

Eulogizing Epicurus: Stepped Challenges in Lucretius' *laudes Epicuri*

In line with studies which explore various facets of Lucretius' didactic strategies in *De rerum natura* (e.g., Schrijvers 1970), this paper examines the process by which Lucretius instructs his reader through the use of subtle poetic language. More specifically, I analyze the way in which Lucretius subtly alters his presentation of Epicurus in order to test the reader to act on the lessons of Epicureanism presented over the course of the poem. And while a number of scholars have looked to the proems of *DRN* as important nodes of poetry and *didaxis* (Büchner 1952, Lienhard 1969, Packman 1976, Graca 1989, Gale 1994), a unified picture has yet to emerge for the way in which Lucretius presents his master in these proemial portrayals. Even the conspicuous absence of Epicurus' name plays a part in Lucretius' lesson for the reader (Snyder 1978, Gale 2001). Herein I explore the increased challenges of the reader in implementing the lessons of Lucretius' text specifically to the proemial praises of Epicurus.

In the first book, after the full and flowing hymn to Venus, Lucretius turns our attention to the man whose doctrines have paved the way for human happiness – and, not insignificantly, the poet refers to him as a man, *Graius homo* (1.66). The praise in this section (1.62-79) makes clear that this figure deserves a great deal of thanks and admiration, but by no means does he transcend the mortal plane (note *mortalis*, 1.66). When the poet next sings Epicurus' praises, in the proem to Book 3, Lucretius has introduced a number of philosophical proofs to his reader, and here he begins to put those lessons to the test. This *Graius homo* from Book 1 has to this point been praised in mortal terms. When we encounter the man next, in the proem to Book 3, Lucretius again highlights his Greek blood (*o Graiae gentis decus*, 3.3), but now he adds a new element as he praises his master's "divine mind" (*divina mente*, 3.15). The reader is fully

capable of interpreting this statement as an exercise of poetic license, given the poet's previous reference to Epicurus as a human being in Book 1, as well as the lessons regarding metonymy and the gods in Book 2. When we meet Epicurus again in the proem to Book 5, Lucretius advances still another step further. The poet explicitly calls him a god (*deus ille fuit, deus*, 5.8) and suggests that it would be fitting to count him among the gods (*nonne decebit / hunc hominem numero divum dignarier esse?*, 5.50-51) – though, significantly, the poet reminds us again that Epicurus is indeed human (*hominem*, 5.51), even after referring to him shortly earlier not as a man but as a god, and in the same breath as he describes the divine power of Epicurus' discourse (*divinitus*, 5.52). Can the reader capably reconcile these seemingly contradictory statements with one another on the basis of the lessons of the text? At last, in the final proem of his six books, Lucretius serves us one more challenge as he prepares us for our approaching graduation from his tutelage. The description of Epicurus here seems at first to portray him as a mortal man (*virum*, 6.5), and Lucretius even points to his master's death explicitly (*extincti*, 6.7), in terms reminiscent of the Book 3 expression of that death (*decurso lumine vitae*, 3.1042). The poet then complicates this picture by appending a divine element as well (*divina reperta*, 6.7). What is the reader to make of this portrayal? In my view, such tensions render this final proem a fitting lesson for the reader, given the competing aspects of Epicurus' depiction and the poetic conventions employed in that depiction. This series of tests shows just how Lucretius challenges the reader's concentration in increasingly subtle but often increasingly demanding fashion. These artful *laudes Epicuri* exhibit the same complex structuring which typifies Lucretian *didaxis* and reinforces the lessons of the text.

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