

## Tantalized by Natural Phenomena: Tantalus and Intratextual Allusions in Lucretius' *DRN* 6

In this paper, I argue that Lucretius uses a particular version of the story of Tantalus, first introduced in Book 3 of his *De Rerum Natura* (*DRN*), not just as a negative example of the irrational fear of death, but also, and more importantly, as an encouragement to humankind to rid themselves of their fears—in this instance, of the gods themselves—and live a proper Epicurean life. He instructs his reader to remove the metaphorical “rock” that hangs over their heads – i.e. their fear of the gods. We see allusions to Tantalus’ situation throughout Book 6, where Lucretius describes natural disasters, including thunderstorms, earthquakes, and plague with variations and cognates (e.g. *inpendeo*, *suspendeo*) of *pendeo*, the verb used to describe the rock that threatens Tantalus in Tartarus. Lucretius thus uses intratextual allusions to connect the two moral lessons.

Lucretius, in his diatribe against the fear of death in Book 3 (3.830-1094), describes the underworld and begins with Tantalus (978-983), allegorizing the place and asserting that its horrors are not real, but are examples of daily life. A large rock—symbolic of one’s fear of the gods—hangs over (*inpendens*) Tantalus’—humankind’s—head. Because of this rock, which threatens to both fall and cause his own destruction (*casum*), Tantalus is frozen with empty fear (*cassa formidine*). His fear is empty because, as E.J. Kenney (2014) states, Tantalus either does not exist or has died long ago. Therefore, his fear—and, as Lucretius adds, our own fear of the gods and death—is empty and baseless.

Scholars have considered how Lucretius connects the Tantalus myth to other sections of his work. Kenney (2014) argues that Lucretius’ use of *inpendens* in 3.980 to describe the rock over Tantalus is similar to the poet’s depiction of *superstitio* in 1.65, where religion looms over

(*instans*) mankind. Monica Gale (1994) and Seth Holm (2013) have explored the idea of “latent myths”, arguing that 3.1084 and 4.1097-1100 refer to Tantalus’ insatiable thirst, familiar from Homer but not part of the Lucretian variant. My point, however, is that Lucretius chooses a different version of the myth—the hanging rock that can be pushed away—specifically to guide his readers one step closer towards overcoming their fear of death and attaining *ataraxia*: the peace and pleasure that is the ultimate end goal of Epicureanism.

To solidify my claim that Lucretius is using intratextual allusions to instruct his readers, I will first analyze Lucretius’ adaptation of the Tantalus myth. Lucretius, in Book 3, follows earlier Greek (Archil. Fr. 91; Pind. *Ol.* 1) and Latin (Cic. *Fin.* 1.60) authors in depicting the hanging rock by having it symbolize some sort of fear or impending destruction. What scholars have failed to emphasize, however, is that the metaphorical rock is often able to be pushed away, meaning that this fear can be removed. This is particularly clear in Euripides’ *Orestes* where Electra wishes “to push away the rock”—symbolizing Clytemnestra and Aegisthus—hanging above her head (982-83: μόλοιμι τὰν ... αἰωρήμασι πέτραν).

I will then argue that Lucretius guides and instructs his reader to remove their own metaphorical rocks throughout Book 6 by using language similar to that used in Book 3 through his use of *pendeo* and its cognates in his descriptions of natural phenomena, including thunderstorms (6.189-204 and 246-255), earthquakes (561-567), and plague (1125-1130 and 1272-1277). In each instance, Lucretius describes the natural phenomenon, uses a form of *pendeo*, and combines it with references to Acheron, fear, divinity, and rocks and caves to solidify these allusions. These allusions, I argue, are meant to remind the reader of Lucretius’ argument that the gods—who loom over humankind ominously like the rock over Tantalus—have no role in creating the natural disasters and phenomena that occur around us. Because these

phenomena can be explained through atomic theory and logical reasoning, the gods, therefore, should not be feared. Lucretius guides and instructs his readers to internalize and apply Epicurean principles and logic to rid themselves of their fear of the gods—and ultimately, of death—to avoid making their own lives a living hell.

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