

A Lucretian Venus: Erotic and Divine Love in Apuleius' *Cupid and Psyche*
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At her first entrance in Apuleius' *Cupid and Psyche novella*, the goddess Venus announces herself as the ancient parent of the nature of things, the first beginning of the elements, and the nourishing mother of the entire world (*en rerum naturae prisca parens, en elementorum origo initialis, en orbis totius alma Venus, Met. 4.30.1*). These words are an obvious allusion to Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* and especially his characterization of Venus as "governing the nature of things" (*rerum naturam sola gubernas, DRN 1.21*). Coming from a self-professed *philosophus Platonicus*, this allusion to Lucretius' Epicurean epic makes an unusual appearance in what has rightly been seen as a Platonic allegory (Schlam 1992, Kenney 1990).

Apuleius is notorious for literary allusions, but his several references to Lucretius are more than just literary learnedness. Rather, Lucretian details are a thread running through the entire *Cupid and Psyche* story. This paper will argue that Apuleius alludes to Lucretius both to affirm and to subvert two important points of Lucretian philosophy. First, the tortures and misery Psyche experiences as a result of her uncontrollable love for Cupid echo Lucretius' arguments against erotic love in Book 4 of *De Rerum Natura*. The language of torture and slavery used to describe Psyche's punishment find their antecedent in Lucretius' treatment of the pains involved in erotic love directed toward one person (*DRN 4.1069-85*). At the same time, the conclusion to the story shows Apuleius subverting this Lucretian admonition, as Psyche's marriage to Cupid shows that erotic attachments can indeed result in happy unions.

This happy marriage of Cupid and Psyche gives another Lucretian twist on a largely Platonic allegory: Psyche becomes immortal through her marriage to Cupid and gives birth to *Voluptas*. In a strictly Platonic reading of the *Cupid and Psyche* story, Psyche should give birth to *Prudentia* (Gk. *phronêsis*), one of the offspring that results when the soul is united with love in Plato's *Symposium*. Instead, Psyche's offspring, *voluptas*, represents the highest Epicurean virtue in Lucretius' philosophical system. By placing *voluptas* in this pivotal position, Apuleius affirms the importance of what Epicureans consider to be the ultimate pursuit in life. Yet, Apuleius' use of such an Epicurean virtue is not without some complication: in Lucretian theology, humans can achieve no such union with the divine (*DRN 2.646-51*). Identifying *voluptas* as the result of a divine marriage can thus be seen as a subtle attack against Lucretius' theology. The conclusion to the *Cupid and Psyche* story shows that, contrary to Lucretian theology, humans *can* achieve a union with the divine, and that the result of such a union is precisely *voluptas*, the highest Epicurean virtue.

Apuleius' allusions to Lucretius demonstrate a developed appreciation for notable aspects of Lucretius' philosophy. In conjunction, the largely Platonic allegorical themes of the *Cupid and Psyche* story are not disrupted by these allusions. Apuleius is boasting his literary erudition by these allusions to Lucretius, but he is also showing a struggle with some important Lucretian philosophical tenants. The story of *Cupid and Psyche* shows that pain and misery may result from erotic love, but immortality and *voluptas* are the rewards for divine love.