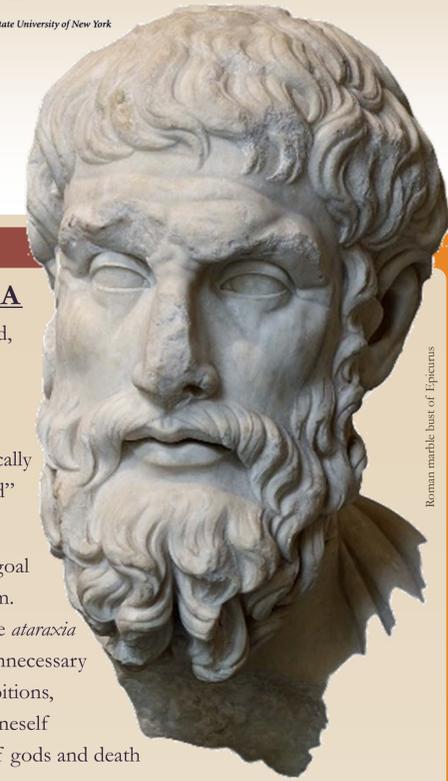


UNSEEMLY DEVICES:

The *Voluptas atque Horror* of the *De Rerum Natura*

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Roman marble bust of Epicurus

The past 2,000 years of Lucretian scholarship has determined that this poetic exploration of the nature of the universe is jarring, full of discontinuities, flawed with antinomies, and muddled by its own subject matter. Lucretian scholarship is largely bifurcated with philosophers whose methodology focuses on the pungent wormwood and philologists whose methodology leaves them captivated by the thickest coats of honey. One might think no consensus on Lucretius can be found. That conclusion, however, overlooks the vast and complex mosaic that is *omnis natura, for mere pieces rerum*.

By analyzing the structure and design of the poem, this study proposes to reveal how Lucretius presents Venus and Epicurus as counterparts that work congruently to represent the poem's major themes. In revealing their complementary companionship, this study reveals the poetic design, which the poet intended in his philosophical exposition on the nature of the universe.

THE POET-PHILOSOPHER

- Lucretius was a Roman poet in the first century BCE (late republican era)
- Almost nothing is known about him; his only known work is his philosophical, didactic poem *De Rerum Natura*
- This poem lays the tenets of Epicurean philosophy for a Roman audience

EPICUREANISM

- The school of Epicureanism was founded by Epicurus in late 4th century/early 3rd century Hellenistic Greece
- The philosophy primarily focuses on the pursuit of happiness, i.e. absence of both physical pain and mental disturbance
- Epicurus believed that solid, immutable particles (atoms) composed the universe, and based on this, he believed he could disprove the soul's immortality, and thus banish the fear of death
- Epicurus also believed in the existence of the gods; however, he denied that they played a role in human life



Botticelli, Sandro Birth of Venus (1485)

The problem resolves itself once we analyze the function of Venus and Epicurus, then see how that relates to Epicurean physics and ethics

THE PROBLEM

Scholars have been perplexed in particular by the presentation of the two main figures in the poem: Venus and Epicurus. Much scholarship claims that the representation of Venus and Epicurus seems to contradict Lucretius' stated purpose: to educate a Roman audience on Epicureanism. This is due to Lucretius commencing his work with adulation of Venus, even calling upon the goddess as a companion to his work, then his subsequent disparagement of her. And also, Lucretius exalting Epicurus to divine status, calling him a god in the fifth proem. Since Antiquity, many have been satisfied to question Lucretius' sanity or to describe Lucretius as a paradoxical "anti-Lucretius".

Many have reconciled this conflict by claiming that Lucretius substitutes Epicurus for Venus in the third proem in order to show her diminished role and the elevation in his status; however, it is not necessary to view Venus and Epicurus as separate roles conflicting with one another in the poem. If one considers the purpose and theme of the work, and in addition, Lucretius' method of presentation, Epicurus and Venus can serve as counterparts, working in union to exemplify the tenets of Epicureanism.

Here I outline my interpretation of Venus and Epicurus

Venus

- Lucretius' veneration of Venus in the prologue presents itself as a successional tableau of the goddess and her various functions. It is clear that she governs nature, in particular its generative qualities. At the outset, she is called *voluptas*, the desire or delight of men and gods. Thus, she represents the physical force of creation
- Lucretius asks for her aid in writing, thus associating her procreative qualities with poetic creativeness. In addition, she is the seeable universe. She, as the sight of nature, represents Lucretius' poetic imagery in describing the universe
- Yet, her role as the conspicuous universe diminishes as we learn that most images are illusions, unless the seer learns to view objects in their proper context
- In addition, we discover that atomic motion causes creation and destruction. Therefore, Venus' role as *voluptas* must take on a new meaning

Epicurus

- It is clear that Epicurus represents the philosophy of the poem. Lucretius reasons that he must use his poetry to induce his audience in reading about Epicureanism for the philosophy is *horror*
- In each celebration of Epicurus, we learn more about his triumph over the fear of death. Lucretius depicts this victory like that of an Iliadic hero worthy of songs and praise. Epicurus is an example of a man reaching his potential. He found happiness through knowledge of the universe

ATARAXIA

- The Greek word, *ataraxia* can be translated as "tranquility" or more specifically "peace of mind"
- Ataraxia* is the goal of Epicureanism. One can achieve *ataraxia* by eschewing unnecessary desires and ambitions, and liberating oneself from the fear of gods and death
- Throughout the poem, Lucretius describes the gods as existing in a state of *ataraxia*
- In the third proem, Lucretius vividly describes his pivotal experience of reaching *ataraxia*. When he finally surpasses the walls of the universe, he says, "some divine desire (*voluptas*) and horror (*horror*) seizes my being entirely"
- This, I propose, references Venus and Epicurus. Venus represents *voluptas*, which represents *ataraxia* itself, the sheer bliss of an existence void of care and worry. Epicurus represents the *horror*, the knowledge of the universe needed to reach *ataraxia*
- Epicurus, and now Lucretius, take their seat among the gods. This philosophy made it possible to understand the universe and their place in the universe. They have liberated themselves from useless fears and divinized themselves through their knowledge

CONCLUSION

Therefore, Venus is not just a goddess, but a means for Lucretius to explain his philosophy and an image of *ataraxia*. Epicurus is not a just man, but an example Lucretius uses to show man's potential. There is not a discontinuity in this imagery, but a progression and change to fit Epicurean attitudes. Lucretius presents Venus, not to honor the goddess, but to alter our view of Venus to better understand the universe. In altering her image, Lucretius can redefine Roman attitudes fitting for an Epicurean. Epicurus does not become a god in the sense of organized religion, but is divinized because he reached *ataraxia*. This shift perspective challenges the reader to reinterpret their own mindset in order that they may too, understand the nature of the universe.

For more information, or to continue the conversation, scan the QR code to visit my Dropbox or go to <https://goo.gl/0XuVLU>. My thesis will be posted in Summer 2016.



"Here, above the vaults of the universe, some divine desire and horror seizes my being entirely. Thus nature, by your force, lies so manifestly open, and from all sides it is uncovered."

Lucretius *De Rerum Natura* 3.28-30