

Gender in the Roman Garden: Lucretius' idealized Epicurean society

Lucretian scholarship has not yet found consensus regarding Lucretius' stance on women in his *De Rerum Natura*, and so the next logical question—the role of women (or lack thereof) in Lucretius' ideal Roman Epicurean congregation, a “Roman Garden”—has not been fully considered. Scholars have not asked whether Lucretius sides with Epicurus in placing relatively equal value on women, or with contemporary Roman mores in seeing women as wholly subordinate to men. By synthesizing the scholarship on gender in Lucretius and examining passages problematic to a unified reading of women in the poem, I seek to answer this question and to achieve a better understanding of the didactic goal of Lucretius' epic.

The five central scholarly works on women in Lucretius reveal two distinct ways of reading Lucretius on gender: optimistically and pessimistically. The optimistic reader (Nussbaum, Fowler, Gordon) posits a recuperative reading of Lucretius and focuses on the more progressive elements of his social and moral philosophy. Pessimistic readers (Nugent, Keith), on the other hand, emphasize Lucretius' place in Roman epic tradition, a tradition that forces women into a fixed subordinate social role. I will undertake a more neutral reading of passages that are both problematic for the interpretation of gender in the poem and emblematic for the gender landscape of his Roman Garden.

Lucretius' presentation of gender roles is ambiguous, as evidenced by the strength of both optimistic and pessimistic readings of his text. His focus on the male addressee (cf. Keith) and his constant association of women with void and death (cf. Nugent) are consistent with mainstream Roman society and reflect an effort to normalize Epicureanism at Rome. Lucretius does, however, also challenge Roman society and traditional Roman views about women. My inquiry seeks to remove some of this ambiguity by focusing on two central questions: is Lucretius' Garden homosocial or heterosocial, and is it radically different from or essentially similar to the elite society of contemporary Romans?

[1] The Roman Garden, while not exclusively homosocial, does have a preference for males. The idealized Epicurean society is open to women, but, since Lucretius believes they are intellectually inferior to men, he also thinks they will be a small part of his Garden—and thus he focuses instead on preparing his male membership to adopt Epicurean philosophy. The *De Rerum Natura*'s male-oriented focus can further be explained as part of Lucretius' didactic goal, part of his place (however limited it may be) in the epic tradition of elite male education. Furthermore, Lucretius' inclusion of strong female literary figures as founts of knowledge in the epic (cf. Fowler) invites speculation about a female reader. Women are secondary subjects in the *De Rerum Natura*: while Lucretius is primarily interested in and engaged with males, there is nevertheless some room for female experience and participation in his epic and in his Garden. Women are not invited to the Garden, but, if they are of “pleasant mind” (*bello animo*, 4.1190), then, despite the many flaws that Lucretius says they possess, they may participate.

[2] Lucretius exhorts his male readers to withdraw from public life—an effeminizing action (cf. Gordon) that leaves males without an active gender role and suggests gender role adjustment in the Roman Garden. Lucretius leaves unexplained whether this adjustment is egalitarian or still markedly hierarchical. Furthermore, for Lucretius, community—and therefore society—begins specifically with marriage (it arises prior to *amicitia* in Book 5's “anthropology”), and the poet allows at the end of Book 4 for the possibility of happy, essentially coequal marriage. Whereas mainstream Roman society during Lucretius' time was incontrovertibly male-dominated and homosocial, Lucretius' idealized Roman-Epicurean society is not incontrovertibly so.