using a comparison to music:

As eight notes produce innumerable tunes, so twenty four letters  
produce innumerable words, which are marks for things, which  
marks produce innumerable imaginations, or conceptions, which  
imaginations or conceptions begets another soul which another  
animal hath not, for want of those marks, and so wants those  
imaginations and conceptions which those marks beget; besides those  
marks beget a soul in communitie; besides words are as gods that  
give knowledge, and discover, the mindes of men...<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Sylvia Bowerbank, *Speaking for Nature: Women and Ecologies of Early Modern England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 5. Bowerbank writes that Lucretius's analogy of atoms and letters troubles the status of language and law, divine or otherwise. Kroll, on the other hand, situates Cavendish's interest in the atom-letter analogy in the context of early modern scientific developments. Kroll, *The Material Word*.

<sup>148</sup> "And how these atoms are arranged makes all the difference – / Their positions and formations, and what moves they give and take / From one another, for the selfsame atoms go to make / The heavens and the sea, the land, the rivers and the sun, / The same make crops, trees, animals – but by their combination / In different ways with different elements move differently. / Furthermore, all through these very lines of mine, you see / Many letters that are shared by many words – and yet / You must confess that words and lines from this one alphabet / Have sundry sounds and meanings. Letters only have to change / Their order to accomplish all of this – and still the range / Of possibilities with atoms is greater. That is why / They can create the universe's rich variety."

<sup>149</sup> Margaret Cavendish, *The World's Olio* (London: Printed for J. Martin and J. Allestrye, 1655), "Of Speech," 23–24. The same motif reappears several times, as in this passage: "As severall Letters do a word up-joyne, / So severall Figures through the Aire combine. / The Aire is waxe, words Seale, and give the Print, / Those words an Eccho in the Aire do mint." Cavendish, *Poems, and Fancies*, "What Makes Eccho," 38. Language can

*DRN*'s letter-matter isomorphism is the basis for Cavendish's poetics. Like nature, thoughts and letters produce "innumerable imaginations," discovering not just "the minds of men" but also the motions of nature. In textual practice, this looks like variety of subject, diction, and image. In *DRN*, for example, Lucretius often does not explain to his readers the one, true cause of natural phenomena, but rather presents multiple viable explanations. Instead of pinpointing the real dynamics of lightning, for instance, he proliferates several explanations based on its fundamental principle of atoms moving in the void.<sup>150</sup> This natural philosophical principle is matched to *DRN*'s poetic principle, which relies on an accretion of persuasive verses to convert readers to the Epicurean system.

Cavendish's poetry is much like *DRN* in its exploratory imagination and its refusal to propose single, simple explanations. The bewildering variety this produces is one reason why Cavendish's early poetry has been neglected. Although there is a wide-ranging body of scholarship on Cavendish and atomism, these accounts have largely bypassed her poetic output to focus on the later natural philosophical works in prose.<sup>151</sup> Even those critics who identify the principles of variety and profusion motivating Cavendish's poetry tend to dismiss the poetry because of that very variety and profusion, reading it as a breakdown of poetic method rather than the expression of a stated poetics. For example, Bowerbank, whose sensitive assessment of Cavendish's imagination has been influential, ends her article on this note:

Even those of us who are attracted to her personality and ideas cannot help but wish she had been a more disciplined writer. It is also useful, then, to see Cavendish's place in literary history as a cautionary tale for those of us who would suggest that craftsmanship and order are masculine, and artlessness and chaos are feminine. Do we really want to create a literary ghetto called the "female imagination" and claim as its characteristic style of expression, anarchic formlessness?<sup>152</sup>

After giving an excellent account of Cavendish's poetics, Bowerbank moves from critical analysis to normative judgment, but instead of judging the poetry of *P&F* according to the poetics she so accurately describes in the first part of the article, she evaluates it on completely different terms: strict organization and discipline. Measured by this ruler, Cavendish's poetry looks artless, chaotic, anarchic, and formless. For this reason, Bowerbank sees Cavendish's poetry as a failure at order rather than a success at fancy.

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be broken back down into its component parts, too. When Cavendish describes her own bashfulness, she writes that it, "[d]isturbs the Thoughts so much, as the Thoughts are all in a Confused Disorder, and not any one Thought moves Regularly, neither will they Suffer the Words to pass out of the Mouth, or if they do, they are Uttered without sense, nay, sometimes in no Language, being but Pieces of Words, or Pieces of the Letters of Words." Margaret Cavendish, *Sociable Letters* (New York: Garland, 1997), 147.

<sup>150</sup> Lucretius deals with thunder, lightning, earthquakes, and other unusual phenomena in Book Six.

<sup>151</sup> Similarly, a surprisingly small proportion of the work on Cavendish and genre has addressed her poetry. Rather, particular attention has been paid to drama, the epistle, and utopian texts. The most notable exceptions are Bowerbank, Chalmers, and Dodds. Bowerbank, "The Spider's Delight: Margaret Cavendish and the 'Female' Imagination," *English Literary Renaissance* 14, no. 3 (1984): 392–408. Chalmers, "Flattering Division?: Margaret Cavendish's Poetics of Variety." Dodds, *The Literary Invention of Margaret Cavendish*.

<sup>152</sup> Bowerbank, "The Spider's Delight," 407.

Cavendish's Lucretian poetics have made her vulnerable to the same sort of ad hominem attacks that have been leveled at Lucretius for millennia. Perhaps the most evocative testament to the Lucretian underpinnings of these attacks are the charges of madness that began as soon as Cavendish published her first book, *P&F*. Contemporary critics still evoke the scandalous figure of "Mad Madge."<sup>153</sup> These accusations saw (and perhaps still see) the "disorder" of Cavendish's poetry as evidence of a disordered mind (for her contemporaries, it was also question of a woman publishing). These allegations of madness place Cavendish in unsurprising company: Lucretius. The Roman poet was first accused of madness by the church father Jerome, who claimed – likely in an effort to discredit Epicureanism<sup>154</sup> – that Lucretius wrote his *DRN* under the influence of a love potion that drove him mad and eventually killed him.<sup>155</sup> Jerome's logic: only a lunatic Lucretius could have written such perverse verses.<sup>156</sup> The same judgment is made of Cavendish: only a madwoman could have written such wild verse, or have had the perversity to write, and publish, as a woman.

Another reason for critical dismissals of Cavendish's poetry is Cavendish's own seemingly negative assessments of her verse. In the dedicatory epistles to *P&F*, the poet characterizes her work apologetically as "huge Mountaines of Follies," "Errours," and "Pastime."<sup>157</sup> Cavendish's critics often take these self-representations at face value, believing what the poet claims about herself and her writing: that writing poetry was a diversion for a bored, flighty, woman, and that the poems do no more than narrate the circumstances of Cavendish's life, giving "an Account to my Friends, how I spend the idle Time of my life, and how I busie my thoughts."<sup>158</sup> Carefully sounding the gender norms of her day, Cavendish minimizes the seriousness of her own work, domesticating it by contextualizing it biographically. In order to preclude hostile reactions to a woman writer writing herself into the masculine public sphere, she will vehemently assert – demand – that her work should be read as a domestic textual production born of a woman's boredom, idleness, and fancy. Perpetually unwilling to grant the interpretation of her texts to anyone but herself, Cavendish frequently stipulates readings of her own work in this way.

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<sup>153</sup> Cavendish's contemporaries fixed upon madness as a way to characterize the audacity and impropriety of Cavendish's personal and publishing habits. Dorothy Osborne wrote that there were "many soberer People in Bedlam." Kingsley Hart, ed., *The Letters of Dorothy Osborne to Sir William Temple, 1652-54* (London: The Folio Society, 1968), 41. Samuel Pepys' called Cavendish a "mad, conceited, ridiculous woman." Cited in Eric Lewis, "The Legacy of Margaret Cavendish," *Perspectives on Science* 9, no. 3 (2001): 351. Contemporary publications took up the same trope: "For if we have seen one Lady gone mad with Learning, we mean a late Famous Countess, there are a hundred Men cou'd be named, whom the same Cause has rendered fit for *Bedlam*." From the scientific journal *The Athenian Mercury*, Vol. 1, No. 18, pub. 1691 quoted in Kathryn Shevelov, *Women and Print Culture: The Construction of Femininity in the Early Periodical* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 65. The sobriquet "Mad Madge" is still used in contemporary scholarship; for example, Katie Whitaker, *Mad Madge: The Extraordinary Life of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, the First Woman to Live by Her Pen* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

<sup>154</sup> The church fathers would have had a particular interest in discrediting Lucretius's poem when atomist doctrine so starkly opposed Christian doctrines of divine control.

<sup>155</sup> Jerome synopsisizes Lucretius's life with these words: "Titus Lucretius, poet, is born. After a love-philtre had turned him mad, and he had written, in the intervals of his insanity, several books which Cicero revised, he killed himself by his own hand in the forty-fourth year of his age." Jerome, *Interpretatio chronicae Eusebii Pamphili*, in JP Migne, *Patrologia Latina* (Alexandria, VA, 1995), 27:523. Translation George Hadzsits, *Lucretius and His Influence*. (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1963), 5.

<sup>156</sup> Contemporary critics still evoke this story. Battigelli, for example, speaks of the "lunacy of Lucretius." Battigelli, *Margaret Cavendish and the Exiles of the Mind*, 52.

<sup>157</sup> Cavendish, *Poems, and Fancies*, "To Naturall Philosophers," unnumbered.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid*.

However, Cavendish's self-representations are best understood not as biographical truths but as a Lucretian poetic strategy. Cavendish does not represent her poetry as the errant fancies of a flibbertigibbet because it – and she – is one, but because the principles of folly, error, and pastime she establishes in her self-representations are foundational to her poetics. These principles speak to Cavendish's conception of nature as infinite variety and verse as the proliferation of imaginative possibilities. The task, then, is not to accept Cavendish's self-representations as the basis for critical inquiry, but to interrogate how this naïve pose expresses her poetics. We must interrogate the goals of such acts of self-representation, asking how those representations function as assertions of a Lucretian poetic program. Thus, where Bowerbank follows Cavendish's lead and sees in *P&F* artless, chaotic, undisciplined poetry, I see poems that fully express the poetics Cavendish lays out in her introductory epistles and in the texts of the poems themselves. Cavendish may be a more sophisticated theorist of poetry than she is a versifier, but judged according to its own poetics, her bad poetry is still successful poetry.<sup>159</sup>

Cavendish's dismissal of atomism has guided critical accounts, which all too often disdain her poetry and dismiss her atomism as a childish phase or what could only be called trendiness – following the scientific crazes of her time unthinkingly. The trendiness narrative demands that we read Cavendish's atomism as merely a side effect of a larger historical phenomenon. Sarasohn is one of many who adopt this perspective. In an early article on Cavendish's natural philosophy, she argues that Cavendish's early atomism is little more than a phase brought on by the omnipresence of mechanistic science in the period: “As a scientific philosophy, Margaret Cavendish's materialism is an interesting, but unimportant by-product of the Scientific Revolution.”<sup>160</sup> Interpreted in this way, Cavendish's atomism is a mere symptom of contemporary philosophical trends, notable chiefly because it transmitted the Epicurean revival from France, where Cavendish was exiled, to England, where she published her *P&F* in 1653 during a visit to England to petition the government for compensation for the loss of her husband's estate. Battigelli's assertion that *P&F* “reviewed Gassendi's revival of Epicurean atomism in a series of poems” succinctly expresses the way that reading Cavendish's atomism as a historical byproduct forecloses both interpretations that take seriously her philosophical engagement with atomism and formal readings of her verse.<sup>161</sup> The word “review” expresses the dilatory method of each: verse form is incidental to content, a “review,” and natural philosophy is recast and reproduced, “reviewed” rather than contested, supported, or refined.

Only Cavendish's serious commitment to Lucretianism can explain the strong biographical skewing in her self-representations without dismissing the early poetry out of hand. Her modesty topoi must be read as symptoms of the Lucretian isomorphism between atoms and alphabetical

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<sup>159</sup> It is perilous to take Cavendish's self-representations at face value because doing so puts critics in danger of accepting the gendered stereotypes Cavendish deploys for self-defense and making them into definitive descriptions of the woman, her life, and her thought. Such readings magnify a problematic inclination in scholarship on early modern women's writing more generally: to interpret women's texts according to biography rather than their systems of thought. Dodds writes: “[a]s long as women's writing is read primarily through a lens of biography or of gender, literary developments in individual women's work will be interpreted in the context of personal experience rather than as responses or contributions to broader cultural, political, or literary trends.” (Dodds, *The Literary Invention of Margaret Cavendish*, 9.)

<sup>160</sup> Lisa Sarasohn, “A Science Turned Upside Down: Feminism and the Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (1984): 297. Sarasohn's more recent book on Cavendish, published in 2010, gives a more thorough assessment of Cavendish's atomism. Sarasohn, *The Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish*.

<sup>161</sup> Battigelli, *Margaret Cavendish and the Exiles of the Mind*, 9.

letters, which Cavendish reimagines as an isomorphism of mind, text, and nature.<sup>162</sup> Thus, when Cavendish describes her personality in her autobiographical statements, she is also explicating the style of her writing – her poetics – and her vision of nature – natural philosophy. Cavendish’s self-representations do precisely the opposite of what they seem to do, undermine the skillfulness and legitimacy of her writing, instead giving a positive definition of what sort of poet she is and what sort of poetics she uses. By describing her personality and her life as various and disorganized, Cavendish characterizes the sort of poetry she aims to write: a poetry in touch with nature’s own variety and peculiar organization, and free from the pretensions ostensibly learned literary and philosophical culture. As we will see in the third section of this chapter, Cavendish uses her self-representations to define a style and school of poetry she calls “natural poetry.”

### III. “My Lord, I cannot Work”: Defending Poetry and Women’s Writing

Cavendish articulates her Lucretian poetics using feminine imagery. Although this poetics does not exclude men from practicing it, the ways Cavendish explains and defends it are almost exclusively feminized.<sup>163</sup> Perhaps Lucretius’s repeated invocations to Venus showed Cavendish that feminine imagery was a powerful way to express a fanciful poetics and a skeptical epistemology: invoking gender stereotypes of women as flighty and naïve allowed Cavendish to shorthand the principles of her poetics and the foundations of her natural philosophy. In Lucretius’s poem, Venus embodies the feminized principles of fertility and persuasion that are foundational to both atomism’s vision of Nature and Lucretius’s argument for poetry’s indispensable role in publishing and propagating that philosophy. Unlike Lucretius, however, Cavendish takes the opportunity such feminine imagery provides to defend and valorize women’s thought, especially the modes of thought available to women in social circumstances as limited as hers and in an intellectual scene as dominated by men as hers.

Cavendish achieves her defense of women’s writing through a defense of fancy, championing poetry and imaginative philosophy, indeed all imaginative genres, in the face of empirical values.<sup>164</sup> In the epistles dedicatory to *P&F*, Cavendish offers a mutual defense of fanciful poetry and female authorship. Defying those who would equate women’s writing with sexual promiscuity and urge her, as they did Mary Wroth, to “Work Lady, Work, let writing Books alone, For surely wiser Women ne’r writ one,<sup>165</sup>” she argues that writing poetry should be considered women’s work because women’s minds are fundamentally fanciful, suited to poetry as much as to the traditional domestic crafts like spinning or embroidery. Cavendish’s defense of women is doubly coded: she speaks of the proper roles and provinces of women to defend her choice of poetry, but the discourse is also epistemological. What at first glance reads as social conservatism – poetry is

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<sup>162</sup> The metaphor of contagion and disease is Lucretius’s own – the sixth book of *DRN* describes the plague in Athens. Gerard Passannante has recently proposed the metaphor of contagion to describe the influence of Lucretius in the Renaissance. Passannante, *The Lucretian Renaissance*.

<sup>163</sup> As we will see, Cavendish’s comparison of her poetry to Ovid’s makes it clear enough that Lucretian poetics is not the exclusive domain of women.

<sup>164</sup> Starr nicely sums up how Cavendish combines her treatment of women’s writing and fancy: “Cavendish constantly defended her capacity as a woman to write and the worth of her writing; inevitably this meant she engaged in the defense of poesy. Her sensitivity to the precarious position of women’s writing made her all the more aware of the state of imaginative literature in general, whether in light of Platonic injunctions against poets, the new empirical values of natural philosophy, or Puritan denunciations of fancy.” Starr, “Cavendish, Aesthetics, and the Anti-Platonic Line,” 296.

<sup>165</sup> Cavendish herself cites these lines in the Preface to her *Sociable Letters*. Cavendish, *Paper Bodies*, 64.

relegated to the status of women's work rather than liberating women from those traditional tasks – is in fact a rhetorical strategy that proposes a radical poetics.

Cavendish couches her defense in what at first glance seems a narrow vision of women's social role. Poetry not only suits the nature of the feminine character but, like traditional busywork, reinforces domestic virtue because it keeps women quietly occupied at home instead of gossiping abroad or galling about.<sup>166</sup> Cavendish apologizes for her lack of facility in traditional handiworks, but justifies poetry as a valid substitute. “My Lord, I cannot Work, I mean such Works as Ladies use to pass their Time withall.”<sup>167</sup> In the absence of natural skill at such “work” – traditional handicrafts like spinning or embroidery – but also her lack of children or an estate upon which to exercise the traditional feminine management skills, Cavendish turns to poetry.<sup>168</sup> The formal characteristics of a poem – organization and parsimony – make it a fertile comparison to housekeeping: “It is just as in Poetry: for good Husbandry in Poetry, is, when there is a great store of Fancy well order'd.”<sup>169</sup> Thus, Cavendish claims to exercise her wifely duties in the composition of her verse.<sup>170</sup>

Cavendish pivots gracefully on these excuses to justify her poetic “work,” rhetorically linking poetry and women by redefining traditionally female activities and characteristics to encompass poetic activity.<sup>171</sup> The “Epistle Dedicatory” of the *P&F*, addressed to her brother-in-law Sir Charles Cavendish, opens with a characteristic image: “Spinning with the Fingers is more proper to our Sexe, then studying or writing Poetry, which is the Spinning with the braine.”<sup>172</sup> Although she prudently puts the distaff before the pen, she characterizes writing as little more than a different medium for “spinning.”<sup>173</sup> “[H]aving no skill in the Art of the first ... made me delight in the latter; since all braines work naturally, and incessantly, in some kind or other.”<sup>174</sup> She makes poetry – spinning with the brain – a viable alternative to the distaff – spinning with the fingers.

Cavendish justifies what qualifies as women's work by positing a fundamental kinship between Nature, women's work, and the very structure of women's minds. “Spinning” is Cavendish's metaphor for not just the domestic motion of distaff and spindle, but of women's minds themselves: “Poetry, which is built upon Fancy, Women may claime, as a work belonging most properly to themselves: for I have observ'd, that their Braines work usually in a Fantasticall motion.”<sup>175</sup> This motion is that of atoms moving about in the mind to create thoughts. Developing another of her preferred metaphors – clothing – Cavendish accuses women of being extravagant in

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<sup>166</sup> “An Epistle to Mistris Toppe” in Cavendish, *Poems, and Fancies*, A4.

<sup>167</sup> Cavendish, *Sociable Letters*, 38.

<sup>168</sup> “I have no Children to imploy my Care, and Attendance on; And my Lords Estate being taken away, had nothing for Huswifery, or thirsty Industry to imploy my self in; having no Stock to work on.” Cavendish, *Poems, and Fancies*, “Epistle to the Reader,” unnumbered.

<sup>169</sup> Cavendish, *Sociable Letters*, 38.

<sup>170</sup> Chalmers argues that Cavendish's poetry is “a sublimation of the energies that she would otherwise use in managing her husband's household.” Chalmers, “Flattering Division”: Margaret Cavendish's Poetics of Variety,” 130.

<sup>171</sup> “Traditionally feminine pursuits of the domestic arts are transformed into the metaphorical basis for and justification of Cavendish's poetics.” Dodds, *The Literary Invention of Margaret Cavendish*, 10.

<sup>172</sup> Cavendish, *Poems, and Fancies*, “Epistle Dedicatory,” unnumbered.

<sup>173</sup> On spinning as image to tie poetry to women's work, see Emma L. E. Rees, “A Well-Spun Yarn: Margaret Cavendish and Homer's Penelope,” in *A Princely Brave Woman: Essays on Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle*, ed. Stephen Clucas (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2003). On spinning as an image for feminine mental activity, see Bowerbank, “The Spider's Delight.”

<sup>174</sup> Cavendish, *Poems, and Fancies*, “Epistle Dedicatory,” unnumbered.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, “To all Noble, and Worthy Ladies,” unnumbered.



their tastes. Yet the very preference for ribbons, bows and all sorts of sartorial frippery also incline women to poetry. The frippery of garments and poetical fancy belongs to women in the same way poetry “is a work belonging to them,” according to an analogy with the fantastical motion of their minds.

The way Cavendish construes and defends poetic fancy and women’s writing has major implications for how she thinks of natural philosophy. The link between the Lucretian poetics of the early poetry and the natural philosophy lies in the consistency of feminine imagery. The rhetoric of feminine “pastime” in *P&F* connects Cavendish’s thinking on domesticity and poetic fancy to her skeptical epistemology and natural philosophy, clarifying how Cavendish’s defense of women’s work and poetry is at the heart of her later philosophical thinking. On the one hand, a lady’s pastimes indicate her virtue: the object of a woman’s “Fantastically” mind is a choice, and it is an act of virtue and temperance to choose well, of vice to choose something that does dishonor to you or your family. Time can be passed well or ill, but it must be passed: we choose the object upon which to fix our thoughts, and that choice determines the quality of our behavior. As Cavendish argues in *P&F* and the *Sociable Letters*, it is just as possible for a woman to while away her time by fixing her thoughts on poetry as on fashion, the distaff or the pen. Each has ties to fancy and a kinship with the fantastical and fanciful nature of the female mind, and all can be linked to a woman’s domestic role.

On the other hand, pastime has traction as an epistemological concept, because for Cavendish, all thought is pastime. Cavendish believed that the world’s causes were unknowable: humans are only privy to its effects, which means that nobody can truly judge between true and false, what is real and what is not. For example, in the “Epistle to Mistris Toppe” that precedes *P&F*, Cavendish couches her choice of poetry within an epistemological frame concerning the unknowability of Nature:

Yet there are as few meer Fools, as wise men: for Understanding runs in a levell course, that is, to know in generall, as of the Effects: but to know the Cause of any one thing of Natures works, Nature never gave us a Capacity thereto. Shee hath given us Thoughts which run wildly about, and if by chance they light on Truth, they do not know it for a Truth.<sup>176</sup>

Because humans can’t know causes, they are necessarily ignorant. Any and all of their thoughts are spinning wheels with nowhere to stop but where a given person chooses for them to stop; which is to say that, where human thoughts alight has no relation to what is “true” or “false,” but only depends on where we allow them to alight. In this sense, all thought is “fancy,” and every product of fancy is a “pastime,” a stopping-point for those spinning thoughts. Cavendish’s point is not that only women are fanciful, but rather that women’s thinking is exemplary of natural thought.

Cavendish’s fanciful epistemology casts new light on the apology for verse in *P&F*’s “Epistle to the Reader.” The “Epistle” reads as an apology for the flaws in Cavendish’s writing, but is really an apology for poetry in the vein of Sidney’s, which is to say a justification.

And the Reason why I write it in Verse, is, because I thought Errours might better passe there, then in Prose, since Poets write most Fiction, and Fiction is not given for Truth, but Pastime; and I feare my Atomes will be as small Pastime, as themselves; for nothing can

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid., “Epistle to Mistris Toppe,” unnumbered.

be lesse than an Atome. But my desire that they should please the Readers, is as big as the World they make; and my Feares are of the same bulk; yet my Hopes fall to a single Atome agen: and so shall I remaine an unsettled Atome, or a confus'd heape, till I heare my censure. If I be prais'd, it fixes them; but if I am condemn'd, I shall be Annihilated to nothing: but my Ambition is such, as I would either be a World, or nothing.<sup>177</sup>

Critiquing the very possibility of truth claims, Cavendish recalibrates the balance between “Errour” and “Truth,” fact and fiction. Instead of “truth” claims, she valorizes fanciful motions. When she says that errors might better pass in poetry than in prose, she echoes Sidney, who writes that the poet “nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth.” Yet Cavendish’s poetics is much more affirmative and ambitious than either Sidney’s or Lucretius’s (who claims that he writes poetry to sweeten bitter truths).<sup>178</sup> She affirms – contra Sidney – that poetry sustains the very world, but also – contra Lucretius – that poetry is not a superficial inducement to natural philosophical insight but fundamental to its construction. That her poems are “small Pastime[s]” makes them no less capable of making a world. In fact, the construction of the final sentences repeatedly link the single atom to the whole world.

The content of Cavendish’s early atomist poems little differ from the atomist natural philosophy of her contemporaries, but her emphasis on fancy and imagination sets her methodology apart. Her opinions – about the shape and motion of atoms, about which atoms govern which parts of nature – are not in themselves outlandish, and would have been at home in the works of any number of early modern natural philosophers.<sup>179</sup> This is most obvious when she leaves aside verse to give a brief prose synopsis of her position:

Thus the Fancy of my Atomes is, that the foure Principall Figures, as Sharpe, Long, Round, Square, make the foure Elements; not that they are of severall matters, but are all of one matter, onely their severall Figures do give them severall Proprieties; so likewise do the mixt Figures give them mixt Proprieties, & their severall composures do give them other Proprieties, according to their Formes they put themselves into, by their severall Motions. This I do repeate, that the ground of my Opinion may be understood.<sup>180</sup>

Despite this straightforward exposition, Cavendish characterizes her conception of matter’s formation as a “Fancy.” Even writing prose, she takes pains to emphasize the fanciful nature of atomism, because she was convinced that the natural world moved in the same fanciful manner as her mind and her poetry. Thus, Cavendish would have considered that her *Blazing World*, a fanciful

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<sup>177</sup> Cavendish, *Poems, and Fancies*, “Epistle to the Reader” unnumbered.

<sup>178</sup> Philip Sidney, *The Major Works*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 235. Emma L. E. Rees, “Triply Bound: Genre and the Exilic Self,” in *Authorial Conquests: Essays on Genre in the Writings of Margaret Cavendish*, ed. Line Cottegnies and Nancy Weitz (London: Associated University Presses, 2003), 25.

<sup>179</sup> Clucas’s article on the various treatments of fire atoms in the Cavendish circle gives ample evidence that Cavendish’s atomist fancies were no more preposterous than the “serious philosophy” of her contemporaries. Clucas, “The Atomism of the Cavendish Circle: A Reappraisal.”

<sup>180</sup> Cavendish, *Poems, and Fancies*, 31.

fictional account of an Empress and her animal scientists, was a valid form of scientific exploration (although of a fundamentally different sort than experimental methodologies).

Approached from this perspective, natural philosophy, no more or less than poetry, is a form of pastime. Cavendish openly admits the fact that her *P&F* and other writings could as easily be true as false, because there is no ground for either.

But amongst many Errours, there are huge Mountaines of Follies;  
and though I add to the Bulke of one of them, yet I make not a  
Mountaine alone, and am the more excusable, because I have an  
Opinion, which troubles me like a conscience, that 'tis a part of  
Honour to aspire towards a Fame...<sup>181</sup>

The rise of scientific epistemology is founded upon the elimination of error, but Cavendish rejects this approach and tames error through the topoi of modesty and fancy. By denying that her writings are anything other than errors, Cavendish appeals to literary traditions that see error as productive growth.<sup>182</sup>

In scientific terms, Cavendish claims that fancy or imagining are the only honest and honorable and viable grounds for thought. The Royal Society, with its pretensions to truth, is an example of false hubris, error taken for truth (see the overtly foolish animal philosophers of *The Blazing World*). In the end, the ignorance of the uneducated woman is the only defensible epistemological posture, particularly in Cavendish's case, because of her "Opinion, which troubles [her] like a conscience," that she must pursue Honour and Fame. In other words, her desire to share her fancies appears as a moral inclination, rather than simply a vain or self-aggrandizing one.<sup>183</sup> Cavendish pits Fancy against Method, the context of an ignorant, fanciful, woman (that she is) against educated male philosophers and scholars.

This opposition, however, does not mean that fancy cannot partake of rational thought. Quite to the contrary. Cavendish's point is not that men are rational and women aren't, or that experiment is rational and fancy isn't. Rather, fancy is a form of reason (one with no claim on truth), and experiment is really nothing more than the delusion that method produces reason. Fifteen years

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid., "Epistle to Mistris Toppe," unnumbered.

<sup>182</sup> Error was profoundly important to Renaissance notions of literary development. The founding text of Renaissance literary culture, Petrarch's *Canzoniere*, begins by recalling the poet's "giovanile errore," or youthful errors. "Voi ch'ascoltate in rime sparse il suono / di quei sospiri ond'io nudriva 'l core / in sul mio primo giovenile errore / quand'era in parte altr'uom da quell ch'I sono..." In English: "You who hear in scattered rhymes the sound of those sighs with / which I nourished my heart during my first youthful error, when / I was in part another man from what I am now." Petrarca, *Petrarch's Lyric Poems*. This opens up a line of inquiry into the relation of early modern women's rhetorics of errancy to textual autonomy. My hunch is that tropes of errancy are a space of autonomy for early modern female authors. See for example, Katherine Philips' lines "My love and life I must confess are thine / But not my errours, they are only mine" Hero Chalmers, *Royalist Women Writers, 1650-1689* (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 2004), 5. Chalmers is citing "To Antenor, on a paper of mine ..." Katherine Philips, *The Collected Works of Katherine Philips*, ed. Patrick Thomas (Stump Cross, England: Stump Cross Books, 1990), Volume 2, 7-8. Patricia Parker's work on error and gender are particularly useful here. Patricia Parker, *Literary Fat Ladies Rhetoric, Gender, Property* (London: Methuen, 1987). Patricia Parker, *Shakespeare from the Margins: Language, Culture, Context* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>183</sup> On ignorance in Cavendish, see Bronwe Price, "Feminine Modes of Knowing and Scientific Enquiry: Margaret Cavendish's Poetry as Case Study," in *Women and Literature in Britain, 1500-1700*, ed. Helen Wilcox (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 13-139.

after *P&F* was published, Cavendish would write, *contra* Aristotle, that “fancy or imagination is a voluntary action of reason, or of the rational parts of matter,”<sup>184</sup> and in *The Blazing World* (1666), she will be careful to justify her fanciful method.

The end of reason, is truth; the end of fancy, is fiction; but mistake me not, when I distinguish *fancy* from *reason*; I mean not as if fancy were not made by the rational parts of matter but by *reason* I understand a rational search and enquiry into the causes of natural effects; and by *fancy* a voluntary creation or production of the mind, both being effects, or rather actions of the rational parts of matter...<sup>185</sup>

Cavendish’s emphasis on voluntarism and rationality here is crucial. Fancy is not chance, but choice; error is not unreasonable, but a rational mirroring of the motions of the natural world. Furthermore, the rational intentionality of fancy empowers poetry and gestures towards an agency inherent in poetic composition, an agency that empowers a woman’s writing as much as a man’s. What is often read as lack of order is in fact fancy, disorder not as lack but choice. Often, haphazardness is construed as a falling-off from a state of order, but Cavendish puts this the other way around. The originary state – of nature, of the mind – is variety, whimsy (what looks like disorder). It is the elimination of this originary error that would be a mistake.

#### IV. Natural Poetry

The way Cavendish describes her own personality, and female nature more generally, speaks to her ideals of poetic composition. Her self-representations are in fact normative – and fundamentally genderless – insofar as her description of her own writing method and poetic style provides the rubric for her judgments of other poets and the standard according to which she organizes her understanding of literary tradition and poetic lineage. It is clear from Cavendish’s assessment of the Roman poet, Ovid, that she considered her style of poetry to be a school rather than a style exclusive to herself. When she refers to the school of poets to which she belongs, she talks about “natural poets” and “natural poetry” instead of her more subjective term, fancies. In the context of literary traditions, what she often describes as circumstances of her development or personality traits – haphazardness, impatience, a quick mind – turn out to be the characteristics of what she calls “natural poets.” Cavendish’s emphasis on a natural poetics is a question as much of literary history as it is of self-characterization, which is to say that her poetics does not exist in a vacuum, but is a standard by which she judges other poets, both her contemporaries and the titans of the classical period, and organizes her understanding of literary history.

Cavendish’s persona – isolated, ignorant, naïve, and melancholic – is a strategy that serves a dual purpose. On the one hand, it addresses what I have been calling the biographical, fixing her within the domain of feminine decorum by depicting a modest and retiring lady. On the other hand, it is programmatic, fleshing out her conception of natural poetry as a representation of the varieties and pleasures of Nature. As I have already suggested, Cavendish’s poetics and her conception of the natural world are mutually constitutive. The valorization of fancy over empiricism relies upon a specific conception of nature that finds itself reflected in the workings of the human mind and the

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<sup>184</sup> Margaret Cavendish, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, ed. Eileen O’Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 272.

<sup>185</sup> Cavendish, *The Blazing World and Other Writings*, 123–4.

forms of the written text. The human mind – when unspoiled by pretension, too much learning, or painstaking artifice – is like nature, or rather, it *is* nature. Its fanciful motions are nature’s very flux and flow, which means that the fancies of an unmediated mind produce a variety and copia in writing that don’t just represent but rather partake of nature. Thus, what Cavendish calls “natural” poetry shares the goals of natural philosophy (to bring the human mind closer to nature’s secrets) through an entirely different methodology. Instead of trying to crack nature’s structures to find her hidden truths, natural poetry replicates nature in human arrangements, manifesting her structures in the forms of poetry.

Because natural poetry emphasizes untutored ease, we must look for the tenets of this school in the place we would logically least expect to find them: Cavendish’s professions of ignorance of literary history. Natural poets, as Cavendish describes them, hew to creation rather than imitation, inviting their material forth from their fecund fancy. “Natural poets . . . are far beyond Artificial Chymists, their Creation of Fancies is by a Natural way, not an artificial”<sup>186</sup> They are more likely to represent themselves as natural and naïve than inspired by the work of other writers. In order to emphasize her own natural-ness, Cavendish stressed her seclusion and naiveté, emphasizing her ignorance of literary traditions and incapacity to read foreign languages.<sup>187</sup> Cavendish denied that she had a library or was at all influenced by any other writer, but denying such influence was a way of asserting the naturalness so important to her poetics. The frontispiece to the 1665 *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* bears this inscription:

Studious She is and all Alone  
Most visitants, when She has none,  
Her Library on which She looks  
It is her Head her Thoughts her Books.  
Scorning dead Ashes without fire  
For her owne Flames doe her Inspire.<sup>188</sup>

Yet Cavendish, who constantly describes her reclusive and melancholic personality, had as great a passion for publishing her texts as she did for “publishing” herself, dressing with a singularity and ostentation in her public appearance that made her name circulate like wildfire in the talk – and type – of British society.<sup>189</sup> Cavendish figures herself as ignorant and secluded because to be a writer of natural poetry she must be inspired by nature, her own mind, more than textual precedents.

The closest Cavendish comes to pointing out her compatriots in the school of natural poetry is her praise of Ovid. The first chapter of this study showed that Ovid enshrined Lucretian ideas and images in the myths of Narcissus and Actaeon, influencing Renaissance conceptions of poetic creation. For Cavendish, more important than the mythological transmission of Lucretian ideas was

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<sup>186</sup> Cavendish, *Sociable Letters*, 279.

<sup>187</sup> Lucy Hutchinson, who translated Lucretius, depicts her translation as similarly solitary: she writes that she toiled over her translation of Lucretius in the seclusion of her children’s nursery. “I did not employ any serious studie in [translating Lucretius], for I turnd it into English in a roome where my children practuzd the severall qualities they were taught, with their Tutors, & I numbrd the sillables of my translation by the threds of the canvas I wrought in, & sett them downe with a pen & inke that stood by me.” Lucy Hutchinson, *Lucy Hutchinson’s Translation of Lucretius: De Rerum Natura*, ed. Hugh de Quehen (London: Duckworth, 1996), 7.

<sup>188</sup> Margaret Cavendish, *The Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (London: Printed for J. Martin and J. Allestrye, 1655), unnumbered.

<sup>189</sup> James Fitzmaurice troubles the picture of Cavendish as a solitary genius thing by examining how family attachments influenced her writing. James Fitzmaurice, “Fancy and the Family: Self-Characterizations of Margaret Cavendish,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 53, no. 3 (1990): 199–209.

the way Ovid's poetics enacted the variety of Lucretian cosmology. Ovid is a natural poet insofar as his poetry replicates the exuberance and variety of nature in Lucretius's vision of it. In the *Sociable Letters* (1664), Cavendish applies the category of natural poet to the author of the *Metamorphoses* as much as to herself. Responding to her interlocutor's question of which is her favorite Latin poet, Virgil or Ovid, Cavendish decides for Ovid without hesitation. His great strength is what she often apologizes for as her greatest stylistic weakness: haphazardness and variety.<sup>190</sup> "[H]aving more Variety," Ovid's poetry is "Brief, and yet Satisfactory."<sup>191</sup> That is, he writes much and in pieces, but each piece is in itself full and sufficient, and furthermore the collection of fragments benefits more than loses from their relative brevity (and possible even incoherence).

Neither did he spend his Reason, Judgment, Wit and Fancy, on One  
Tedious Feigned Story, but on Hundreds of Stories, and Express'd  
himself in his Metamorphosis, as much a Moral, and Natural  
Philosopher, a Courtly Lover, an Heroick Souldier, a Valiant and  
Prudent Commander, a Politick States-man, a Just Governour and  
Ruler, a Wise and Magnificent Prince, a Faithful Citizen, a Navigator,  
Fortificator, Architect, Astronomer, and the like, as also a Learned  
Scholar ...<sup>192</sup>

Ovid's variety speaks to his breadth of experience and imagination, painting the world.

Rather than artificially limiting the scope of his work or the range of his style, Ovid's work covers a vast span of topics. The implications of this emerge when Cavendish compares his work to Virgil's. The alternative to Ovid's roving poetic eye is the sort of ambitiously programmatic poetry Virgil writes. To make her point, Cavendish repeatedly contrasts Ovid with Virgil in terms of their relationships to the state. This creates a surprising moment when Cavendish – so often characterized as writing with a finely tuned awareness to politics and often with political motives – criticizes Virgil for writing to please Caesar rather than to do justice to Nature: "Virgil was the Craftier, but Ovid the Wittier man, that Virgil was the better Flatterer, but Ovid the better Poet."<sup>193</sup> His dedication to Nature cost Ovid dear, and he was exiled. (A royalist exile herself, Cavendish must have felt a double kinship with the exiled Roman.) Nevertheless, Nature kept him in her favor: "Although [Ovid] was not one of Augustus Caesar's Favorits, yet he was Nature's Favorite ... [a] Natural Poetical Birth"<sup>194</sup> In Cavendish's account, Virgil is a good poet whose art is undermined for being in the service of mere politics, instead of Nature.

Like Ovid, Cavendish is a child of Nature. What appears in her work as a modesty topos in fact manifests her commitment to natural poetry. As I have argued, Cavendish's frequent exclamations of her own ignorance, lack of training, and haphazard poetic compositions serve to present her as a natural poet, untutored by culture but attuned to nature. "For though I am a Poetess, I am but a Poetastress, or a Petty Poetess, but howsoever, I am a Legitimate Poetical Child of Nature, and though my Poems, which are the body of a Poetical Soul, are not so Beautiful and

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<sup>190</sup> All too often, Cavendish's texts are denounced for the very qualities that are praised in the writings of male contemporaries. As Dodds writes in an article on Cavendish and Donne, "Cavendish's poetry, by contrast [to Donne's], has suffered critical neglect as a result of its liminal status between science and literature." Dodds, "Poore Donne Was Out: Reading and Writing Donne in the Works of Margaret Cavendish," 156.

<sup>191</sup> Cavendish, *Sociable Letters*, 207.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 208.

Pleasing, as the rest of her Poetical Childrens Bodies are, yet I am nevertheless her Child, although but a Brownet.”<sup>195</sup> This directly recalls her description of Ovid, “Nature’s Favorite ... [a] Natural Poetical Birth”<sup>196</sup> Cavendish excuses herself for her poetic failings by claiming the equality of her creations as Poetical Children. However mean she is, she is nevertheless a “Legitimate Poetical Child of Nature,” and her poems legitimate poetical children.

Being a “natural” poet, or “Child of Nature” implies that the gifts of poetry and philosophy are natural gifts, not acquired by training, but also not a question of inspiration. Cavendish writes that “it pleased God to command his Servant Nature to indue me with a Poetical and Philosophical Genius, even from my Birth; for I did write some Books in that kind, before I was twelve years of Age.”<sup>197</sup> Her youthful writings attest to the innateness of her gift. This casts light on the importance of what Cavendish calls her “baby books,” her earliest notebooks. In letter 211 of *Sociable Letters* she writes that the ‘Baby-Books’ have “neither Beginning nor End, and [are] as Confused as the Chaos, wherein is neither Method nor Order”<sup>198</sup> Instead of an infirmity, the lack of method and preponderance of chaos in Cavendish’s juvenilia attests to her natural gifts. That she was so early a “natural” poet is only proper, when it is the gifts of nature rather than the acquisitions of learning that make a poet.<sup>199</sup>

The modesty topoi Cavendish employs to emphasize the naturalness of her poetic gift draw upon the Lucretian analogy between atoms and letters, which appears most frequently in Cavendish’s texts when she describes her own aversion to (or inability to learn) languages, not only foreign or ancient ones such as French – which she claims to never have learned despite her five years living in France – or Latin – which would have been useful for her studies – but even English. She professes to be unschooled even in her native tongue, insisting that her education was earned as a casual onlooker to familial conversations, not in books:

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>197</sup> Margaret Cavendish, *The Life of the Thrice Noble, High, and Puissant Prince William Cavendish* (London: Printed by A. Maxwell, 1675), n.p.

<sup>198</sup> Cavendish, *Sociable Letters*, 267.

<sup>199</sup> In this, I follow what could be called third-wave Cavendish studies, which is reflective of scholarship on early modern women’s writing in general. In the seventies, the first generation of Cavendish scholars focused on the rehabilitation of her work and the work of other early modern women writers by distinguishing a distinctive voice for women writers. See Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale Nota Bene, 2000). The eighties and nineties saw scholars wanting to take Cavendish’s thought seriously on its own merits, but often falling into the sort of reductive biographicalism that Dodds so astutely diagnoses. For example, Sara Mendelson, *The Mental World of Stuart Women: 3 Studies* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987). Sarasohn, “A Science Turned Upside Down.” Catherine Gallagher, “Embracing the Absolute: The Politics of the Female Subject in Seventeenth-Century England,” *Genders* 1 (Spring 1988): 24–39. Kathleen Jones, *A Glorious Fame: The Life of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, 1623-1673* (London: Bloomsbury, 1988). The next decade and beyond of Cavendish scholarship has moved towards situating Cavendish’s work in conversation with her contemporaries and within genealogies of philosophical and literary thought. The work of Dodds, Cottagnies and Weitz, and Starr come first to mind. Dodds, *The Literary Invention of Margaret Cavendish*. Cottagnies and Weitz, *Authorial Conquests*. Starr, “Cavendish, Aesthetics, and the Anti-Platonic Line.” Complementing this trend in seventeenth-century studies are the efforts of scholars of the eighteenth century to place both Cavendish’s work and seventeenth-century materialism more generally in the context of eighteenth century developments in aesthetics and reading practices. Natania Meeker, *Voluptuous Philosophy: Literary Materialism in the French Enlightenment* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006). Starr, “Cavendish, Aesthetics, and the Anti-Platonic Line.”

For I never read, nor heard of any English Booke to Instruct me: and truly I understand no other Language; not French, although I was in France five yares: Neither do I understand my owne Native Language very well; for there are many words, I know not what they signifie; so as I have only the Vulgar part, I meane, that which is most usually spoke. I do not meane that which is us'd to be spoke by Clownes in every Shire, where in some Parts their Language is knowne to none, but those that are bred there. And not onely every Shire hath a severall Language, but every Family, giving Marks for things according to their Fancy. But my Ignorance of the Mother Tongues makes me ignorant of the Opinions, and Discourses in former times; wherefore I may be absurd, and erre grossely.<sup>200</sup>

As always, Cavendish uses claims of ignorance as a modesty topos. Not only does she know no books, she is unfamiliar with the language in which they are written; her ignorance of languages makes her unschooled in all but family habits.<sup>201</sup>

Cavendish's self-representations as ignorant, naïve, and childlike are Janus-faced. On the one hand, if she is ignorant of ancient books, her poetry and natural philosophy is original, wholly her own. On the other hand, she implies that ignorance of foreign languages and cultures will make a person no less wise than one who struggles to grasp them:

Greek and Latine, and all other Languages are of great ornament to Gentlemen, but they must spend so much time in learning them, as they can have no time to speak them, and some will say it is a great advancement to wisdom, in knowing the natures, humours, laws, and customs of several men, and nations; which they cannot do, except they understand their severall Languages to answer that, although al Languages are expressed by four and twenty letters, yet there is no Language which will not take up an age, to learn it perfectly as to know every circumstance; and since mans life is so short, and learning so tedious, there wil accrue but little profit for that laborious pains, so that the benefit that should be made will come too late, but surely these men are wise enough which understand the natures, laws, and customs of their own country, and can apply them to their right use.<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Cavendish, *Poems, and Fancies*, "To Naturall Philosophers," unnumbered.

<sup>201</sup> Boyle argues that both editions of the *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1655 and 1663) espouse a notion of what she calls "local knowledge:" "although no part of nature can know the whole truth about nature, there are what we might dub 'local knowledges,' the different knowledges possessed by different parts of nature due to their different motions." Boyle, "Margaret Cavendish's Nonfeminist Natural Philosophy," 104. It seems that part of Cavendish's picture of natural poetry, as well as her skeptical epistemology, was the idea that a person could only really know their immediate environs. She might gain a local familiarity – family habits – but would never be able to extrapolate those ways of knowing in a systematic way, for example, to other cultures or the acquisition of other languages.

<sup>202</sup> Cavendish, *The World's Olio*, "Of Languages," 13–14. In Chapter 11 of the *Defense*, Bellay makes much the same argument. Du Bellay, *Les regrets précédé de Les antiquités de Rome et suivi de La défense et illustration de la langue française*.



Cavendish asserts that it is well nigh impossible to ever master the language and customs of another people, because of the great time and effort involved. Furthermore, drawing a distinction between “ornament” and “wisdom,” she implies that there is more wisdom in understanding and putting to “right use” the language and custom of their own countries as those of others. Thus, the “ornament” of foreign learning is little boon at all.

Cavendish implies that the mind we are born with is as wise as the learned mind, because our natural, childlike mind is nature’s mind, and our most familiar language is nature’s language, and no amount of learning can enrich such language. If anything, learning, custom, and affectation will detract from it, ossify it, or simply waste our time.<sup>203</sup> Because the language we are born with is natural, a woman who knows but one language will know as much of Nature as a man who knows many. Language’s basis in letters – that is, “al Languages are expressed by four and twenty letters”<sup>204</sup> – attests to their elemental expressive quality. Though they may sound different and have grown different by culture, they all express the same thing: nature.

Giving a reading of Cavendish’s fanciful poetics and epistemology, indebted as they are to Lucretius, is less a corrective to reading Cavendish biographically than a demonstration that a biographical reading – or self-representation – responds to and constitutes her very poetics, which are bound up in spontaneity, lack of mediation, ignorance, and fancy. This gives at least part of the story about the appeal of Epicureanism – and, as I have shown, Lucretianism – for early modern women writers and thinkers, which, in turn, shows how important women’s writing must be to the line of Lucretian poetics that provided an alternative to both the Horatian poetics and the experimentalist natural philosophy of the period. Furthermore, focusing on the cooperation between one author’s poetic and scientific principles and the sympathies between her literary and philosophical texts will be helpful for future scholarship in analyzing the complex relationship between poetry and science at the inception of England’s scientific revolution.

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<sup>203</sup> Cavendish attributes her mature ability to piece together the world’s language to her husband, asserting that before she met him she could barely read the world’s language. Younger, she “found the World too difficult to be understood by my tender years, and weak capacity, that till the time I was married, I could onely read the letters, and joyn the words, but understood nothing of the sense of the World, until my Lord, who was learned by experience, as my Master, instructed me.” Cavendish, *The World’s Olio*, 47.

<sup>204</sup> Either Cavendish demonstrates some of her self-professed ignorance when she disregards alphabets with more or less than “four and twenty letters,” or her point is that regardless of the different alphabets or arrangement, each language speaks from and to the same Nature.

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