

## The Light of Lucretius: A Metapoetic Acrostic (L-U-C-E) in *De Rerum Natura* 5.712-15

While scholars have studied Lucretius' adroit use of wordplay, as well as his engagement with Hellenistic poetry, this focus on Lucretius' *ars* has not yet extended to an examination of his acrostics. This paper helps to fill that gap by arguing that an acrostic in Lucretius 5.712-15, L-U-C-E ("shine" or "with light"), is intentional and has metapoetic significance.

Lucretius' *LUCE* acrostic appears in his discussion of how the moon shines (5.705-50). It thus looks back to the most famous acrostic in Greek literature, Aratus' *LEPTĒ* ("slender") acrostic, which similarly appears during a discussion of the moon (*Phaen.* 783-87). Gee (2013) has recently demonstrated Lucretius' thorough (and tendentious) engagement with Aratus and Cicero's *Aratea*, and Lucretius surely was aware of Aratus' acrostic. Like Aratus, Lucretius gives a clue in his text to the "hidden" acrostic by prefacing it with the phrase "[the moon] hides its light" (*condere lumen*, 5.710).

Lucretius' *LUCE* acrostic references not just Aratus' *LEPTĒ* acrostic, but its model, namely Homer's infamous *LEUKĒ* acrostic ("white") in *Iliad* 24.1-5. Not only do *LUCE* and *LEUKĒ* sound similar, but Lucretius may be calling attention to the etymological connection between *luna* and *luceo* (e.g. Varro, *Ling.* 5.68), and perhaps even λευκή, as well as the frequent description of the moon (and sun) as "white." Meunier (2012) has argued that Ennius' poetic description of the moon as the *sol albus* ("white sun," *Ann.* fr. 84 Sk.) might be a playful double reference to Homer's *LEUKĒ* and Aratus' *LEPTĒ* acrostics. If so, then Lucretius outdoes Ennius by making the same double reference but in acrostic-form.

Lucretius' acrostic may also play on his own name. Other scholars (e.g., Snyder 1980, Gale 2001) have documented Lucretius' penchant for name play (e.g. Calliope/*callida*, Epicurus/*ἐπίκουρος*, Ennius/*perennis*, Carus/*carus*), as well as his general play on words sharing

similar letters (e.g., Snyder 1980, Dionigi 1988, Armstrong 1995). However, none has connected his frequent use of *lux/lumen/luceo* to his name LUCrEtius. If Lucretius does combine a play on his name with a reference to Aratus' *LEPTĒ* acrostic in his discussion of the moon, then perhaps he inspired Virgil's own allusion to his name via an acrostic (*PU-VE-MA*) in his version of Aratus' *LEPTĒ* passage (*G.* 1.429-33) (see Brown 1963).

If Lucretius associates himself with the moon through this acrostic, then the frequent reference to the sun (*sol*) in the lines surrounding the *LUCE* acrostic might bring to mind Aratus of SOLi (referred to by Callimachus as ὁ Σολεὺς in *Anth. Pal.* 9.507). In Lucretius' universe, however, the true sun is Epicurus. Indeed, Lucretius directly compares Epicurus to the sun when he describes how Epicurus surpassed all of humanity in his genius just as the sun outshines the stars (*Lucret.* 3.1042-44).

If Epicurus is Lucretius' sun, then perhaps Lucretius uses his discussion of the relationship between the moon and the sun (5.705-50) to reflect metapoetically on his relationship to Epicurus. In the beginning of Book 3, Lucretius makes clear that he follows in Epicurus' footsteps not because he wants to rival him but because he wants to imitate him (*te imitari aueo*, *Lucret.* 3.6). In his explanation of light of the moon, Lucretius gives prominence to the theory that the moon reflects the light of the sun (5.705-14)—a theory that could well symbolize Lucretius' imitation of Epicurus. On the other hand, Lucretius follows this first explanation with two theories that involve the moon shining with its own light (5.715-30). Thus, perhaps Lucretius also includes a subtle nod to his own poetic brilliance, which does not depend on Epicurus.

Cicero frequently notes that Aratus was a better poet than astronomer (*De or.* 1.69, *Rep.* 1.22). Lucretius surpasses Aratus by making the form and content of his poetry equally valuable:

as Lucretius' discussion of the moon reveals, his poem is not just full of poetic brilliance but also reflects the truth of Epicurus.

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