

“Warts and all”: John Lyly’s atheist aesthetics*

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ABSTRACT

This paper finds some evidence of an atomist aesthetic in certain passages of John Lyly’s *Euphues. The Anatomy of Wit*. It then addresses the issue of how Lyly might have become acquainted with atomist philosophy and, in particular, the thought of Empedocles, whether through his reading or his membership of the Oxford circle. Finally, by showing how Lyly’s early play *Campaspe* combines his aesthetic views and atomist controversy, the paper confirms the reasonableness of its initial proposition and opens the way not only for a reassessment of Lyly and his works but also for a reappraisal of the baroque in early modern English literature and for a revision of standard accounts of the origins of English atomism.

KEYWORDS: John Lyly; atomism; aesthetics; Empedocles; *Euphues. The Anatomy of Wit*; *Campaspe*.

1. Introduction

This article proposes that John Lyly (1564?-1606) was an atheist, a claim that is less contentious than it sounds. In the first place, atheism in late sixteenth-century England need not have meant lack of belief in any divine being. Rather, “atheism” was one brush with

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which early proponents of philosophical and scientific materialism were tarred; cognate slurs included “atomism” and “Epicureanism.” Atheism was, so to speak, a broad church with room on its pews for “mechanical tradesmen,” Galenists, Arians, deists, medical practitioners who focused on secondary causes and, later, the Royal Society (Hill 1997:60, 72, 129, 154, 162, 114), not to mention Christopher Marlowe, Sir Walter Raleigh, George Chapman, Thomas Hariot and other members of the “wizard” Earl of Northumberland’s circle. To all of these might be added Edmund Spenser, the Lucretian strain of whose poetical philosophising was identified almost one hundred years ago (Greenlaw 1920); Gabriel Harvey, whose earthquake letters pit natural philosophy against superstition (Passannante 2008); and John Donne, an evident adept of atomist science and thought (Hirsch 1991).

What is more unusual about Lyly is the atomist nature of his aesthetics, which bears close conceptual affinities to Empedoclean physics and predates the atomist slant of baroque aesthetics some associate with Lucilio “Giulio Cesare” Vanini and Marin Mersenne. By no means does this paper wish to transform Lyly into a baroque writer *tout court*, but it does suggest that Lyly, like many of his contemporaries, may be regarded with profit as a *libertine érudit*, a figure familiar to us from histories of early Enlightenment philosophy, but whose lineage runs backwards from Vanini, through Giordano Bruno, Jean Bodin, Niccolò Machiavelli and Pietro Pomponazzi, to philosophers of antiquity and Empedocles himself (Israel 2001:14-15).¹ When in his *Dialogues des Morts* (1683-1684) Bernard le Bovier de Fontanelle joined Empedocles and Vanini in conversation, he was formalising a partnership – facilitated by their fiery ends on Etna and at the stake, respectively – which has survived to the present. For Fontanelle, their subversive philosophical ideas, rendered them “Fools to all posterity” (1730:252). This paper proposes that Lyly might sit well in their company. In the process, it discovers some of the possible philosophical foundations for that “mutability,” “relentless process of change” or “riot” that Leah Scragg (2003:6, 8) and Katherine Wilson (2013:179) have found seething beneath the apparent composure and balance of Lyly’s antithesis, parison and paroemion.

¹ Israel cites Popkin (1979:87-109) and Gregory (1998:325-7).

In his classic study, G. K. Hunter (1962) argued that Lyly was a second-class humanist turned courtier. Arthur J. Kinney hinted at a different Lyly, schooled in “the New Learning” (1986:148) and disaffected with Renaissance humanist poetics. Leah Scragg, meanwhile, has built on Jonas Barish’s (1956) pioneering study of Lyly’s “doubleness” to rewrite disaffection as “modernity,” manifest in his “radical destabilization of meaning” (Scragg 2003:19). Michael Pincombe’s (1996) portrait of Lyly as a “counter-courtly” playwright gives that radicalism a more overtly political strain, visible in his satire (Berry 1898:116) and implicit in his antitheses which, according to Marcia E. Picallo (2008:83) questioned the fixed concepts of the established order.² This paper adds momentum to this progression towards a critical, radical Lyly, conversant with controversial philosophical ideas that threatened religious orthodoxy and political ideology. It therefore also adds some intensity to the hue of the new, revisionist picture that is emerging of Lyly in such works as Andy Kesson’s recent *John Lyly and Early Modern Authorship* (2014). At the same time, it acts as a petition for a reappraisal of the baroque in early modern English literature and for a revision of conventional accounts of the origins of English atomism.

2. “Warts-and-all” beauty

Lyly’s *Euphues. The Anatomy of Wit* (1578) and its sequel, *Euphues and his England* (1580), were among the best-selling works of Elizabethan England and are today felt as being somehow seminal, whether of a style (“Euphuism”) or of a genre (the novel). But their catch-all categorisation as “prose fiction” is eloquent of the difficulty critics encounter when actually trying to define their nature and achievement. The style has precursors, but is by no means merely derivative; the form and genre have points in common with courtesy books, particularly Baldessare Castiglione’s *The Book of the Courtier*, Greek romances, Roman comedy, Boccaccio’s *Decameron* and contemporary Italian prose romance and Spanish *picaresque*, but are clearly distinct from all of them. Critics seem not quite to know what to do with the works, much as Elizabeth I did not quite know what to do with their author: Lyly, ever awaiting preferment, was ever

² Lyly’s subversive politics of gender has been noted by, among others, Rackin (1987) and Wixson (2001).

disappointed. Despite the success of *Euphues*, he died in extreme poverty, his star as playwright eclipsed by those of his younger contemporaries, Marlowe and Shakespeare.

If the *Euphues* works as a whole are perplexing, so too are many of their details. Not the least of these is the opening of Lyly's epistle dedicatory to Sir William West, Lord Delaware (de la Warr), which prefaces *Euphues. The Anatomy of Wit*:

Paratius [= Parrhasius] drawing the counterfaite of Helen (right honorable) made the attier of hir head loose, who being demaunded why he dyd so, he aunswered, she was loose. Vulcan was painted curiously, yet with a polt foote. Venus cunningly, yet with hir Mole. Alexander hauing a Skar in his cheeke helde his finger vpon it that Appelles might not paint it, Appelles painted him with his finger cleauing to his face, why quod Alexander I layde my finger on my Skarre bicause I would not haue thee see it, (yea sayd Appelles) and I drew it there bicause none els should perceiue it, for if thy finger had bene away, either thy Skarre would haue ben seene, or my arte mislyked: whereby I gather, that in all perfect workes aswell the fault as the face is to be showen. (Lyly 1902:1.179)

One puzzle is the origin of the four *exempla* Lyly adduces concerning ancient art works. The source for the painting of Vulcan is Cicero's *De Natura Deorum* (i.29.80-83) where, as pointed out by R. Warwick Bond (Lyly 1902:1.328), Lyly's most exhaustive editor, Cicero praises a statue of the lame god by Alcamenes. However, Bond finds the *exempla* of Parrhasius and of Alexander and Apelles to be of Lyly's own invention since neither appears in Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* or Plutarch's *Lives*, the standard sources for information about ancient artists. On Venus, Bond's notes are silent. In their note on Helen, William Croll and Harry Clemons (Lyly 1906:3) hint that Lyly has confused Pliny's account of Zeuxis (*Nat. Hist.* xxxv. 36), which does mention a picture of Helen, with his other of Parrhasius, which does not; as for the *exemplum* of Alexander and Appelles, they agree with Bond that it was of Lyly's own making. In her more recent edition, Leah Scragg (2003:27) casts no further light on the matter.

That Lyly should be inaccurate on some points (he talks of a painting of Vulcan, Cicero of a statue; he speaks of Parrhasius in relation to Helen, Pliny of Zeuxis) is not perhaps surprising since what is known of his time at Oxford can suggest that Lyly was not

the most assiduous of students (Bond 1902:6-8), though Gabriel Harvey's jaundiced remarks are not entirely trustworthy. What is more surprising is Lyly's invention of the Alexander and Apelles *exemplum*, particularly as Apelles is a frequent reference throughout the rest of the work and a character in his play *Campaspe*. Such fabrication ran counter to contemporary rhetorical practice regarding the use of *exempla* which, if they were to persuade, needed the credentials of authority. In the absence of any sources, the conclusion is that Lyly must have had some compelling reasons to invent authority in this unusual way.

The passage is obviously written under the influence of what Lyly wrote on the first page of *Anatomy* itself:

And true it is that some men write and most men beleeeue, that in all perfecte shapes, a blemmish bringeth rather a liking euery way to the eyes, then a loathing any waye to the minde. Venus had hir Mole in hir cheeke which made hir more amiable: Helen hir scarre on hir chinne which Paris called Cos amoris, the Whetstone of loue. Aristippus his wart, Lycurgus his wenne: So likewise in the disposition of ye minde, either vertue is ouershadowed with some vice, or vice ouercast with some vertue. Alexander valiaunt in warre, yet gyuen to wine. Tullie eloquent in his gloses, yet vayneglorious: Salomon wyse, yet to too wanton: Dauid holye but yet an homicide: none more wittie then Euphues yet at the first none more wicked. (Lyly 1902:1.184)

The Venus/mole *exemplum* is shared by both passages. The source for Helen and her scar is unknown, but to Bond (Lyly 1902:1.131) it has the smack of authenticity. In contrast, Bond judges the Aristippus and Lycurgus *exempla* to be a further invention of Lyly's. Clemons and Croll (1906:10) and Scragg (2003:32) are similarly unable to find parallels.³ Aristippus had appeared relatively recently in Richard Edwards's play *Damon and Pithias* (1565), which Lyly had in mind when writing *Campaspe* in 1583 (Hunter 1991:5, 13), but again there was no mention of any dermatological eruption. The following four *exempla*, referring to Alexander the Great, Cicero, Solomon and David, were all genuine and well-enough known to be commonplace. Worth noting at this stage is that Aristippus' unauthorised wart implies the virtues of the founder of the Cyrenaic

³ Laurie Maguire (2009:66-69) discusses the same passage in connection with Helen of Troy's absolute beauty, but is unable to trace the sources of Lyly's allusions or ideas.

School of philosophy, whom Lyly's readers would have known from Diogenes Laertius (1925:II.8.65-86) as a proto-Epicurean hedonist and voluptuary, that is to say, an unregenerate atheist or *libertine érudit avant la lettre*.

Another of this passage's debutants (hence, perhaps, Lyly's translation, "the Whetstone of loue") is the Latin expression "*Cos amoris*," with no parallels until, a good thirty years later, Thomas Dekker's *The Gull's Hornbook* (1904 (1609):17), Thomas Coryat's *Crudities* (1905 (1611):404), George Griffin's acrostic on Coryat's name (Coryat 1905:101), and John Josselyn's *New Englands Rarities* (1865 [1671]:157) (see Sell 2014). What emerges from these instances is an identification between moles and sexual looseness. The physical blemish becomes a sign of a moral flaw in a sexually-signed trope which owes much to the Aristotelian view of woman as the biologically imperfect sex and the Augustinian and Thomist view of woman as the morally weaker sex on account of that biological imperfection (*propter imperfectionem corporalis naturae*; see McGowan 1985:217-8). However, Lyly's *exempla* extend to physically blemished males, his own Euphues has a flawed character, and, in the dedicatory epistle, he seems to argue that much as a mole can be attractive – a whetstone that sharpens appetite, what Josselyn calls a "come-at-me" – so too can a defective work of literature such as his own. If, on the one hand, in the epistle dedicatory Lyly is simply affecting the conventional self-effacement of the modesty topos, he is on the other formulating an aesthetic argument whereby perfection must countenance or accommodate imperfection: "in all perfect workes aswell the fault as the face is to be shoven." The first page of *Anatomy* itself takes that argument a stage further by suggesting that the "fault," now "blemish," can actually enhance a perfect work: "in all perfecte shapes, a blemmish bringeth rather a liking euery way to the eyes, then a loathing any waye to the minde." Perfection, in other words, can be improved by imperfection. Perfection may even depend on imperfection, a thought Shakespeare's Enobarbus might have shared, who tells us how Cleopatra "did make defect perfection" (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 2.2.238).

Lyly's first postulate (perfect works must show imperfections) was anything but mainstream at the time he was writing. In art theory from Leon Battista Alberti, through Michelangelo, to Giorgio Vasari, it was the legitimate task of the painter or sculptor to

“eliminat[e] the imperfections in natural objects” in order to reveal “what nature is always aiming at but is also frustrated from producing” (Blunt 1940:18). As Alberti, under the influence of Aristotle (*Protreptikos* B13, *Physica* 199a:16), put it in *De Re Aedificatoria* (1485), “it is very rarely granted even for Nature herself to produce anything absolutely perfect in every part” (qtd. Blunt 1940:15). Thus art took on for itself the prosthetic and moral function of supplementing and improving on nature that is familiar to us from Renaissance and early modern literary theory, not least Sir Philip Sidney’s *Apology for Poetry*, where the poet’s “erected wit” releases him from “subjection” to Nature’s works and opens up vistas of “perfection.” Among art theorists, only Leonardo doggedly insisted that a perfect work should reflect the imperfections of reality: to try to improve on Nature was to be unnatural and mannered (Blunt 1940:30).

Lyly is unlikely to have been familiar with Leonardo’s ideas; in any case Leonardo never went so far as to claim that something, be it nature or a work of art that imitated nature, attained perfection on account of its imperfections: it is one thing to say a painting is perfect because it is a perfect representation of natural imperfections, quite another that a painting is perfect because of its imperfections as a work of art. Yet this seems to be Lyly’s position according to his second postulate. For his assertion that “in all perfecte shapes, a blemmish bringeth rather a liking euery way to the eyes, then a loathing any waye to the minde” suggests that the aesthetic effect of a perfect work of art will actually be enhanced – become more perfect still – if there is a flaw to it.⁴

Lyly’s *Euphues* works are noticeably preoccupied with the notion of perfection. A major contention of both *Anatomy* and *England* is that personal and moral perfection can in theory be achieved through nurture and education, while, *pace* Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas, the female objects of male desire are usually presented as perfectly or absolutely beautiful, both physically and, therefore presumably, morally: as Euphues ponders of Livia, “how can she be in minde any way imperfect, who in body is perfect euery way?” (Lyly 1902:1.213). However, Euphues’ experience shows that

⁴ Greenblatt (2010:18-48) implies that Shakespeare’s attention to beauty marks liberated the subject from the “virtually programmatic impersonality” of conventional canons of ideal, harmonious and perfect beauty.

theory and assumptions are never fully applicable in practice or borne out by facts, a disheartening conclusion made inevitable perhaps by the superintendant and unique perfection of Elizabeth I.⁵

3. Atomist aesthetics

According to some, the term “baroque” comes from the Spanish word *barrueco* (or Portuguese *barroco*) which in turn derived from Latin *veruca*, meaning wart (Hollander 1998:202). Early modern jewellers applied the word to misshapen pearls whose imperfect shapes suited their fashioning as mythological figures and animals (Pearl Distributors 2012). Lyly’s views call to mind the allegedly baroque aesthetic of imperfect perfection which historian of aesthetics Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz attributes to Vanini and, to a lesser extent, Joseph Scaliger and Marin Mersenne, all of whom, according to Tatarkiewicz, were drawing on the metaphysical theories of the pre-Socratic philosopher Empedocles (c.490-c.430 BC). Tatarkiewicz defines “the Baroque aesthetic” as follows: “True perfection lies in ceaseless improvement, constant elaboration, in enrichment, in the appearance of new things, properties, values” (1980:77). This definition certainly seems compatible with Lyly, and if “baroque” originally meant verruca, it would be a doubly fitting term to apply to Lyly’s aesthetic which makes room for Aristippus and Lycurgus, “warts and all.” There are problems with Tatarkiewicz’s definition of the notoriously slippery term “baroque,” any meaningful discussion of which lies beyond the scope of this paper, whose only aim is to isolate an atomist strain in some of its purported tenets. That said, others have suggested that the baroque is best conceived as a debate around Renaissance ideas and ideals of classical perfection (Checa and Morán 1982:14), while at least one critic has advanced Lyly’s *Euphues* works as foreshadowing in its style English literary baroque (Hanak 1970:323).

The key text in Vanini is to be found in the fiftieth dialogue, “On God” [“De Deo”] of his *De Admirandis Naturae* (1619:352-367). Andrzej Nowicki (1970), the first modern scholar to scrutinize the relationship between Vanini and Empedocles as it emerges in this

⁵ Lyly discusses the problems posed to human representational arts by Elizabeth’s beauty at some length in *England* (e.g. 1902:II.38-40, 205-215). See Riehl (2010:93-98).

dialogue, puts the matter as follows: “To Empedocles – as represented by Vanini – perfection depends on incompleteness (*perfectio propter imperfectionem*), since it possesses a potential for development and complementing with new characteristics (*perfectio complementi*)” (qtd. in Tatarkiewicz 1980:77). Vanini’s Empedoclean aesthetic is the result of combining the ultimate end of the universe, “perpetuity” (*perpetuitas*) with the means to obtaining that end, “generation” (*generatio*). According to Empedocles, the attributes of perpetuity are perfection and rest (*quies*), those of generation, imperfection and motion (*motus*). It is the antithetical nature of their respective attributes which leads to the paradox that if generation is a means to, or guarantor of, perpetuity, then rest depends on motion and perfection on imperfection:

If rest is the perfection of motion, and generation logically consists of motion, then the end of generation is rest: as nature tends to that end, she generates no more: everything before the end is imperfect, for it is on account of something else: then the world for Empedocles must be perfect on account of imperfection and, as he states, perpetual on account of generation.” (Vanini 1616:363; my translation)⁶

What concerns us here is not the philosophical validity of Vanini’s argument, but the kinship it bears with Lyly’s aesthetic of perfection (the flaw enhances perfection = *perfectio propter imperfectionem*) and, potentially, his antithetical style reflecting an antithetical nature. However, Vanini’s dialogue raises several problems. In the first place, it is not strictly speaking an argument about aesthetics, although it could be – and indeed would be – applied to aesthetics. Secondly, we will look in vain for any direct source for the paradox in Empedocles, which might suggest that Vanini was creating a straw man for dialectical purposes: while his argument rests on a materialist view of the universe that is rooted in the Sicilian philosopher (but is also paralleled in Parmenides and Xenophanes), nowhere does this particular paradox find expression in those fragments of Empedocles that survive. Thirdly, Vanini was born in 1585, seven years after *Anatomy* was published, and Lyly died in

⁶ “Si quies est perfectio motus, & generatio constat ratione motus, ergo finis generationis quies est: cum eum natura finem adispicitur, non amplius generat: omnia ante finem, imperfectio, sunt enim propter aliud: Ergo Mundus erit Empedocli perfectus propter imperfectionem, Est enim perpetuus per generationem, ut asserit” (original emphasis).

1606, a decade before the publication of *De Admirandis Naturæ*. This enforces the hypothesis that Vanini was formulating ideas that were already in circulation before Lyly commenced his *Euphues* works. When around 1727 William Warburton noted how Edmund's speech on bastardy in Shakespeare's *King Lear* anticipated the thoughts of the atheist Vanini, he ascribed Shakespeare's prescience to "the divinity of his genius" (Blair 1753:1.lxii): evidence that such ideas were actually current at the time Shakespeare and, before him, Lyly were writing would help demonstrate the accuracy of Warburton's hunch.

It is difficult to assess how familiar, if at all, Lyly and his contemporaries might have been with Empedocles. It was not until 1573 that Henri Estienne published the "Empedoclis Fragmenta" with Joseph Scaliger's commentary as the first work collected in his *Poiësis philosophos*. Scaliger's strictly philological comments do not address Empedocles' thinking, let alone any possible implications for aesthetics;⁷ nor do any of the annotations he made to his own copy of Estienne's printed edition.⁸ It is in any case highly improbable that Lyly would have read Estienne's edition. Even Sidney, in his *Apology for Poetry* (1973:97), written perhaps between the two *Euphues* works, seems only to have known of Empedocles as a philosopher-poet, not actually to have read him. Sidney did know Giordano Bruno (1548-1600), the undisputedly baroque figure who was in England between 1583 and 1585, and had the uncertain privilege of being the dedicatee of two of the three dialogues (*Cause, Principle and Unity* and *Ash Wednesday Supper*) the Italian wrote during his English sojourn. Lyly too might have met Bruno, and his play *Endymion* (first performed 1588) draws on the cabbalistic interpretation of the Endymion story as depicting the ascent of the soul from erotic desire to divine contemplation which Bruno set out in the same dialogues and had inspired Cardinal Bembo's famous speech in Book IV of *The Book of the Courtier* (Gannon 1976; Bevington 1996:12). Bruno cites Empedocles often, but once again, there is no trace of the notion of "imperfect perfection," and once again, even if there were, Bruno's England visit and the publication of his works

⁷ I have reviewed Scaliger's notes as cited in Simon Karsten's edition of Empedocles (1838). Scaliger visited England around 1566, but its barbarity, dull libraries and idle scholars made little impression on him, nor he on them (Grafton 1983:120).

⁸ I have reviewed them as reproduced and discussed in Marzillo (2011).

postdate Lyly's *Euphues*. Nonetheless, Lyly's evident familiarity with Bruno's London works hints at a measure of philosophical affinity.

What Lyly might have known of Empedocles would have been gleaned from classical and renaissance sources. The most obvious one was Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, available in printed form in Latin translation since the late fifteenth century and in the original Greek since 1533. The picture that emerges of Empedocles (Laertius 1925:2. 367-391 [viii. 51-77]) is of a statesman, philosopher and poet given to the excesses proper to the "egotistic, melancholy, eloquent soul that he was [...] the wonder-worker and the hierophant, in purple robe and golden girdle" (Leonard 1908:2). Most notorious was the alleged manner of his death by leaping into the crater of Mount Etna in an attempt to secure veneration as a god. As for Empedocles' philosophical doctrines, readers of Laertius like Lyly would have learnt of his materialist view that everything in the universe was composed of four elements, fire, water, earth and air, a proposition he formulated to counter the Eleatic School's (Parmenides, Xenon) insistence on a single, eternal reality, and which was accepted by Plato and Aristotle. He would, too, have been aware of Empedocles' love/strife binary, that pair of mysterious forces which organised and modified the combinations of the elements, and of his beliefs in endless physical mutability and reincarnation. All of this was hot stuff in late sixteenth-century England; but there is no trace of any Empedoclean ideas of perfection and imperfection.

Among the transmitters of Empedoclean thought, Lucretius (c.99-c.55 BCE) was particularly notorious. His great philosophical epic, *De rerum natura* served to introduce not only Roman readers, but also Renaissance readers after its rediscovery in 1417 by Poggio Bracciolini, to the ideas of Epicurus. Epicurean materialism was perhaps based more on Democritan atomism and his own principle of the "swerve" (*clinamen*) than on the ideas of Empedocles, and in the poem generally it is difficult to isolate completely Empedoclean and Epicurean strands (Garani 2007:4).⁹ However that might be, the Epicurean-materialist triad formed by Empedocles, Epicurus and Lucretius was viewed with great suspicion throughout the

⁹ Lucretius discusses Empedocles at length in the first book of the poem (1982:59-69 [1.716-829]). Scholars are still divided over whether Empedocles was anything more than a poetical influence on Lucretius. See, for example, Campbell (1999).

Renaissance. Francesco Zabarella's early defense of Epicurus, *De Felicitate* (1400) was not actually published until 1655, while Lorenzo Valla's *De Voluptate*, an Epicurean dialogue which praised pleasure and recriminated scholasticism and asceticism, led to his trial on theological grounds (his patron, Alfonso of Aragón, intervened to save him). Espousing Epicurean materialism was dangerous: Machiavelli, Ariosto, Guicciardini and Montaigne got away with it; others, like Bruno, were not so lucky.¹⁰

As a transmitter of knowledge about Empedocles, Plutarch deserves special mention in connection with Lyly. In his *Moralia*, which Lyly drew on frequently, most probably in Jaques Amyot's French translation of 1572 (a copy of which was in the Earl of Oxford's library [Nelson 2003:53]), the name of Empedocles appears side by side with that of Apelles in an anecdote about how the painter's poverty was relieved by the generosity of the philosopher Arcesilaus. Plutarch makes Arcesilaus quote Empedocles on entering the painter's humble abode: "Here is nothing here (quoth he) I see well, but these four bare elements that Empedocles writeth of: Hot fire, cold water, sheer and soft: |Gross earth, pure air that spreads aloft" (Plutarch n.d.:73).¹¹ Whether or not this otherwise insignificant textual conjunction of philosopher and artist inspired Lyly's atomist aesthetics, his play *Campaspe* is articulated around the discourses of art and science in what might otherwise seem an arbitrary combination.

In addition to Laertius, Lucretius and Plutarch, Empedoclean ideas could be gleaned from the many references in the standard surviving works of ancient philosophy – in addition to Plato and Aristotle, Cicero's *De amicitia* and Theophrastus' *De sensu et sensibilibus* – and in the writings of those that transmitted his and the other atomists' notions from antiquity to late sixteenth-century England. Isidore of Seville, Bede, Hrabanus Maurus, William of Conches and Vincent of Beauvais all knew of atomist philosophy, which Conches "openly taught" (Stones 1928:445-446). Subsequent propagators in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries included Nicholas of Cusa,

¹⁰ On the influence of Epicureanism see Jones (1989), C. Wilson (2008) and Greenblatt (2011), who discusses Machiavelli's reading of Lucretius and offers a useful synopsis of "the Lucretian challenge" (2011:150, 185-199).

¹¹ In his *Life of Arcesilaus*, Laertius makes no mention of this anecdote.

Girolamo Fracastoro, Peter Ramus and, of course, Bruno (Stones 1928:446-452). Earlier, both the scholastic Adam of Buckfield and Aquinas had regarded Empedocles as a “naturalist philosopher;” long before them, Plotinus attributed to him Pythagorean views on the soul and its purification, reconciled him with Platonism, and thereby facilitated allegorical readings of him by early Christian Platonists and Neoplatonists such as Clement of Alexandria, Hierocles of Alexandria, Simplicius, who translated him into Latin, and Olympiodorus the Younger (Bercovitch 1968:68-71). By the fifteenth century, some Neoplatonists found in Empedocles the “source of Plato’s theory of Ideas and of the soul;” Marsilio Ficino traced to him the notion of man as microcosm, Pico della Mirandola the “doctrine of the soul’s purification” (Bercovitch 1968:71-72). Throughout the sixteenth century many anthologies reproduced excerpts from his writings so that readers could decide for themselves whether he was a “naturalist” or a Platonist (Bercovitch 1968:72-73). Among those readers might well have been Thomas Nashe, who accurately quoted from Fragment 115, Gabriel Harvey, who “Without all exception|subscribe[d]” to his doctrine of contraries, and Sir Walter Raleigh, who counted him “the deep philosopher,” not to mention Thomas Kyd, Spenser, Thomas Watson, William Shakespeare and Robert Herrick, or Bacon, who incorporated important elements of his philosophy into his own cosmology (Bercovitch 1968:73, 74n24, 78-79). Though still shadowy, Empedocles was by no means unknown.

4. Atomism in Oxford’s circle

After securing both BA and MA from Oxford, where he appears to have had little inclination for academic study, more, according to detractors like erstwhile friend Gabriel Harvey, for a libertine life of “horning, gaming, fooling, and knaving” (he may have been rusticated for three years), Lyly found himself in 1575 in need of employment after rejection for a fellowship at Magdalen College.¹² By 1578 Lyly was living in rented rooms at the Savoy Hospital, the expense probably born by Lord Burleigh, a distant relative through marriage (Hunter 2004); Burleigh’s son-in-law, Edward de Vere, 17th

¹² Lyly was also incorporated MA at Cambridge in 1579, a procedure for which there were little or no residence requirements.

Earl of Oxford, was also renting accommodation there. So too were Harvey and Edmund Spenser (Bond 1902:1:17-18), both of whose philosophy was considerably influenced by their reading of Lucretius (Greenlaw 1920; Jardine 47-48n39) and both of whom may have introduced Lyly to materialist philosophy. In 1578 *Anatomy* was published, with its dedication to the otherwise undistinguished Lord Delaware. When *England* was published in 1580, its dedication to de Vere makes it quite likely that Lyly was by then already working as what Harvey would term Oxford's "minion Secretarie" (qtd. Nelson 2003:289). Himself a playwright, Oxford may have encouraged Lyly's turn to drama; certainly he transferred to him the lease of the Blackfriars Theatre in 1583. Oxford's notorious libertinism ruled him out of securing any important office or command and may, together with his literary interests, have led him to identify a fellow-spirit and sufferer in Lyly; more practically, by recruiting Lyly to produce plays for a royal audience, Oxford might have hoped to curry some favour with Elizabeth.

Licentious, hedonistic, extravagant and scandalous living was a charge conventionally brought against the materialist philosophers such as Empedocles, Aristippus and Epicurus, and later Bruno and Vanini – all of them as erudite as allegedly libertine. Epicurus' advocacy of pleasurable living was an easy stick with which to beat him even if what was really at stake were the atheistic consequences of his atomism. If charges of sensualism and luxury were convenient rhetorical stratagems which avoided the potentially more hazardous task of taking atomistic arguments seriously enough in order to be able to refute them, it becomes reasonable to suppose that what underlay contemporary slanders on Oxford's and Lyly's immoral demeanour may have been the suspicion of atheism. It was Oxford himself who was purported to have introduced atheism – along with Italian fashions – to the English court on his return from a sixteenth-month tour of France, Germany and Italy between 1574 and 1576 (Ward 1928:143). In Venice, Oxford may have come across victims of the Inquisition denounced for holding Epicurean beliefs regarding the chance creation of the world and the mortality of the soul (Nelson 2003:212). Yet his atheism may also have derived from sources available in England such as John Proctor's *The Fal of the Late Arrian* (1549). Be that as it may, Oxford's atheism was attested by Henry Howard, Francis Southwell and Charles Arundel, while "the Articles of Atheism brought against Raleigh in 1594 may date back to

his association with Oxford in 1579" (Nelson 2003:211). The precise nature of Oxford's atheism cannot be ascertained with certainty. He may have indulged in alchemy and prognostication, acting as the patron of a circle of mages and esoterists to which Lyly, accused of "dabbling in magic" (Bond 1902:1.29) also belonged, even if grudgingly: "Loth I am to be a prophett, and to be a wiche I loath," he wrote in a letter to Burleigh in 1582 (Nelson 2003:225). It begins to appear that Oxford and his circle were subject to the same smears as Northumberland, "the Wizard earl," and his, smears which perhaps attacked subversive science under the guise of wizardry and magic.

If Oxford were, like Northumberland, an atomist, Nicholas Hill, a disciple of Bruno and author of *Philosophia Epicurea, Democritana, Theophrastica* (Paris, 1601), would certainly have felt at home when becoming the former's secretary on expulsion from Cambridge in 1591, possibly on account of his suspect philosophical ideas (Hill 1997:130). The fact that in his diary entry for 25 October 1602 John Manningham accused "great profest philospher" Hill of "seduc[ing], indeed gull[ing]" a certain Sir Richard Basset "by imagined Alchymie" (qtd. Nelson 2003:62) demonstrates how one man's science may well have been another's atheism.

5. Atomism in *Campaspe*

The historical record allows speculation as to Lyly's atomism and/or atheism, but no hard evidence; and certainly, Lyly never cites Empedocles by name or quotes directly from him. The *Euphues* works do refer to Epicurus several times, but always as the butt of hackneyed jibes at gluttony and "licentiousnesse" (Lyly 1902:1.186, 188, 190, 276; 2.55, 99, 172). *Anatomy* does include a discussion on religious matters between Atheos and Euphues, the former subscribing to a materialist, Pantheist view that "if there be any God, it is the worlde wherein we lyue, that is the onely God," a view which Euphues brands as "detestable heresie" (Lyly 1902:1.292, 300). Despite reproving the fallaciousness of Euphues' arguments, which prove God's existence on the authority of the Scriptures, Atheos is "somewhat easily overcome" by them, as Bond noted (Lyly 1902: 1.365). The dialogue could be read as an exercise in containing atheistic subversion, but there is no proof either way. Lyly's attack on English fashion in *England* (Lyly 1902:2.194), a work which is

noticeably more ambivalent towards Italian culture than the more acerbic *Anatomy* (Hadfield 1998:170-179) may be a nod in the direction of his new patron, Oxford, whose Italianate sartorial taste was lampooned by Harvey in *Speculum Tuscanismi*; but the suspicion of libertinism is as soon allayed as aroused.

Lyly's first play, *Campaspe* (1583), does however bring into tantalising conjunction Lyly's aesthetics and atomist debate, as if prompted by the Arcesilaus anecdote from Plutarch's *Moralia*. The play opens with Clitus and Parmenio discussing the genetics of Alexander's perfection (Lyly 1902:2.317 [I.i.7-13]), while later, Hephestion delivers himself of a Petrarchan analysis of "al the perfection that may be in *Campaspe*" but yet advises Alexander to nurture his divine pretensions and shun her earthly charms (330-331 [II.ii.62-76]). More importantly, as already mentioned, the plot turns on Apelles deliberate marring of his portrait of Campaspe. When entrusted by Alexander with the task of painting Campaspe, Apelles expresses doubts about the successful accomplishment of the commission: "Bewty is not so soone shadowed, whose perfection commeth not within the compasse either of cunning or of colour" (333 [II.ii.157-158]). A little later he identifies that beauty with Campaspe's "absolute" (336 [III.iii.7]) face, a face so complete that its perfection lacks nothing and, as he explains to Alexander, means that any artistic representation of it will never be finished and therefore never perfect: to his customer's impatient question "When will you finish *Campaspe*?", Apelles replies, "Never finishe: for always in absolute bewtie there is somewhat aboue art" (339-340 [III.iv.80-82]). By this time, Apelles has fallen in love with the woman sitting for him as he confesses in a soliloquy which seems to confirm the atomistic basis of his aesthetics. Contemplating his portrait of Campaspe, he wishes it might come to life, but suspects Venus is so envious of its beauty that she will refuse to work any such miracle. More practically, he acknowledges the misplacement of his love for the "concubine of the Lord of the world" (342 [III.v.33]); more philosophically he realises that he has painted "the expresse image of *Venus*, but so[me]what fresher: the only pattern of that eternitie, which *Iupiter* dreaming of aslepe, could not conceiue again waki[n]g" (342 [III.v.41-43]). In other words, his portrait has attained a perfection inaccessible even to the Gods. It is a perfection which replicates "eternitie" and thereby transforms the subject portrayed, Campaspe, into a goddess herself; and it is as Venus that Apelles

now apostrophises his portrait: "Blush *Venus*, for I am ashamed to end thee" (342 [III.v.43-44]). As in Vanini's reading of Empedocles, perfection here is identified with eternity or perpetuity; Apelles, cowed by the hubris of bestowing immortality on Campaspe, feels dread at the prospect of actually completing the portrait, making its perfection absolute and himself greater than the gods, a danger that is brought out explicitly in a later exchange between him and Campaspe:

Apel. Whom do you loue best in the world?

Camp. He that made me last in the world.

Apel. That was God.

Camp. I had thought it had been a man. (347 [IV.ii.34-40]).

Luckily for Apelles, the love-plight he is submerged in affords him the means not to have to complete the painting. For so keen is he to set his eyes once more on Campaspe that he conceives a ruse to see her again and confess his love for her: "Assoone as Alexander hath viewed this portraiture, I will be deuise give it a blemish, that by that meanes she may come again to my shop" (343 [III.v.57-59]). Apelles, then, deliberately makes imperfect his perfect work of art so that, in a variation on the blemish/"come-at-me" trope, the girl he loves will be obliged to go back to his painter's shop. Thus the aesthetics of imperfection enables Lyly's play to achieve its comic resolution and completion.

As a foil to the love plot Lyly introduces Athenian philosophers onto the stage where they embark on a discussion of the relationship between the moon and the tides. How the moon might affect the tides if there was no contact between them was a question which had vexed materialist philosophers since Aristotle and was being debated even as Lyly wrote his play.¹³ Between 1583 and 1585 Bruno was wrestling with the issue in his London dialogues (Blum 2012:36). Whatever else may be affirmed of Lyly, he was certainly conversant with one of the hot scientific topics of his day, a topic which forced one to take a stand with the atheists or the faithful. Taken together with his play's dramatization of his novel aesthetics of perfection, this textualization of a contemporary scientific controversy makes it

¹³ It should be noted that Pincombe finds Lyly's Aristotle a mere "time-serving propagandist" (1996:29).

at least plausible that Lyly's aesthetics have a basis in atomist philosophy where the concept of perpetuity was predicated on generation. That being the case, Lyly's dramatic engagement with the moon in *Endymion* and *The Woman in the Moon* (where Pandora, a possibly veiled portrait of Elizabeth, is initially a "perfect" compound of the four Empedoclean elements, "purest water, earth, and ayre, and fyre" (Lyly 1902.3.244 [I.i.62]), finally "mutable" and "fickle"),¹⁴ as well as through the figure of Diana in *Gallathea*, might take on a new resonance in the context of contemporary political debate over Elizabeth's virginity, potential matches and eventual succession: self-proclaimed *eadem semper*, Elizabeth's perfection resided in her immutability, yet the perpetuity of the English crown required the change intrinsic to generation and its corollary of unmaidenly imperfection. Meanwhile, in a metaphorical economy where on the one hand courtiers like Raleigh cast themselves as the ocean petitioning Cynthia, their lunar queen, and where on the other social instability was figured as tempest, seditious elements in society as "roarers" and "ruffian billows," scientific debate over the effective relationship between moon and tide begins to acquire a charged political undertow.

5. Conclusions

This paper raises more questions than it answers. Its thesis that Lyly espoused an atomist aesthetic requires wide-ranging substantiation from a close reading of all his works. The political implications of an aesthetic where perfection is predicated on perpetuity, imperfection on generation, also need to be teased out carefully before rereading Lyly's plays against the backdrop of contemporary debate over Elizabeth's virginity and the problem of succession. More broadly, if Lyly's aesthetics do have an atomist slant which may properly be identified as baroque, then it is time for English literature of the late-sixteenth century to be re-examined from the optic of an aesthetic and cultural category which is generally associated with continental (and Roman Catholic) Europe and absent from standard accounts of English literary history. More broadly still, this paper is further testimony to the need for standard histories of philosophy and

¹⁴ Scragg (2006) suggests an early date for *The Woman in the Moon* and blames the suppression of the Paul's boys circa 1590 on the "royal displeasure" it incurred.

science to be revised. Interest in Epicurean materialism in England is usually understood to have taken root in the wake of Pierre Gassendi's reconciliation of atomism with Christian doctrine with the publication of *Philosophiæ Epicuri Syntagma* in 1649 (Kargon 1964:184) or of the Paris salon of the Cavendish circle in the mid-1640s, which was "the centre of a revival of Epicureanism led by Hobbes and Gassendi" (Wilson 2008:27).¹⁵ Perhaps, as some of the studies cited here indicate, that revival started much earlier, before any reconciliation with Christianity made atomism respectable. And perhaps Lyly was one of its revivers, with no qualms about its heresies. For Lyly was capable of airing the most radical of ideas, whether on the virginity of Mary or the insubstantiality of art. When in *England* Lyly asserts of the virgin queen's overmastering power that "This is the onely myracle that virginitie ever wrought" (1902:2.205), the compliment contains a scarcely veiled confession of either radical Puritanism, which would sit ill with Lyly's attachment to the Burlegh circle, or outright religious scepticism – both of which, in any case, would qualify him as atheist. When in his prologue to *Endymion* Lyly writes: "We present neither comedy, nor tragedy, nor story, nor anything but that whosoever heareth may say this: Why, here is a tale of the Man in the Moon," he not only anticipates Shakespearean dissatisfaction with conventional genres, but also the proto-postmodernism of Lawrence Sterne's aesthetic nihilism, grounded as it would be in the same empiricist rationalism and demystification of the cosmos which the early Greek materialist philosophers had first essayed, which led Bruno and Vanini to the stake, and which may, less drastically, have barred Lyly from mastership of the revels. Lyly may well be a more dangerous, subversive and exciting writer than standard accounts of his eclipse by Marlowe, Shakespeare and company suggest.

¹⁵ Slightly earlier, Robert Greville, son of Fulke Greville, and Kenelm Digby had also advocated atomism in *The Nature of Truth* (1641) and *Two Treatises* (1644) respectively. Fulke Greville had participated in scientific discussions with Bruno.

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