

Lucretius and *The Golden Ass*

In Apuleius' frequent allusions to the *Odyssey*, Lucius is revealed as an opposite to Odysseus, lacking self-control, a negative example where Odysseus is a positive one. Similarly, Apuleius alludes to Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, with Lucius serving as a negative example of an Epicurean. Each inset narrative (which could serve him as moral instruction) and his larger arc of experience demonstrate he is concerned with pleasure in the way *outsiders* assume an Epicurean would be, achieving at the end only a parody of *ataraxia*.

Lucretius and Apuleius encase their instruction in mediums audiences will find pleasant. Lucretius (1.936-48 = 4.10-25) compares his setting Epicurus' teachings in "honey-sweet song" to a doctor putting honey on a vessel so a child will take absinthe. Apuleius characterizes his inset tales as pleasant (*lepidae fabulae*: 1.20), pretty stories (*bellam fabellam*: 6.25), and associates honey with Venus' entrance (6.6: the birds' honeyed tunes; cf. of Isis: 11.7).

Where we are Lucretius' external audience, Lucius is an internal audience for the honeysweet tales. Though all the tales depict and comment on his own choices and circumstances, a warning against his own behavior and values, he only finds them entertaining, failing to learn from them. Each tale Lucius hears serves as a negative model for the audience, which itself finds instruction in the narratives he merely enjoys. This theme climaxes in the reenactment of the *Judgment of Paris* (10.30-33): Lucius himself is Paris! In his pursuit of the Venus-like Photis he made the same choice as Paris.

Venus' thematic prominence in *The Golden Ass* is Lucretian. *The Tale of Cupid and Psyche* presents her in unmistakably Lucretian terms (4.30.1: *En rerum naturae prisca parens, en elementorum origo initialis, en orbis totius alma Venus*), echoing Lucretius' title, and the beginning of 1.2. Book 11's descriptions of Isis restate the Lucretian allusions to Venus (Finkelpearl). *Cupid and Psyche* culminates in the birth of the goddess *Voluptas* (6.24), Lucretius' programmatic epithet for Venus (1.1: *hominum divomque voluptas*). Himself a voluptuary, Lucius encounters various versions of Venus throughout the novel, from Photis (2.8, 2.17) to the Judgment of Paris, where she is again characterized in Lucretian terms (10.31: *voluptatem*; 10.32: *dominae voluptatum*).

Lucretius bookends Book IV with allusions to Euripides' *Hippolytus*. 4.1-5 are a corrective to Hippolytus' speech (*Hippolytus*, 72-81), while the famous *Attack on the Passion of Love* (4.1058-1287) reworks central themes of Euripides' larger plot. Since Apuleius offers his own reworking of the Hippolytus story (10.2-12), Lucius' paternity (a Thesus is his father: 1.23.6) reveals him a Hippolytus figure, destroyed by a wrathful Venus.

Lucretius repeatedly warns against the evils of religion, "I . . . set out to unknot / The mind from the tight strictures of religion." For Epicureans liberation from superstition and illusion is essential to the goal of leading a contented quiet life. Apuleius thematically depicts religion as corrupted by individuals for their own agendas, victimizing those they meet. Lucius' association with Philebus and the worshippers of the Syrian Goddess (8.24-30), as Schlam (54) notes, "highlights perversion, theft and the spectacle of fraudulent religious ecstasy." Other episodes develop a sustained depiction of religion as corrupted (see Egelhaaf-Gaiser), agreeing with an Epicurean view.

Lucius' failure to learn results in his serial victimization, his conversion to Isiaic cult the climax. Incapable of moderation, he is either inappropriately sexual or, at the conclusion, abstinent. He either gobbles food to excess, or is hungry. From an Epicurean perspective, only fools like Lucius spend their time on a false quest for a supernatural-based meaning of life, at the end now based on burning religious fervor (Keulen in Harrison). His earlier condemnation of bribery as governing the legal system (10.33) undercuts his acceptance of his new vocation at the end. His new post-conversion life, opposite the detachment Epicureans seek, is a parody of Epicurean *ataraxia*.

Bibliography

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