

## "Lucretius, Ovid, and Pythagoras in the Renaissance: Ronsard Evaluates the Metamorphoses, Book XV, 62-272"

In this paper, I will evaluate the manner in which Pierre de Ronsard, a 16<sup>th</sup> century French poet, explores the same questions about change Ovid and Lucretius had in Rome, 1,500 years earlier. An analysis of Ronsard's "Élégie 24," in conjunction with the Pythagoras episode from Book XV of the *Metamorphoses*, will reveal both the timeless nature of classical ideas and the capacity of poetry to express them. In "Élégie 24," Ronsard employs a metaphor of deforestation to express his affection for the classical literary tradition and his fear that it will soon be abandoned. The last stanza, in particular, contains references to both *De Rerum Natura* and the *Metamorphoses*. After we understand Lucretian theory, we can go back to *Book XV* and evaluate how Ovid uses Lucretius as part of his own message, we will see that Ronsard's allusions to both ancient poets confirm the accuracy of Ovid's prediction about the immortality of poetry. As it happens, Charles Segal, a renowned critic of ancient poetry, published an article in 2008, depicting his own interpretation of the Pythagoras episode, which almost parallels Ronsard's. Segal's ideas emphasize Ronsard's profound reading of Ovid: his tribute to ancient predecessors and his personal contribution to keep the tradition alive. Studying these two poems together not only helps us appreciate the significance of Ronsard's elegy, but also offers a new way to interpret the Pythagoras episode.

In "Élégie 24," Ronsard spends 9 out of 10 stanzas going into great detail about his fondness for poetry, illustrated by a metaphor of a sacred forest. He directly addresses a woodcutter, who represents the forces in society that threaten the immortality of his poetry. He uses an allusion to Erisichthon, a king punished with eternal hunger in the *Metamorphoses*, to express the seriousness of his concern. Falling trees, depicted through references to the

*Metamorphoses*, serve as visual images of the destruction of poetry. In three consecutive stanzas, he bids adieu to the forest, which he illustrates with a series of mythological citations. With this variety of classical references throughout the elegy, Ronsard affirms his familiarity with Ovid and more generally, ancient literature. Therefore, it seems appropriate that Ronsard would use the last stanza to console himself with Lucretian laws about cycles of eternal change. If all matter eventually deteriorates, it would be natural that his poetry would also fall victim to dissolution. However, we have to wonder why the French poet would settle for the degradation of his own work and the literary tradition he has meticulously described in the preceding stanzas.

Before we turn to the Pythagoras episode and evaluate how Ovid uses Lucretian language to express his view on the immortal nature of poetry, we will evaluate how Ronsard interprets two passages from *De Rerum Natura*. You'll find the last stanza of "Élégie 24" at the top of your handout. In line 62, Ronsard cries out, "Que véritable est la philosophie." Scholar Louisa Mackenzie suggests the description of this philosophy in lines 63-67 correspond directly to citations from Books 2 and 5 of *DRN*<sup>1</sup>. "Nec tenet omnia paulatim tabescere et ire/ Ad capulum spatio aetatis defessa vetusto" (2.1173-74) ends a passage in which Lucretius mocks human tendency to idealize by-gone times<sup>2</sup>. The extensive measures Ronsard takes to build up his reverence for poetry and the past suggest he has fallen victim to this practice. With the metaphor of the forest, Ronsard creates an ideal world in which he can escape harsh realities of 16<sup>th</sup> century France. His use of Lucretian intertext in the last stanza underlines his reliance on the past. However, his acknowledgment of its eventual decay creates a certain paradox. We can see that Ronsard understands Lucretius's message; he parallels "omnia" (1173) with "toute chose"

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<sup>1</sup> All *DRN* text was taken from Bailey, Cyril, ed. *De Rerum Natura*. Vol. 1. Oxford: Clarendon, 1947.

<sup>2</sup> Mackenzie, "Ce Ne Sont Pas Des Bois," 21.

(63) and “paulatim” (1173) with “à la fin” (63). However, his violent imagery of removing trees contrasts the natural, gradual decay of matter, characteristic of Lucretian philosophy.

An excerpt from Book 5 of *DRN* helps summarize the Lucretian theory Ronsard cites; line 260 gives us, “Ergo terra tibi<sup>3</sup> libatur et aucta recrescit.” It’s important to recognize that Lucretius uses both “aucta” and “recrescit” to describe re-growth. This description tips the balance of degradation and production toward the positive side. In the passage before this line, he presents an image of recycling. The “pars terrai” (252) not only “exhalat nebulam nubisque volantis” (254), but also “ad diluviem revocatur imbris” (255-56). This dispersion of particles emphasizes their flexibility and movement, which contrasts the idea that they would settle and perish. Lucretius furthers this idea by adding, “videtur omniparens eadem rerum commune sepulcrum” (257-58). If the parent of all things is also the tomb of all things, there must be a fixed amount of matter that’s simply changing forms. In line 64 of “Élégie 24” Ronsard claims “Et qu’en changeant de forme une autre vestira,” which forms a parallel to the Latin passage. It is clear that Ronsard is familiar with Lucretius and sees something worth incorporating, but we cannot come to any final conclusions before we also analyze Ovid’s Pythagoras episode.

In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid examines changing landscapes throughout lines 237-360 of Book XV. He conveys his awareness about universal change, which he expresses in Lucretian terms similar to those in the last stanza “Élégie 24.” You’ll see on your handout, Ovid states, “Haec quoque non perstant, quae nos elementa vocamus/ quasque vices peragant, animos adhibete: docebo” (237-238). Ronsard’s assertion, “que toute chose à la fin perira” (63) almost directly parallels this claim that time slowly eats away all things. Line 263 of Book XV, “...vidi factas ex aequore terras,” expresses the same idea as lines 65-67. Line 65, “De Tempé la vallée

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<sup>3</sup> tibi refers to Time

un jour sera montagne” almost matches Ovid’s lines 266-69, “...vallem decursus aquarum/ fecit, et eluvia mons est deductus in aequora.” These similarities confirm Ronsard’s awareness of Ovid’s purpose for including Lucretian philosophy in his own work.

Therefore, we can assume Ronsard also incorporates both ancient authors into his conclusion, in line 68 of the elegy: “La matiere demeure, & la forme se perd.” The idea that “form is lost” fits in with the Lucretian theme of dissolution, described in the last stanza. However, the Ovidian intertext reveals Ronsard’s true message. In lines 257-58 of Book XV, Ovid writes, “...Cum sint huc forsitan illa/ haec translata illuc, summa tamen omnia constant.” The ideas that “la matiere demeure” and “summa omnia constant” are expressed in very Lucretian terms. However, Ovid’s material does not dissolve or deteriorate as it does in *DRN*. He makes a distinction between the soul and the body, which Ronsard imitates with a separation of “la matiere” and “la forme” (68).

In the past, the ability of the Pythagoras passage to philosophically sustain the preceding 14 books of myths has drawn scholars’ attention<sup>4</sup>. In 1958, Roy Swanson emphasized the importance of considering this episode in a literary context. He suggested it would “eliminate attention to the controversy as to what constitutes Pythagorean philosophy...and place the essay in its proper field of question, namely literature.”<sup>5</sup> Charles Segal furthers this idea, with his observation that interest in the Pythagoras speech has shifted from its seriousness as a statement about philosophical transformation to the issues of genre and intertextuality it presents<sup>6</sup>. More specifically, he suggests, “The Lucretian coloring in the *Metamorphoses*, among other things,

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<sup>4</sup> John Miller expresses this idea in "The Memories of Ovid's Pythagoras" and Douglas Little does in "The Speech of Pythagoras in *Metamorphoses* 15 and the Structure of the *Metamorphoses*."

<sup>5</sup> Swanson, Roy A. "Ovid's Pythagorean Essay." *The Classical Journal* 54.1 (1958): 21.

<sup>6</sup> Segal, Charles. "Myth and Philosophy in the *Metamorphoses*: Ovid's Augustanism and the Augustan Conclusion of Book XV." *The American Journal of Philology* 90.3 (1969): 63.

provides the background against which the reader can pick out the distinctly Ovidian character.”<sup>7</sup> Because Ronsard so closely imitates passages from the Pythagoras episode and even incorporates allusions to *DRN*, he must have recognized Lucretian episodes in the *Metamorphoses* in a manner similar to Segal. Although Ovid alludes to a variety of poets and philosophers in the Pythagoras episode, we can focus on passages containing Lucretian intertext in order to better understand Ronsard’s interpretation, expressed in “Elegy 24.”

Even before the opening of the Pythagoras speech, Ovid acknowledges his predecessor by including the phrase “magni primordia mundi” (67). Segal calls our attention to the geographical and scientific interpretations<sup>8</sup> this phrase warrants. Geographically, we can take primordia as referring to the foundation of Croton, mentioned above, “constabat certa primordia” (58). Scientifically, Ovid must have *DRN* in mind, perhaps lines 55-56 of Book 1: “rerum primordia pandam, unde omnis natura creet res.” This passage summarizes the theory of mobile, evolving elements, which both Ovid and Ronsard imitate in Book 15, 237-360 and lines 62-67 respectively. More specifically, Ovid imitates lines 55-56 of *DRN* with “causas rerum” and “quid natura” (68). The series of question words “quid” (68, 69), “quae” (69), “an” (70), “quid” and “qua” (71), and “quodcumque” (72) that follows underlines the similarity of the subjects Pythagoras and Lucretius each explore. Because Ovid reveals his familiarity with Lucretius in the introduction, there must be more passages throughout the episode that will contribute to the significance Ronsard determined.

Segal suggests that lines 62-72 of Book 15 of the *Metamorphoses* were perhaps modeled after lines 72-79 of Book 1 *DRN*, in which Lucretius praises Epicurus<sup>9</sup>. The similarity in the style

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<sup>7</sup> Segal, “Myth and Philosophy in the *Metamorphoses*,” 66.

<sup>8</sup> Segal, “Myth and Philosophy in the *Metamorphoses*,” 72.

<sup>9</sup> Segal, “Myth and Philosophy in the *Metamorphoses*,” 71.

of these two passages highlights the difference audiences to which each author writes.

“Coetusque silentum” (66) and “docebat” (68) describe the manner in which Pythagoras captures his audience. Ovid employs a traditional didactic structure, but lacks an attentive audience. It is almost as if “the vagueness of the addressee’s presence leaves the teaching sounding hollow.<sup>10</sup>” Lucretius, on the other hand, was viewed as “the poet of *docere*, [which] demands his pupils’ involved presence as an essential part of the didactic convention...<sup>11</sup>” Lucretius describes, “vivida vis animi pervicit” (72), which underlines the importance of an active mind. Even though Ovid conveys his familiarity with Lucretian philosophy, it seems that he does not expect his audience to embrace his message to the same extent his predecessor does.

We must acknowledge Ovid’s efforts to establish his poetry’s immortality. Lines 165 – 178 uses Lucretian vocabulary to express universal change. However, if we look closely, he argues that bodies, rather than the souls they contain, change. This idea is crucial for our interpretation of the last stanza, and more specifically line 68, of “Élégie 24.” We can see a resemblance to his predecessor’s philosophy in line 165, “omnia mutantur, nihil interit.” Ovid pronounces, “nihil est toto, quod perstet, in orbe/ cuncta fluunt, omnisque vagans formatur imago” (177-78). He acknowledges Lucretian philosophy by saying that nothing endures. However, he refines his statement with the phrase “vagans formatur imago” (178), which emphasizes his belief that the image or form changes. He applies this claim more specifically to the soul, as he says, “animam sic semper eandem/ esse, sed in varias doceo migrare figuras” (171-172). He describes the soul’s movement, “errat et illinc/ huc venit, hinc illuc” (165-166), which seems similar enough to Lucretian philosophy about migrating elements. However, Ovid again clarifies his message, by adding “et quoslibet occupat artus/ spiritus” (165-166). Ovid

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<sup>10</sup> Segal, “Myth and Philosophy in the *Metamorphoses*,” 73.

<sup>11</sup> Segal, “Myth and Philosophy in the *Metamorphoses*,” 73.

emphasizes the soul's ability to change form, which implies survival and immortality, rather than deterioration.

Analyzing the Lucretian intertext in the Pythagoras episode provides one method of interpreting Ovid's message. We can argue that Ovid recognizes the importance of the literary tradition and is working to make his own poetry immortal. It seems that incorporating intertexts from other authors elevates the meaning of his poem and helps him convey that many genres of literature are necessary and can serve as the framework that houses universal ideas. Furthermore, we can see that Charles Segal has constructed an interpretation of the Pythagoras episode similar to Ronsard's. This confirms that Ovid's method of expressing his message was effective. We can disregard efforts to philosophically connect this passage to the rest of the work or determine whether or not it "fits in."

In summary, Segal, who goes into great detail about the role of intertext in the Pythagoras episode, claims, "Ovid thus reminds us of how differently the same material can be handled in different literary modes."<sup>12</sup> In the Pythagoras episode, Ovid uses Lucretian language to establish his poetry's immortality. He recognizes the universality of change in nature and conveys his understanding in terms similar to those in *DRN*. However, once he makes the distinction between body and soul, his own belief emerges. Just as Segal suggested, Ovid effectively employs Lucretius to provide a background against which his own ideas stand out. In line 237 and again in line 252, Ovid acknowledges how elements and shapes change over time. But the clarification in line 259 about the "sub imagine" suggests that matter remains, and it is the image or form that changes. If we understand this "matter" as a metaphor for the ideas expressed in poetry, we can

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<sup>12</sup> Segal, "Myth and Philosophy in the *Metamorphoses*," 70.

argue that Ovid implies they are immortal. Poetry, then, simply serves as the mutable framework that contains universal messages.

Thanks to my background in both Latin and French, I was able to analyze the Pythagoras episode and “Élégie 24” side by side, and see how Ronsard confirmed Ovid’s belief that poetry, despite changes in form and languages, has an immortal ability to relay universal ideas to those who read it. Not only does “Élégie 24” provide one example that suggests the classics were a component of French education, but it also conveys the profound impact of these studies on Ronsard. The last line of the elegy reveals the key to understanding his interpretation of the Pythagoras episode. Ronsard’s ideas provide a new light under which we can evaluate Ovid’s message. We can conclude that both Ovid’s and Ronsard’s poetry had universal qualities that ensured their survival from one generation of readers to the next.