

2011

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Recommended Citation

Bisangi, Paul (2011) "LIMINA LETI, MORTIS METUS: An Analytical Contextualization of Lucretius' Description of the Plague of Athens in *De Rerum Natura*," *Ephemeris*: Vol. 6 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/ephemeris/vol6/iss1/3>

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LIMINA LETI, MORTIS METUS: An Analytical Contextualization of
Lucretius' Description of the Plague of Athens in *De Rerum Natura*

Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* is a work of staggering scope and monumental ambition. Appropriately given the title "On the Nature of Things," this poetic treatise broaches atomic behavior, volcanoes, the vastness of the universe, love, the history of the earth and of human society, magnetism – indeed, the subject matter is dizzyingly varied. And yet, such variety, however immense, does not detract from Lucretius' objective in writing the poem. By plumbing the complexities of nature, by logically accounting for the stuff of life, the poet-philosopher-teacher encourages his reader-student to remain grounded in this life and aims to quell the senseless fear of the unknown. Despite its frightful content and, consequently, its seeming incongruence with the poem, the epilogue poses no exception to this aim. Far from being discordant with the rest of *De Rerum Natura*, which exalts the Epicurean acceptance of death as natural and ineluctable and decries the widespread fear of death, Lucretius' description of the Plague of Athens reinforces his Epicurean mission statement and cinches the structure of the poem as a whole.

To begin with, although Thucydides' account of the plague in *The Peloponnesian War* clearly influenced Lucretius' description, the latter writer devotes more attention to the generative human body and dread of death. Both writers mention that the afflicted resorted to castration; however, Lucretius specifically states that men emasculated themselves because they were afraid to die (VI.1208-9: *et graviter partim metuentes limina leti / vivebant ferro privati parte virile...*). Thucydides, on the other hand, relates quite generally that "it [the plague] settled in the privy parts, the fingers and the toes, and many escaped with the loss of these" (II.49.7). Furthermore, in addition to noting, as Thucydides does, the bleak abundance of corpses, Lucretius poignantly describes heaps composed of

parents and their children (1256-8); indeed, he emphasizes the plague's disruption of the generative order. Another significant difference between these plague reports lies in their presentation of people's responses to the desolation. Upon discussing the Athenians' shameless violation of burial customs, Thucydides recounts their resolution to "spend quickly and enjoy themselves, regarding their lives and riches as alike things of a day" (53.2). He therefore indicates that they accepted the imminence and quickened inevitability of death in the wake of pestilential destruction. Though Lucretius does not mention this nihilistic abandon, he accentuates the "excessive lust for life" stemming from "dread of death" (1240) that induced people to spurn their ailing kin. This reference to the fear of death, which is noticeably absent from Thucydides' parallel discussion of familial neglect, is bolstered by the preceding ten lines. Here Lucretius, manifestly inspired by his Greek forbear, bemoans the tendency of plague victims to fixate on death and consequently enfeeble their spirit (1230-4). Dread of death thus plays a considerably bigger part in Lucretius' plague narrative than in Thucydides' account – indeed, both this fear and the human generative body occupy significant positions in the poet-philosopher's great work.

The notion of the generative body and the related act of procreation take root in Lucretius' introductory invocation of Venus. In this grand poetic eulogy, he exalts her as *alma* (1.2: "nourishing") and assigns her the epithet *Aeneadum genetrix* (1: "mother of the descendants of Aeneas"), which serve as the first two words of the poem. Within the first two lines of his treatise, therefore, Lucretius establishes the goddess of love as the consummate mother, one who not only perpetuates her stock but also nurtures and cares for her offspring. As the invocation progresses, the extent of Venus' propagative power increases. In addition to contributing to the production of Aeneas' descendants, the goddess supplies land and sea with their characteristic inhabitants (3-4) – indeed, "through her every type of living thing(s) is conceived and, having arisen, sees the light of the sun" (4-5: *per te quoniam genus omne animantum / concipitur visitque exortum lumina solis*). Lucretius further emphasizes Venus' role in perpetuating the generations of species by detailing her effect on herd animals. Having been "seized by the charm" of the love goddess, these beasts "follow [her] eagerly wherever [she] urge[s] each one to go" (15-16: *capta lepore / te sequitur cupide quo quamque inducere pergis*). As a result, Venus "make[s] it so that the generations eagerly propagate according to their species" (20: *efficis ut cupide generatim saecula propagent*). The magnitude of her influence is particularly evinced by the adverb *cupide*, which Lucretius uses twice in his description of the amorous animals. Although he employs the forceful *incutiens* (19:

“striking”) to characterize Venus as she infuses them with desire, he also presents the beasts as receptive to her touch. Indeed, they follow her eagerly and eagerly copulate; she does not impel them to procreate but endows them with the desire and the alacrity to do so. In his invocation, therefore, Lucretius both accentuates the generative capacity of the body and glorifies Venus as the activator of this capacity, as the one responsible for perpetuating the generations.

If the introduction of *De Rerum Natura* serves to exalt Venus as the mother and ultimate source of all creatures and, consequently, an appropriate muse for the poem (21-25), then the conclusion – Lucretius’ plague narrative – serves to remind the reader of death, the natural and ineluctable complement to birth. This account of the Plague of Athens, which harrowed the city from the years of 430 to 426 B.C.E.,¹ seems to undermine the elements which Lucretius so joyously celebrates in his invocation. To begin with, as the juxtaposition of Lucretius’ description with that of Thucydides illustrates, the poet emphasizes that some Athenians castrated themselves in the frenzy of disease. The implications of this drastic act are momentous. In “depriving themselves of their manly parts” (VI.1209: *privati parte virili*), these Athenians are also depriving themselves of the capacity to procreate, to perpetuate the generations. Such desperation stands in stark contrast to the lusty exuberance which Venus inspires in all creatures and which Lucretius glowingly depicts in the invocation. Far from being eager to sow their seed and thus populate the ages, the deranged men desire to emasculate themselves and thus permanently prevent their contribution to the proliferation of their species. This tension between the introduction and the conclusion to Lucretius’ work also manifests in his description of the plague’s effect on birds and beasts. Upon accentuating the motherhood and generative supremacy of Venus, he designates birds as the first recipients of her touch (I.12-13) and then chronicles her influence on terrestrial creatures (14: *inde ferae pecudes persultant...*). In similar fashion, having described the humans’ desperate resort to castration, Lucretius discusses the interaction between animals and the pestilence. Just as birds functioned as the first bearers of Venus’ mark, so do they assume the primary position in this section on nonhuman plague victims: *nec tamen omnino temere illis solibus ulla / comparebat avis* (VI.1219-20: “nor, however, was any bird by chance at all visible in those days.”). Though their primacy persists, they have switched roles – now they serve as the first animals to succumb to pestilential death, rather than the blow of life-giving, “pleasing love” (I.19: *blandum...amorem*). Moreover, whereas the beasts bounded jauntily

¹ King, 18.

through fields and rivers under the sway of the love goddess (14-15), now, under the sway of inexorable disease, the “sad generations of the beasts were not leaving the woods” (VI.1220-21: *nec tristia saecla ferarum / exhibant silvis*). The poet thus establishes a direct opposition between the victims – both animal and human – of the plague and the beneficiaries of Venus’ sweet touch.

Lucretius magnifies this inversion of the hopeful, life-affirming introduction by including a section in the epilogue that is noticeably absent from Thucydides’ account. Upon noting the rampancy of the disease and the resultant overabundance of corpses, the poet provides a poignantly specific example of the types of corpses one might have encountered amidst the devastation in Athens:

exanimis pueris super exanimata parentum
corpora nonnumquam posses retroque videre
matribus et patribus natos super edere vitam.

Sometimes you would be able to see the lifeless bodies of parents atop their lifeless boys and, on the other hand, [you would be able] to see that sons were breathing out their life atop their mothers and fathers. (VI.1256-58)

In addition to crafting a heart-wrenching passage that briefly yet effectively conveys the horrors of pestilence, Lucretius alludes to the invocation of Venus by accentuating the plague’s violation of the generative order. In blatant contrast to the fruitful, creative goddess of love, plague – a conduit of death – undermines the family, which is integral to the proliferation of generations and nullifies the generative capacity of the individual. This latter point is particularly evident in the scene described. Instead of depicting the bodies of *puellae* or even the gender-neutral *liberi*, Lucretius makes the corpses male (*pueris*, *natos*) – indeed, it is the sower of seed, the active propagator of the species, whom death victimizes in this section. To add to the poignancy of the passage, Lucretius situates *patribus* (“fathers”) next to *natos* (“sons”) and thereby emphasizes the boys’ erstwhile potential to become fathers and to contribute to the perpetuation of generations. The natural, procreative order accentuated in Lucretius’ invocation of Venus thus founders in his tragic epilogue – indeed, the generative power of the poet’s “nourishing” muse seems to degenerate in the wake of pestilential destruction.

And yet, Lucretius’ description of the plague need not be interpreted as an irreconcilable contradiction of his introduction. Although

he presents the reader with an explicit account of human suffering and devastation, he is not remiss in doing so. About twenty lines after he entreats Venus to guide him as he plumbs the nature of things (I.24-25), the poet announces that he will explore the fundamental components of things, “from which nature creates all things, makes [them] grow, and nourishes [them], and into which nature dissolves the same things, having perished” (56-57: *unde omnis natura creet res auctet alatque / quove eadem rursum natura perempta resolvat*). He therefore acknowledges that death is a natural occurrence and that it serves as a necessary and ineluctable complement to birth. Indeed, he does not sugarcoat the account, as he famously strives to lessen the severity of his philosophical thesis by communicating it through verse (I.943-7). Nevertheless, the harshness of the plague does not undermine its natural provenance. Before he recounts the symptoms of the plague and its desolation of Athens, Lucretius discourses on the origins of pestilence and thus offers up a rational explanation (VI.1090-1137). Rather than clashing with and contradicting the celebratory introduction, the epilogue complements it; as Monica Gale notes in *Lucretius and the Didactic Epic*, according to Epicurean thought, “we cannot have creation without destruction.”² The arrangement itself of the Latin text reinforces this complementary relationship between birth and death. As was mentioned earlier, *genetrix*, which literally means “female creator” and refers to Venus, is the second word of the poem and becomes the first word when translated; conversely, the last word of the plague narrative and, indeed, of the entire poem is *desererentur*, which translates as “they [the corpses] would be deserted” (1286). Although the sentence that features *desererentur* is somewhat uplifting – in it Lucretius states that people would “often brawl with much blood *rather than desert bodies*” (1285-6: *multo cum sanguine saepe / rixantes potius quam corpora desererentur*) – the notion of abandonment nevertheless concludes the poem. Therefore, *De Rerum Natura* both literally and thematically begins with creation and ends with destruction. It evokes a living organism, a creature whose life begins and inevitably, naturally ends.

However, not all of the circumstances detailed in the epilogue are natural and thus complementary to those which Lucretius extols in his introduction. Indeed, birds and beasts and humans are subject to death, just as they are subject to Venus’ erotic touch; *pueri* and *nati* may die

² Gale, 20.

before they become fully generative men. The preeminent unnatural act which Lucretius describes in his plague narrative is the self-castration committed by Athenian men. Although the disease naturally invades their private parts (VI.1206-7), Lucretius attributes their rash reaction to “grave fear at the threshold of death” (1208: *graviter...metuentes limina leti*). Once again, the arrangement of the Latin text emphasizes the fatuity of their behavior. Immediately after he characterizes these Athenian men as “fearful of the threshold of death” – that is, fearful of death’s advent – the poet writes, “they continued living, having been divested of their manly parts by a sword” (1209: *vivebant ferro privati parte virili*). *Leti* and *vivebant*, though separated by a line break, therefore abut each other. By syntactically forcing these antithetical elements together, Lucretius emphasizes the unnaturalness of the men’s action; instead of accepting death in its pestilential form, they resisted the nature of things and, as A.E. Stallings keenly translates line 1209, “managed to...hang on to life.”³ Though this maddening dread of death does not feature in the invocation, it does appear immediately before Lucretius expounds on his first principle. Indeed, it occupies a central position in what may be called Lucretius’ Epicurean mission statement: to “dash to pieces this fear and the shadows of the mind” by exposing “the appearance and the way of nature” (I.146, 148: *Hunc igitur terrorem animi tenebrasque...discutiant, sed naturae species ratioque*). Thus, in addition to recalling elements of the invocation and complementing its glorification of birth, the plague narrative serves to reinforce the mission statement that concludes Lucretius’ introduction – it emphasizes the necessity of dispelling the fear of that which is inevitable and illustrates how humans behave when such a fear persists.

Although fear of death emerges understandably in the plague narrative as a ruinous force, one that provokes men to emasculate themselves and thus affront the natural order, Lucretius does not restrain himself from producing a thoroughly frightening account of the plague. Many of the elements of this account are manifestly scary. In addition to chronicling self-castration, the poet catalogues the symptoms of the disease in harrowing detail: once the victim’s head has been “inflamed with raging heat” (VI.1145: *caput incensum fervore*), his eyes become red (1146: *oculos...rubentis*), his throat blackens and sweats blood (1147-8: *sudabant etiam fauces...atrae / sanguine*), and his mouth emits a “foul odor” (1154:

³ Stallings, 235.

taetrum...odorem) that is redolent of “putrid corpses” (1155: *rancida...cadavera*). Amplifying the shock factor of his account, Lucretius says that many of the afflicted longed so desperately for water that “from high they fell headlong [into] wells with their very mouths gaping open” (1174-5: *praecipites lymphis putealibus alte / inciderunt ipso...ore patente*). Humans acquire a ghastly appearance and commit drastic acts under the smart of the plague – these details are explicit, and they affect the reader at the visceral level. However, the narrative also features psychologically unsettling aspects. Upon illustrating the insatiable thirst of the plague victims, the poet establishes the inefficacy of medicine. Rather than stating that there was no cure for the disease, as he ultimately does in line 1226, he personifies medicine as a doctor “mumbling with unspoken fear” (1179: *mussabat tacito...timore*), baffled and himself frightened by the symptoms. An element of hopelessness thus permeates the scene. This hopelessness intensifies in lines 1199 to 1201, where the poet emphasizes that even those who had avoided the disease eventually succumbed to it. Lucretius therefore seems to conclude his treatise, which he wrote in order to dispel the mindless fear of death, by presenting death as something to be feared – indeed, the epilogue seems to undermine the treatise proper.

It is this seeming incongruity, however, that cements the plague narrative as a fixture of *De Rerum Natura*. In addition to being a poet and a philosopher, Lucretius is a teacher. One may even assert that he is first and foremost a teacher – indeed, he teaches philosophy by means of poetry. If the reader ought to regard the author as an instructor and, consequently, the literature as a series of lessons, it would not be unreasonable to expect an assessment of the pupil’s comprehension, a final exam of sorts. As several scholars have proposed⁴, Lucretius’ rendition of the Plague of Athens performs this precise function; that is, it serves to gauge how closely his pupils – both Memmius, the direct addressee, and the reader – have paid attention to his exposition of nature. Such an interpretation accounts for the bleakness and sheer horror of the plague narrative. Rather than striving to instill his students with dread of death, which he has written a thorough dissertation to combat, Lucretius wants to see whether they will renounce reason in the face of fear or accept these

⁴ Monica Gale, who discusses this interpretation in both *Lucretius and the Didactic Epic* (40, 42) and *Myth and Poetry in Lucretius* (228), cites David Clay (1983) in the latter book. When James Jope mentions the argument on page 16 of his essay, he cites Gerhard Müller (1997).

frightening images with aplomb, keeping in mind that death is natural and inevitable and that it is foolish to fear it.

And yet, the Plague of Athens is not the only phenomenon discussed in Book Six whose description contains frightful elements. As James Jope notes, in lines 121 to 129 Lucretius employs “vehement language (*perterrificrepto sonitu*)” to convey the “magnitude of the process” (21) of producing thunder; likewise, citing lines 197 to 200 (*magno indignantur murmure...in caveisque ferarum more minantur...quaerentesque viam*), he refers to the poet’s depiction of winds trapped within clouds as a “ferocious personification.”⁵ The terror of these descriptions is manifest – indeed, *perterrificrepto sonitu* (VI.129) translates as a “terribly rattling din,” and the winds are likened to raging beasts in the lines Jope cites. Nevertheless, the discussions of thunder and tempestuous winds are not comparable to the plague narrative. Aside from the fact that such descriptions focus chiefly on the phenomenon itself and, unlike the epilogue, do not chronicle human interactions with the phenomenon – that is, they do not establish an emotional connection between the reader and the description – Lucretius does not enable their frightening elements to seize his pupil. As Jope astutely comments, when the poet concludes his analysis of the thunderclap by comparing it to the popping of a balloon (130-1), he “belittles the thunder” and thus lessens its fear factor.⁶ Moreover, although the section on winds grappling with clouds (185-203) exhibits a dramatic, frightful flare not unlike that of the plague narrative, the depiction itself only spans seven lines (197-203); the reader, therefore, is left by Lucretius to absorb this depiction for a fraction of the time he will be left to ponder the plague narrative, which spans 148 lines. Indeed, by composing the epilogue, Lucretius enables the possibility that fear will overtake the reader. Granted, he provides a thorough explanation for the phenomenon (1090-1137) immediately before his illustration. After this, however, he withholds his teacher-ly guidance, leaving the reader-student to receive the frightening account of the plague on his own. Though Lucretius gives his pupil several helpful reminders about the destructive inanity of fearing death (1208-12, 1230-4, 1238-42), thereby encouraging an Epicurean reaction to the narrative, he offers nothing more in the way of instruction or explanation during the narrative. Even if he had intended

⁵ Jope, 22.

⁶ Jope 21.

to continue writing and to conclude the description of the plague with a reassuring rationalization,⁷ the fact remains that he presented his reader with at least 148 lines of frightening text and imagery. The teacher-philosopher-poet thus administers a formidable final exam, one that his reader-students will nevertheless pass if they remember and accept his rational explication of the nature of things.

Lucretius' retelling of the plague that struck Athens in 430 B.C.E. is deeply chimerical. Upon reading it for the first time, one may reasonably view the narrative as discordant with the rest of *De Rerum Natura*. Because of its viscerally and psychologically unsettling presentation of death, it seems to clash first with the poem's introduction, which exalts Venus as the *genetrix* of all things, and then with the poem proper, which serves to illuminate and decry the fear of death. A closer reading, however, reveals that the epilogue – that is, the plague narrative – is intimately connected to the treatise as a whole. By exploring death, the unavoidable and natural complement to birth, this narrative recalls Lucretius' resolution as put forth in Book One to explain the workings of nature to his audience and thus undermine the fear of death; by offering an unapologetically stark picture of human suffering, the same narrative, in the form of a philosophical final exam, tests the success of his resolution. In addition to emphasizing the poet's mission statement at these two levels, therefore, the epilogue establishes a link between the beginning and the end of the poem. Indeed, rather than being incongruous or out of place, Lucretius' description of the Plague of Athens is both integral to and firmly rooted in *De Rerum Natura*.

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⁷ Monica Gale, who states in *Myth and Poetry in Lucretius* that "few critics would nowadays deny that Lucretius intended his poem to end as it does in our texts" (224), regards the thematic links between the invocation and the abrupt ending as evidence that the latter was intentional.

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