

## Will the Real *Voluptas* Please Stand Up?

This paper examines Lucretius' use of the word "*voluptas*," paying particular attention to how Lucretius presents the word in the opening of *De rerum natura* Book I and later in the finale of Book IV. I argue that Lucretius presents his reader with two distinct conceptions of *voluptas* in these passages, and that he does so in order to indicate the superiority of the *voluptas* in Book I. This examination helps us to better understand the complexity of one of the key terms in the *DRN*, a complexity which has received too little attention by Lucretian scholars.

Scholarship on the Lucretian definition of *voluptas*, such as Elder (1954) and Farrington (1952), has primarily focused on the word's relation to Epicurean philosophy and its association with poetic creativity and the reproduction of species. In other words, previous scholarship has defined *voluptas* as an expression of the "blessed life," to use Farrington's words, which Epicureanism produces, and as the stimulus for poetic inspiration and propagation. These approaches to *voluptas* are useful for fleshing out some of the relevant ideas operating in the background of Lucretius' use of the word, but they are also problematic because they treat *voluptas* as a stable, unchanging concept throughout the *DRN*. In contrast, my analysis reveals that the definition of *voluptas* undergoes significant changes in the *DRN*, and that these changes speak to how Lucretius wants his reader to view *voluptas*.

This paper draws upon the approaches of Betensky (1980) and Brown (1987) towards Lucretius' depictions of Venus in the opening lines of the *DRN* and the finale of Book IV. Betensky and Brown both recognize a disparity between Lucretius' portrayals of Venus in these two areas of the text: the revered Venus who inspires peace and prosperity, and the worldly Venus associated with harmful desire. They argue that Lucretius is purposefully distinguishing between an ideal Venus and the common perception of Venus in order to challenge the reader's

understanding of the goddess and to emphasize the superiority of the ideal Venus over the common Venus.

Drawing upon this framework for contrasting definitions, I argue that a similar process is taking place with *voluptas*. Lucretius starts his poem with a *voluptas* that refers to a tranquil state of Epicurean peace, both mental and physical, that inspires the world to be creative and fruitful. However, I note that there is a shift in Lucretius' presentation of *voluptas* starting in the finale of Book IV. I compare the peaceful language used prior to Book IV with the violent, incongruous imagery found in that book in order to demonstrate that Lucretius is distinguishing between two forms of *voluptas*: an ideal, Epicurean *voluptas* and a destructive *voluptas*. Proceeding from this examination, I argue that Lucretius uses these contrasting definitions in order to assert that an Epicurean *voluptas* is preferable to the unpleasant *voluptas* found in Book IV. I also examine how this employment of contradictory language is reflective of Lucretius' tendency to deconstruct ideas and terminology, as noted by Dalzell (1996) and Fitzgerald (1984).

### Bibliography

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