

An Epicurean Goddess Named Pleasure?

In a little-discussed article published in 1982, Pierpaolo Fornaro offered an intriguing hypothesis about the opening of Lucretius's *De rerum natura*: namely, that similarities between the 'Hymn to Venus' at the opening of Lucretius's epic (1.1–40) and Dio Chrysostom's satirical account of Epicureans worshipping a debauched goddess named 'Pleasure' (*Or.* 12.36–37) hint at the existence of a lost Epicurean text on philosophical allegory that served as a model for Lucretius's allegorizing portrayal of Venus. Although Fornaro's speculation about a lost Epicurean text has failed to win over many followers in the subsequent decades, his analysis of the textual and thematic parallels between the relevant passages in Lucretius and Dio is more compelling and merits further consideration.

This paper will revisit the question of Lucretius's literary sources from a new perspective, leaving aside the well-studied poetic models for Venus-as-*voluptas* and focusing instead on the many prose authors in antiquity, both Greek and Roman, who accused the Epicureans of worshipping Pleasure as a goddess. In a surprisingly diverse set of philosophical writers, ranging from Cleanthes in the 3rd century BC (cf. Cic. *Fin.* 2.69), to Philo of Alexandria in the 1st century BC (*Spec. leg.* III 8–9), to Dio Chrysostom (*Or.* 12.36–37), Maximus of Tyre (*Or.* 33.3), and Aelian (fr. 10) in the 2nd century CE, Epicureans are regularly described—always in tendentious terms—as worshipping or deifying Pleasure. Building upon Fornaro's analysis of the Epicurean goddess Ἡδονή in Dio Chrysostom, this paper will argue two points: (1) that the stereotype of Epicureans worshipping a goddess named Pleasure is more widespread in antiquity than commonly supposed, and (2) that there are strong reasons for supposing that Lucretius's allegorical depiction of Venus responds, at least in part, to some earlier version of this critique. Although a number of studies have examined this material with respect to individual authors such as Cleanthes (Asmis 1982), Philo (Booth 1994), and Dio Chrysostom (Ventrella 2017), this paper will attempt to offer a more global

account of the alleged Epicurean worship of Pleasure, which served as an enduring trope of anti-Epicurean polemic in antiquity (cf. Gordon 2012).

Works Cited

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