

Something Feminine:
Female Pipes and Lucretian Narratives in Virgil's *Eclogues*

At first glance, Virgil's *Eclogues* and Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* seem to operate in completely distinct literary worlds. Virgil's *Eclogues* are vignettes of pastoral life, while Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* is a didactic poem that seeks to explain Epicureanism. However, despite the differences between these pastoral and didactic projects, Virgil regularly engages with Lucretian ideas and narratives.

This paper will examine a small subset of these intertextual discourses, beginning with the scene of poetic succession in *Eclogue 5*. Towards the end of this poem, the older poet Menalcas hands over his hemlock pipe to the younger Mopsus, saying: "This pipe taught me, 'Corydon burned for beautiful Alexis,' and the same pipe taught me 'Whose flock? Is it Meliboeus?'" (5.86-7).¹ The image portrayed by this statement is striking: a (feminine-gendered) pipe is the active instructor of pastoral poets and the figure that initiates them into the process of poetic production. Following Hardie, this paper will argue that the Vergilian passage alludes to Lucretius' understanding of the invention of music as described in *De Rerum Natura*: "The whistling of the west wind through the hollow reeds first taught the countryfolk to blow into hollow hemlock pipes" (5.1382-4).² By examining the imagery and language of these two passages, it will become clear that Virgil does not just use the pipe as a symbol of poetic instruction, but references Lucretius' portrayal of the invention of music and thus brings the Lucretian world into his pastoral setting.

¹*haec nos 'formosum Corydon ardebat Alexin,' / haec eadem docuit 'cuim pecus? An Meliboei?'*

²*et Zephyri, caua per calamorum, sibila primum / agrestis docuere cauas inflare cicutas;* discussed by Hardie (2006), 26.

Having established this connection between Vergil and Lucretius, this paper then hopes to use this Lucretian image of musical instruction to illuminate a broader trend within the Eclogues. Including the aforementioned example from Eclogue Five, there are three cases in which feminine-gendered instruments operate as active agents over their male poets.³ These autonomous pipes place their poets in an intriguing position, wherein the poets become beholden to their instruments, passive agents that are acted upon by the symbols of their poetics. In isolation, these feminine pipes could be viewed as syntactical quirks. However, when placed in dialogue with Lucretius and his understanding of music's invention, the pipes suggest an interpretation of Virgil's pastoral aesthetics that pushes back against reading the *Eclogues*' landscapes solely as feminized spaces subject to male domination.⁴ Instead, it seems that Virgil hints at an understanding of musical production as reliant on instruction from nature, and perhaps even as a feminine act that references and mimics the behavior of Lucretius' generative 'mother earth.' Although his performers are exclusively male, Virgil's allusions to Lucretius embrace images of feminine reproduction and creativity to fulfill the pastoral aesthetic.

³2.36-8: *fistula... te nunc habet ista secundum* ("this pipe now has you in turn); 3.21-2: *An mihi cantando victus non redderet ille / quem mea carminibus meruisset fistula caprum?* ("didn't I beat him in singing, and shouldn't he have paid me the goat my pipe had won with songs?"; 5.85-6: *Hac te nos fragili donabimus ante cicuta / haec nos 'formosum Corydon ardebat Alexin'* ("first let me give you this slender hemlock pipe which taught me 'Corydon burns for beautiful Alexis'").

⁴See Cowan (2021) 183-6

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