

The *Causas Rerum* in Lucretius and Lucan

Lucretius' *De rerum natura* admits the topic of Epicurean philosophy into the didactic genre. A century later Lucan's *Bellum Civile* as a historical epic narrates Caesar's civil war against Pompey in 49-48 BCE. Despite the diversity of content, these two authors share a similarity of intention in regards to what they consider the purpose of their poems, i.e. to describe things (*res*) both important enough to be memorialized and crucial enough to be clarified. This clarification is central to the poetic program of the *DRN* and the *BC* because previous epic authors had misused or misinterpreted the "causes of things" (*causas rerum*) pertaining to philosophy and history respectively. I argue that Lucan adapts Lucretius' polemical program against Homer as a model for his own confrontation with Vergil, expanding Saylor's (1999) suggestion that Lucretius' proem served as a model for Lucan's own introduction.

My argument begins with Lucan's allusive statement at line 1.67 in which he announces his intention to narrate the causes of civil war and its effect on the Roman state (*causas tantarum expromere rerum*). I then compare this to Lucretius' own aim to reveal the causes of natural phenomena in verse (*de rerum natura pangere*, 1. 25). Gale (2007) has established Lucretius' engagement with Homer as one of acknowledgement but also criticism; the *DRN* combats the Homeric world view in which the gods take responsibility for the feats of nature. Lucretius confronts the mythology of Greek epic and strips it of its religiosity in order to replace it with *vera ratio* — the true reason for the nature of things. In this paper, I not only extend this model to the poetry of Lucan but suggest that the *DRN* shaped the *BC* into an epic about the *causas rerum*.

Next, I propose that Lucan's plan to detail the causes of the decline of Rome's greatness is motivated by a Lucretian necessity to correct the world view of his predecessor Vergil.

Scholars continue to remark on the composition of the *BC* as an anti-*Aeneid* (recently Martindale: 1993; Casali: 2011) in that it narrates the death of the Roman nation as opposed to the events that led to its birth. Just as Lucretius found reason to criticize and correct aspects of Homeric myth, so too does Lucan feel the need to confront the Vergilian “myth” that civil war can lead to a constructive end — i.e. the founding of Rome. Instead, the *BC* reveals that civil war is the true cause of Roman decline.

Yet in considering Lucretius’ proem as a model for Lucan this paper emphasizes the complexities of this polemic. As with Lucretius and Homer there is rivalry but also respect; Lucan offers his poem as an alternative to the *Aeneid*’s presentation of Julio-Claudian history while at the same time paying homage to his poetic predecessor and the traditions of the epic genre. Therefore I conclude that narrating the *causas rerum* is not only the prerogative of the didactic poet but finds purpose in the *BC* of the epic poet Lucan.

Bibliography

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