

A Cyclical Cosmos: The Female in Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*

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Abstract

This essay concerns the role of the female gender in Lucretius' epic poem, the *De Rerum Natura*. In this paper, I argue that 1) Lucretius uses the cyclical structure to highlight the philosophy presented by Nature personified in Book III, 2) the content of Nature's speech effectively delivers the Epicurean *tetrapharmakos* and highlights the importance of the female Nature, 3) that the dichotomy of pure and perverted depictions of two other female protagonists, the *terra mater* and the *alma Venus*, underscore the cycle of birth and decay present in the poem's structure, and ultimately 4) that the presence of these ideological devolutions alongside Nature's exhortation allows the reader to see herself as part of a larger cosmic cycle and understand the need for a philosophical revolution.

Introduction

The rise and fall of natural life cycles is the most familiar structure of our universe. Individuals, species, and empires all come and go, each one coming to a peak in life, the turning point between growth and decay. The *De Rerum Natura*, the epic poem written by Lucretius in 1st century BC Rome, is no exception to this cycle: as scholars since Cyril Bailey have noted, Lucretius imbeds a structure of birth and death into his poem, both in form and in content. He uses language that invokes procreation and development, and speaks of a world that births, provides, and decays, just as any other living creature. Lucretius uses the imagery of birth and death, and a triumvirate of female figures, to show the reader the pervasively female nature of the cosmos.

In this paper, I will argue that Lucretius purposefully emphasizes the three female figures in his work, illustrating the pivotal role the female gender plays in the poem, both literarily and

philosophically. I will first present the birth and death cycles embedded in the structure of the poem itself, highlighting the critical speech delivered by Nature at the midpoint of the work that presents the Epicurean *tetrapharmakos*. Then, I will discuss the other two key female figures, the Earth Mother and the goddess Venus, whom Lucretius uses to frame his conception of a cyclic universe, especially in his language of procreation and sexuality. Finally, I will argue that the perversions of these figures in the *De Rerum Natura* allow the reader to connect her own experience to the birth and death cycle of the poem, resulting in her undergoing the desired philosophical awakening intended by Book III.

I

In its most basic form, the *De Rerum Natura* (*DRN*) is composed of six books, each discussing a different facet of Epicurean philosophy. The individual books link together into a philosophical sequence, guiding the reader from the most basic principles of Epicurean physics to the most complex and terrifying phenomena of our world.¹ Lucretius starts the reader off with the fundamental physical truths, and then from that foundation, builds an argument about nearly every aspect of life. By constructing the poem in this way, Lucretius guides the reader from start to finish, addressing counterarguments and doubts along the way, and proves to the reader not only that the argument is compelling, but logically necessary.

However as much as the books of the *DRN* rely on one another to build an argument, the books themselves also stand as independent poetic units, complete with miniature birth and death cycles. Each individual book is its own poetic microcosm, complete with its own structural arch and set of themes and metaphors.² Every book begins with its own proem and closes with an appropriate peroration, tying the beginning and the end of each book together under a common

¹ Joseph Farrell, "The Architecture of the *De Rerum Natura*," *The Cambridge Companion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 80

² Farrell, "The Architecture," 79

theme. The proemia of all the books open with images of birth and creation, and the perorations invoke death, endings, and finality, allowing each book to open and close an independent cycle.

Consider the following breakdown of the proems and perorations of the *DRN*'s six books, and the birth and death cycles they each portray:³

Book	Philosophical Topic	Proem	Peroration	Birth and Death Theme
I	Matter and Void	Hymn to Venus <i>1-145</i>	The Limitlessness of the Universe <i>951-1117</i>	The scope of the universe, from the principle force to the boundless edges
II	Atomic Movement	Ataraxia and the Simplicity of Nature <i>1-61</i>	The Aged Earth <i>1023-1174</i>	The devolution of the natural state
III	The Nature of the Soul	Emulation of Epicurus and the Godly Life <i>1-93</i>	The Fruitlessness of Fearing Death <i>870-1094</i>	The acquisition of knowledge and the philosophical awakening
IV	The Senses	Country of the Muses and the Bitter Pill <i>1-25</i>	The Contemporary Venus <i>1058-1191, 1263-1287</i>	The devolution of sexual relationships
V	The Cosmos	Godly Epicurus and Ancient Superstitions <i>1-90</i>	Contemporary Discoveries <i>1117-1457</i>	The progression of the cosmos and of mankind
VI	Meteorology, the Earth, and the Plague	Athens and Epicurus <i>1-95</i>	The Plague of Athens <i>1138-1286</i>	The cycle of Athens

As is evident, the critical information comes at the peak of each book, where Lucretius delivers the brunt of the book's philosophical content. Having invigorated the reader with a rhetorically charged proem, Lucretius uses the momentum to fuel his philosophical lesson, and then provides closure to the topic in the peroration. By structuring the books of the *DRN* in this fashion, Lucretius not only keeps the reader engaged as he balances philosophy and poetry, but reinforces the atomistic cycles of creation and destruction.⁴

³ The chart is intended to be read from left to right; for each book, I have noted the general philosophical topic, the content of the respective proem and peroration, and the cycle of birth and decay portrayed in the text.

⁴ Farrell, "The Architecture," 79-80

Importantly, the birth and death cycles in the individual books of the *DRN* beautifully parallel the birth and death cycle of the poem as a whole. The separate books provide structure for the work, supporting a larger thematic arch in the poem. The proem of Book I and the peroration of Book VI perform a dual function, structuring both their respective books and the entire *DRN*. The Book I proem invokes the goddess Venus, using the language of birth, sexuality, and importantly, of maternity—*aeneadum genetrix, hominum diuomque, alma Venus*.⁵ Lucretius closes the *DRN* with the plague of Athens, depicting images of horrific death and disease as the city collapses. While the ending of Book VI may feel like an aposiopesis, more poetic than philosophical, the peroration closes the birth and death cycle of the *DRN*. If the comparison between the books and the overall poem holds, then Lucretius should place the most important information in the *DRN* at the height of the work, i.e., the close of Book III.

II

The philosophical peak of the *DRN* is perhaps one of the most critical, and least frequently discussed, passages in the poem. The high point comes at the end of Book III, where a personified female Nature appears to the reader and presents a diatribe against fearing death. Beyond the structural importance, this passage is pivotal to the *DRN* for two reasons: the direct presentation of key Epicurean ethical philosophy to the reader, and the prominence given to the female gender in the personification of a female Nature.⁶ This section of the *DRN* ultimately acts as the wake up call to the reader when she understands the corruption of her own society, spurring her to a philosophical rebirth.

⁵ *DRN* 1.1

⁶ While other philosophers have put their ideas in the mouth of a female character (consider Plato's Diotima and Parmenides' Goddess), Nature's presentation invokes a sense emotion and authority lacking in these other female characters.

Nature's speech against fearing death and Lucretius' subsequent address to the reader deliver key philosophical ideas at a critical point in the *DRN*. Lucretius uses this passage to convey Epicurus' foundational principles for the pursuit of happiness. In this section, Lucretius speaks the words directly from his master. The end of Book III focuses on Epicurus' *tetrapharmakos*, or the four-fold remedy for pain in life, which reads as follows:

For who do you believe is better than a man who has pious opinions about the gods, has reasoned out the natural goals of life and understands that the limit of good things is easy to achieve completely and easy to provide, and that the limit of bad things either has a short duration or causes little trouble?⁷

Four main components make up the *tetrapharmakos*: understanding the nature of the gods, knowing that death is nothing to us, recognizing the limit of pleasure, and realizing that pain in the body is only temporary. The first two components aim to calm the existential anxieties of the reader, and the latter two parts address the nature of pleasure and pain in the body and soul. When combined, the four components support the pursuit of *ataraxia*, or freedom from disturbance, and allow the reader to lead a peaceful life.⁸

The first half of the *tetrapharmakos* aims to ease anxiety surrounding the divine and life after death. The first component shows Epicurus' deistic theology: he believes that the gods are blessed and indestructible beings, and that because they are good, no part of human suffering can be ascribed to them.⁹ He argues that believing that the gods manage the cosmos in some way is the primary source of human anxiety,¹⁰ something put to rest by proper understanding. The second component, that death is nothing to us, relies on Epicurus' belief that death is the end of

⁷ Epicurus. *The Letter to Menoeceus*. Trans. Brad Inwood and L.P. Gerson: 133. See also the *Key Doctrines* I-IV. Cf. Philodemus, Herculaneum Papyrus 1005, 4.9-14; cf. LM 133.

⁸ David Sedley, "Hellenistic Philosophy," *The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 162

⁹ Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, 123

¹⁰ A.A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974), 41-42

all sense-experience; when death arrives, we cease to be.¹¹ He claims that birth and death are the limits of a person's existence, since the body and the soul are intrinsically linked, and one cannot exist without the other.¹² Therefore, when the body dies, so too does the soul, and with that our whole being. These first two components of the *tetrapharmakos* ease the common anxieties surrounding the gods and death, and limit the pain caused by stress in the reader.

The second half of the *tetrapharmakos* addresses the nature of pain and pleasure, in the context of the reader's pursuit of *ataraxia*. In the extant writings, Epicurus promotes a specific brand of hedonism: he believes that a regulation of desires leads to happiness.¹³ Epicurus categorizes desires as either natural, groundless, necessary, or non-necessary, and gives advice on how to sate each desire, if at all.¹⁴ Furthermore, he believes that pleasure and pain are contradictory experiences;¹⁵ the maximum pleasure is the absence of pain, when the soul reaches a place of static tranquility.¹⁶ This pursuit of non-disturbance, or *ataraxia*, is the *telos* of Epicurus' ethical philosophy.

In keeping Epicurus' view of pleasure in mind, the implications of the second half of the *tetrapharmakos* become clear. The third component, that there is a limit to pleasure, displays Epicurus' unique view on the mutual exclusivity of pleasure and pain, i.e. that pleasure is the only the absence of pain.¹⁷ The fourth component of the *tetrapharmakos* says that pain of the body is only temporary: a proper understanding of the relationship between pain and pleasure will help the reader comprehend the impermanence of the body, and will therefore reduce

¹¹ Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, 124-25

¹² Long, 50

¹³ Sedley, 161

¹⁴ Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, 127-128

¹⁵ Long, 63

¹⁶ Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, 128; *Key Doctrines*, XVIII; Sedley, "Hellenistic Philosophy," 161-162

¹⁷ Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, 128

anxiety.¹⁸ Since pleasure is the absence of pain and therefore cannot be increased, all consumption should be in moderation, with a strict avoidance of excess. He argues that a simple lifestyle makes a person completely healthy and happy, and condemns “drinking bouts and continuous partying,” which cause immediate pleasure but long-term pain.¹⁹ Instead, one should pursue a life of simple frugality, and act with continuous prudence, to reduce anxiety.

According to Epicurus, our happiness depends on our ability to understand these four attainments.²⁰ When one no longer fears the gods or death, and properly understands the need to live prudently to minimize stress, the reader can most effectively reduce anxiety in the soul and lead the best possible life. An implementation of the *tetrapharmakos* allows the reader to preserve the natural state, which Epicurus views as *ipso facto* good, through conscious choice and careful action.²¹ This ideology is the four-fold remedy to pain in life, and a comprehension of these ideas facilitates the reader’s pursuit of *ataraxia*.

With the *tetrapharmakos* in mind, the connections between the core Epicurean tenets and the end of Book III of the *DRN* become evident. At this critical point in the work, Nature arises to challenge a man bemoaning his own mortality, combating his fears with Epicurean values:²²

*And then, what if Nature herself suddenly should ask
 These words, lifting her voice, taking one of us to task:
 ‘What’s so much the matter with you, mortal, that you wallow
 In morbid mourning? Why bemoan your death and weep in sorrow?
 For if you’ve relished the life that you have led, if you did not
 Gather all your blessings, as it were, in a leaky pot
 So that they’ve drained away and perished, with no chance to please,
 Why not, like a banquet guest, who’s drunk life to the lees,
 Depart, you dolt, and go to restful peace, your mind at ease?
 But if all the good you got was wasted, poured away,
 And all life is hateful to you, why seek to extend its stay? –*

¹⁸ Sedley, 162

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Sedley, 156

²¹ Long, 64

²² *DRN* 3.870-912

*All will turn out wrong and perish profitless again.
 Why do you not, instead, make an end of life and all its pain?
 For there's no further pleasure I can think up or invent
 For you—it's always the same.*²³

In this central passage, Nature covers a significant portion of fundamental Epicurean doctrine. Not only does her diatribe reflect the second component of the *tetrapharmakos*, but the hedonistic imagery of the passage ties to the third and fourth components. Nature invokes the language of eating, comparing leaving life peacefully to a banquet guest leaving the table when sated. This image reflects the Epicurean philosophy concerning pleasure and pain, as noted in the third and fourth components of the *tetrapharmakos*. Nature argues that she cannot supply new pleasures in a longer life, but only more of the same. Thus, just as a person should leave a table when full, so should a person withdraw from life, so as to maintain a stable disposition of the body and the mind.²⁴ Finally, Nature points out that a longer life would only increase pain that could be ended by death. This reflects the fourth component of the *tetrapharmakos*: bodily pain is limited, and a proper comprehension of pleasure will mitigate any desire to perpetuate long-term decay.

In fact, the only aspect of the *tetrapharmakos* missing from Nature's diatribe is the first component, namely, the understanding that the gods do not control, or even interfere, in mortal affairs. Lucretius compensates for this deficiency in Nature's speech by discussing it himself. In the close of Book III, Lucretius describes the so-called Hell on Earth, where he takes key occupants of Acheron and compares their mythical punishments in death to foibles in life. One of the figures whom Lucretius chooses is Tantalus, whose threatening rock manifests as the empty

²³ *DRN* 3. 931-46, 957-60

²⁴ Long, 64

fear of the gods and of chance,²⁵ thereby explicitly condemning a man fearing the gods' involvement in mortal life. While Lucretius has previously discussed this notion,²⁶ his repetition of this fear in the peroration of Book III rounds out the presentation of the Epicurean *tetrapharmakos*.

As has been shown, Nature's diatribe against fearing death and Lucretius' subsequent address to the reader are strategic passages, both structurally and philosophically. However, there is a third function of this passage: Lucretius uses a female character to deliver this message, casting her as an authoritative voice at the center of the work. Nature's personification alone, and especially her representation as a female figure, shows the importance of the female gender in the *DRN*, a distinguishing mark that sets him aside from his contemporaries.

To begin, recall the Epicurean view on the natural state: the natural state, the state into which we are born, is good. The Epicureans propped the cradle argument, defining the good by the desires of an infant, who has not yet been influenced by an externally imposed value system.²⁷ In the *DRN*, Lucretius writes that the child, the voice of the Nature, has been brought forth from Nature herself: "*Nature first pours / Him forth with birth-pangs from his mother's womb upon light's shores.*"²⁸ Lucretius invokes the language of Nature birthing the infant child, bringing him into the world via the womb of a mother. This imagery alone obviously necessitates a female figure. However, if this is the case, then Nature's exhortation of Epicurean philosophy further supports the idea the Epicureanism is the best way to live. These core tenets of Epicurean philosophy came not from a philosopher, not from a mortal, but from the lips of Nature

²⁵ *DRN* 3.978-982. Note here that Lucretius chooses Pindar's version of Tantalus' punishment, being eternally threatened by a boulder over his head, as opposed to the more popular version where Tantalus is tempted by food and drink while being tortured by hunger and thirst. See Stallings, Book III, endnote 21.

²⁶ See *DRN* 1.44-49, 1.102-25, 3.17-26

²⁷ Sedley, "Hellenistic Philosophy," 161

²⁸ *DRN* 5.224-25

personified. Lucretius' choice of a female Nature reflects the view that Epicurean philosophy is a glorification of the natural state, the unadulterated form of which is literally birthed from a mother. The female figure of Nature becomes that mother in the text, giving forth the purest of the Epicurean tenets, and guiding the reader to *ataraxia*.

III

In addition to the female Nature at the end of Book III, Lucretius incorporates two other female protagonists into the *DRN*: a creative Mother Earth, and the goddess Venus. These two female figures play pivotal roles in Lucretius' poem, acting as procreative, life-giving forces who perpetuate the cycles of the cosmos. Lucretius' use of these two figures, whom he places at the center of his worldview, demonstrate the purest versions of Epicurean philosophy.

The figure of a creative, procreative Earth pervades the *DRN*. Earth is characterized as a mother, who creates, births, and provides for every species on Earth.²⁹ Lucretius writes that it is not just logical, but truly *fitting* that the Earth be characterized as a mother, given the productive role she plays in the perpetuation of the cosmos.³⁰ When Lucretius describes the formation of a species, he depicts the process as a literal birth from the Earth Mother:

*And when the embryos had reached full term, and burst from there,
Escaping the water sac and gasping for air,
Then Nature channeled the Earth's pores, and made the opened veins
Flow with sap akin to milk, as after labor pains
A mother wells with sweet milk, because nourishment in a floor
Is pulled towards her breasts.*³¹

The biological imagery in the *DRN* unmistakably links the creation of a species with a pregnancy, describing an Earth Mother who brings her species into the world in the same way that a human mother does. Lucretius discusses the physical changes that a pregnant woman and a

²⁹ *DRN* 2.991-1001. Similar language is found 1.250-254. The imagery invokes the passage in Hesiod's *Theogony*, where Ouranos spreads himself over Gaia to inseminate her.

³⁰ See also *DRN* 5.795-96, 821-25

³¹ *DRN* 5.809-14

new mother undergo, from the formation and nourishment of a fetus to the process of lactation, in the context of the creation of the cosmos. Furthermore, Earth ages the way that a human mother does, transitioning from being incredibly fertile, where species literally spring from her,³² to becoming increasingly less fertile and less able to bear children, just as a woman experiencing menopause.³³ Lucretius' portrayal of the Earth undergoing the physical experience of pregnancy and labor forces the reader to acknowledge the value of the female gender on a cosmic scale. A masculine figure could not achieve this same goal. By relying on a birthing cycle to structure his worldview, Lucretius necessitates, and therefore prioritizes, a female depiction.

Critically, Lucretius characterizes the Earth Mother as not just productive, but actually *creative* in the formation of the universe, infusing the genesis of species with the language of guided imagination. Throughout the *DRN*, Lucretius simultaneously presents a non-teleological world and a theory of active creation. In alignment with his Epicurean roots, Lucretius ascribes to a non-deterministic worldview, and rejects the idea of a *telos* in the design of the cosmos.³⁴ For example, he writes that our bodies were not “purpose made,” but rather that we function the way that we do because of the way our bodies are.³⁵ The Lucretian cosmos is not growing towards any end, nor was it designed for any bourn: the world, and all the species it contains, simply are the way they were created.

However, Lucretius emphasizes that while the world does not have a *telos*, its species are nonetheless designed, having been created by the Earth Mother.³⁶ When Lucretius discusses the

³² *DRN* 5. 797-98; Nugent, 184

³³ *DRN* 2.1150-60, 5.827-36; Nugent, 184

³⁴ Sedley 162, *DRN* 2.168-182, 5.182-194

³⁵ *DRN* 4.823-858

³⁶ As previous scholars have noted, Lucretius predominantly depicts the Earth Mother as a generative body; the descriptions of pregnancy, and the etymological connection between the Latin *mater* and *materies* speaks to this point.³⁶ However to categorize the Earth as purely generative ignores the power the Earth has as a creative force in the formation of species. Cf. S. Georgie Nugent. “Mater Matters: The Female in Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*.” *Colby Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (1994): 183. Cf. Clay (1983) 229 and Anderson (1960) 6

early production of the world's species in Book V of the *DRN*, he shows a creative Earth who tests and explores combinations of traits in her creation.³⁷ He writes that the Earth herself undertook experiments, putting together different species in different ways to find the most successful arrangement of characteristics.³⁸ Lucretius ascribes a process of trial and error to the creation of species, with a creative Earth at the helm of the experimentation. He balances the power of a creative Mother with a deistic philosophy, resulting in a world that is ordered without being purposed. In this discussion, Lucretius elevates the role of the Mother, both Earth and human, to one that is not just productive, but actually creative.³⁹ This depiction of the maternity situates the female gender at the forefront of Lucretius' cosmic structure, emphasizing the role of the mother in the production of every aspect of the world. The Lucretian Mother is revered for her role in the cosmos, once again emphasizing the necessity of the female gender in the *DRN*.

Lucretius' depictions of the goddess Venus in the *DRN* place similar emphasis on the power of love in the Epicurean cosmos, further highlighting the integral role of the female in the poem. The images of Venus in the proem of Book I display her role as a life-giving, maternal, sexual, and blatantly female character. The goddess provides fertility and peace, both of which Lucretius needs to compose his epic poem.⁴⁰ It is Venus who brings every species together, both animals and humans.⁴¹ In fact, Lucretius claims that if it had not been for Venus, the human race would not have survived—not because of the lack of reproduction, but because humans never would have formed a safe community in which to live. He writes,

*And Venus drained their [the lovers'] powers, and the little ones, with ease,
Broke down the stubborn pride of parents with their coaxing pleas.*

³⁷ *DRN* 3.616-22, 785-95

³⁸ *DRN* 5.837-38

³⁹ Compare to the Aristotelian theory that the woman, when pregnant, contributes the material cause alone, while the man provides the formal, efficient, and final causes.

⁴⁰ *DRN* 1.40-43; Aya Betensky. "Lucretius and Love." *The Classical World* 73, no. 5 (1980): 297.

⁴¹ *DRN* 1.16-20, 5.962

*Then neighbors began to form the bonds of friendship, with a will
 Neither to be harmed themselves, nor to do another ill,
 The safety of babes and womenfolk in one another's trust,
 ...
 But the vast majority of people faithfully adhered
 To the pact, or else man would already have wholly disappeared;
 Instead, the human race has propagated to this day.⁴²*

According to Lucretius' account, Venus civilized the human race, bringing the species out of the state of nature and providing the impetus for the formation of communities. Venus led to the emergence of social contracts, where a conception of justice formed, and relationships started to build between individuals. Not only did this prevent the extinction of the species, but Venus' bringing together of people into communities fostered the earliest presence of friendship, a cornerstone of Epicurean social philosophy.⁴³ Venus is the force that creates, drives, and civilizes the human race. By giving the goddess such prevalence in the work, Lucretius celebrates the female gender and the role women play in the perpetuation of both the physical human species and of human society. Venus is not just valued for sex, but for good will and community. When combined with the depictions of the Earth Mother, Lucretius clearly emphasizes the value of the female and the consequences of their presence, and depicts a worldview that could not continue without these prominent female forces.

IV

Lucretius portrays Mother Earth and Venus as powerful female figures, and prime movers in the Lucretian cosmos. However, alongside his depiction of these two characters, Lucretius presents both love and motherhood—the primary constituents of these female figures—as heavily corrupted. In the *DRN*, Lucretius simultaneously presents pure versions of

⁴² *DRN* 5.1017-27

⁴³ Epicurus founded and ran the Garden, a philosophical school that focuses on community and fostering close-knit friendships with like-minded individuals. Lucretius himself refers to an idealized, serene community of friends: see *DRN* 2. 27-33, 5.912-14, 1390-97. Cf. Sedley, 155 and Long, 68-74.

the Earth Mother and the goddess Venus and perverted depictions of parenthood and sex. The two characters devolve, shifting from the ideal to the corrupted, mirroring the rise and fall of the poem.⁴⁴ Ultimately, the contrast between the depictions of the *terra mater* and the *alma Venus* highlight the social depravity in Lucretius' Rome, and alert the reader to the need for a philosophical revolution.

In the *DRN*, Lucretius displays the corruption of Mother Earth in the passage depicting the Magna Mater, which shows a maternal figure who has been perverted to the point that she appears more masculine than feminine. Excluding this passage, Lucretius exclusively portrays a gentle, caring mother who provides for her children. In contrast, the Magna Mater herself is supported by her followers: her acolytes literally carry her in effigy.⁴⁵ Furthermore, while the Earth Mother physically creates her children, the Magna Mater takes parts of her followers away:

*...They made
Her priests eunuchs to illustrate those who would degrade
The Mother's power, ungrateful to their parents, had not right
To bring descendants firth unto the boundaries of the light.*⁴⁶

According to Lucretius, the image of the Mother becomes so perverted by religion that her followers not only support her, but they physically harm those who disrespect her. Consider the implication of castration in this context: the priests of the Magna Mater have been deprived of their ability to participate fully in life, which the Earth Mother begins for every organism in the cosmos.⁴⁷ By this description, the Magna Mater bears little to no resemblance to her pure, giving counterpart.

⁴⁴ See Betensky and Clayton

⁴⁵ *DRN* 2.624-26

⁴⁶ *DRN* 2.614-17

⁴⁷ Clayton, 80

In fact, the violence of the Magna Mater brings into doubt the femininity of the mother herself. In this passage, the Magna Mater's depiction is overwhelmingly militaristic, making her distinctly more masculine than feminine.⁴⁸ The Magna Mater is not meant to comfort, but to terrify.⁴⁹ The dramatic presence of battle imagery casts the Magna Mater as an aggressive, masculine figure, and in the process, she loses her femininity.⁵⁰ If this is the case, it is not surprising that the natural cycle perpetuated by the Earth Mother is interrupted, since the mother herself has become masculinized. In fact, this passage is not the only place that Lucretius connects a militarized, masculine figure with the destruction of natural cycles. In Book I, Lucretius tells the story of Agamemnon, who tricks his daughter Iphigenia into virgin sacrifice for the sake of military glory.⁵¹ Under the ruse of a wedding, Agamemnon kills his own daughter, whom he ought to be protecting: "*All this for favorable winds to sail the fleet along!*"⁵² Lucretius directly connects a male figure to the corruption of a parent-child relationship, and mirrors this connection in the Magna Mater passage, exemplifying the disruption of the natural by militarization.

In considering these passages, Lucretius' image of the perverted maternal is unmistakable. The Earth Mother, both in her characteristics and in her caring relationship between herself and her creation, has been perverted, to the point that she is no longer even entirely feminine. Lucretius presents the polarizing images of the Earth Mother and the Magna Mater to emphasize the devolution of maternal figures between the Epicurean ideal and the reality of 1st century BC Rome. While an ideal mother might mimic the charitable and

⁴⁸ Clayton, 78

⁴⁹ Clayton, 77

⁵⁰ Recall the demarcation between Venus and Mars, or Love and Strife, in the proem of Book I; Lucretius clearly divides the masculine from the feminine, and attributes "the wicked works of war" to the former. See *DRN* 1.32.

⁵¹ *DRN* 1.80-101

⁵² *DRN* 1.100

procreative Mother Earth, the destruction of the image by religion and social convention leaves little of the original image intact.

In the *DRN*, Lucretius also portrays the adulteration of the goddess Venus, the other principle female figure in the work. He uses a similar tactic to his corruption of maternity, and juxtaposes images of the goddess Venus with images of dysfunctional relationships and destructive sex. As far back as Bailey, the contrast between the proem of Book I and the peroration of Book IV has been the topic of scholarly discussion. In Book IV, Lucretius' description of sex and relationships is harsh and derogatory, and in several places, nothing short of misogynistic. Just as with the Earth Mother, the corruption of Venus underscores just how far Lucretius' society has veered from Epicurean values.

The close of Book IV shows the extent to which Venus, the life-giving force depicted so purely in the opening of the work, has been sunk into depravity. Lucretius describes unhealthy relationships, where the lover and the beloved try to consume each other, something Lucretius declares not only unnatural but impossible.⁵³ Furthermore, the relationship itself dominates the lover, so much that he thinks of nothing except his beloved.⁵⁴ The lover becomes deceived by his own desire, and pursues the beloved not with reason, but entirely in self-deception.⁵⁵ Lucretius depicts Venus at the close of Book IV as consumptive and illusionary, a direct opposite to the laudation he delivers in Book I. Especially in the context of Epicureanism, a Venus of this sort is wholly destructive: with no regulation of desires and a completely misguided concept of pleasure, there can be no friendships like the ones Epicurus propones. All relationships become second to a single dysfunctional one, and the tenets of the philosophy become lost in a haze of self-absorption and lust for the unattainable.

⁵³ *DRN* 4.1084-90

⁵⁴ *DRN* 4.1121-40

⁵⁵ *DRN* 4.1152-56

However, as other scholars have noted, Lucretius draws a clear line between the early portrayals of Venus and the end of Book IV, more clearly than he has divided the Earth from *Magna Mater*. The proem of Book I shows the ideal Venus, the power that fuels the cosmos; the peroration of Book IV depicts the romantic relationships of Lucretius' Roman constituents.⁵⁶ Lucretius intends the two depictions to contrast one another, with the former showing the true nature of Venus and the latter showing how his society has misconstrued these consumptive relationships as Venus herself. He notes,

*This is what our Venus is. It is to this we impart
The name of Love—at it was this first dripped into the heart
Venus' honey—and Icy Care has followed on its train.*⁵⁷

Lucretius characterizes Venus in the form of the popular conception of her as desire alone.⁵⁸ He implies that his contemporaries have misconstrued Venus as a destructive force, and misapplied the name of the goddess to the dysfunctional social norms accepted in Rome.⁵⁹ The purity of the goddess has been lost as society has devolved, and her contemporary image reflects the change she has undergone between her ideal, Epicurean depiction and her actual role in Rome.⁶⁰

Lucretius simultaneously portrays Venus as a life-giving force and as desire alone, demonstrating the corruption of the figure by his contemporaries. In doing so, Lucretius salvages the pure image of Venus without giving up the impact of the perverted one: not only can the reader see where the goddess is now, but she can see how far she has come.

For both Venus and the Earth Mother, Lucretius uses the contrast between the pure and the perverted to show how far Rome is from Epicureanism. Lucretius has lauded these two figures, showing the indispensable roles they play in creating and perpetuating life. And yet

⁵⁶ Betensky, 291

⁵⁷ *DRN* 4.1058-1060

⁵⁸ Brown, 95

⁵⁹ Betensky, 292, Cf. Brown, 95-96

⁶⁰ Betensky, 298

despite the critical roles these two figures play, they become corrupt. In articulating this dichotomy, Lucretius shows that even the purest forms of philosophical figures fall prey to the devolution caused by human society, especially a society that does not adhere to the key tenets of Epicurean philosophy. The reader, having seen the depictions of the Mother Earth and of Venus, understands the need for a legitimate comprehension of the universe so as to preserve the proper characterizations of these integral female forces.

It is at this point that we return to the peak of the *DRN*, where Nature gives her diatribe against fearing death. Recall that Nature's speech comes at the center point of the poem, the halfway mark between the birth and the death of the work. Nature calls the reader to the fundamental principles of Epicureanism, which will steer her clear of excess, consumption, and violence—in short, all of the things that corrupt the Earth Mother and the goddess Venus. Nature's speech follows a lament from someone who has misconstrued the meaning of death, just as Roman society has misconstrued motherhood and love. Lucretius intends to show the reader the extent to which the reader's society has strayed from Epicurean philosophy, and then provide her with the tools to return to it. The reader has taken in the Epicurean tenets and sees society around her clearly. In light of this, the reader conceives of her place in a larger cycle: she sees where she is, and thanks to the text, she sees where she could go—forward to Epicurean philosophy and a pursuit of *ataraxia*, or with her society into further perversion, until they meet a demise like the one of Athens.

In the *DRN*, Lucretius frames his cosmos around strong, female figures: the Earth Mother, the goddess Venus, and Nature herself. Each figure helps propel the world forward, working in tandem to produce, organize, and nurture every species in existence. Lucretius uses language of pregnancy and birth to describe the fundamental cycles of the cosmos, depicting the

female gender not only as present, but necessary and formative to his world. He also promotes the female gender in his use of strong females and the critical birth and death cycles they perpetuate. This clear heightening of female figures in the *DRN* puts to rest the belief that Lucretius, and Epicurus before him, was purely misogynistic and anti-sex;⁶¹ in fact, as this research shows, Lucretius condemned the illusion of Venus that his contemporaries propped, not the goddess herself. Lucretius uses these female figures to frame his cyclical cosmos, something he reflects not only in his philosophy but in the structure of the poem itself. As the reader experiences the cycle of the work and understands the female figures who fuel the universe, she sees the contrast between the Epicurean world and the world around her, leading to her own philosophical awakening. Ultimately, Lucretius constructs his poem in a way which he hopes will guide the reader to an epiphany, convincing the reader of the need for an Epicurean revolution.

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⁶¹ A theory originally proposed by Bailey in his translation. *Lucretius on the Nature of Things* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1929), 298 (note 4.1063). This theory was commonly held (cf John B. Stearns), but has since been rejected by later scholarship.

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