

Satiric Elements and the Theory of Multiple Explanations in Lucretius' Didactic Poetry

This paper offers an interpretation of satiric elements in Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*: after demonstrating the satiric element of mockery is in fact present in certain attacks on rival theories, I consider this mockery in light of the poem's own philosophical principles, arguing that Lucretius' theory of multiple explanations in books 5 and 6 is predicated on his satiric strategies in books 1-4. In conclusion, I argue that the *DRN*'s progression from satiric mockery to the conditional acceptance of rival theories is evidence for how we should understand the progressive nature of the *DRN*.

The approach and conclusion of this analysis contributes to our understanding of satire's function in Lucretius and is suggestive for other didactic poets. The introduction of an attacked third party, first through mockery and then through concession of that party's validity, creates a complex dynamic between teacher, student, and those third parties. Lucretius manages to minimize his rival's view by implying that to know exactly which view is correct, is irrelevant. Lucretius moves between satire, as a rejection of other views, and didactic, as an acceptance of the possibility of multiple views. The poem combines didactic and satire with the result that learning becomes a function of being open to multiple views in the realization of multiple universes.

The argument is as follows: I first focus on instances of "mockery," which are defined by the sorts of attack with extended descriptions of the opposing view's incorrect reasoning and are marked by a third person introductory verb (e.g. *aiunt*, *fingunt*, *dicunt*, etc.), followed by a string of infinitives in indirect statement. A closer look at these passages reveals not simply a disagreement in terms of content, but also the presence of mockery in terms grammatical, poetical, and metrical structures. These passages include the incorrect theories of spatial

displacement (1.372-6), divine influence on the world (2.167-74), the mind existing outside the body (3.98-105), and the false explanation of echoes (4.547-94). After discussing the satiric element of mockery within these passages, I show that in the last two books of the *DRN* mockery is replaced by the principle of accepting multiple explanations (5.526-33 and 6.703-11). This principle states that since there are an infinite number of worlds in our infinite universe, rival viewpoints must inevitably be valid in at least one of those worlds, as long as that explanation excludes divine agency. Thus, Lucretius' philosophical point follows directly from his literary use of satire.

The presence of satire in Lucretius has been the subject of much debate. Murley finds many parallels between Lucretius and the recognized satirist, Lucilius, and concludes that Lucretius has been unfairly slighted in the history of satire in terms of its themes and form (1939: 380-95). Dudley concludes that Lucretius is not a satirist in the full sense (1965: 115-129). Kenney prefers to frame the question in terms of the influence of Hellenistic diatribe (1971: 17ff). Although Coffey finds it generally misleading to place Lucretius in the literary history of satire (1976), Hooley points to echoes of Lucretius (4.1058-1297) in Horace's *Satires* (1.2) (1999: 5). There is need for an analysis of Lucretius that moves beyond the question of satire's taxonomical presence, and instead asks what effect this literary element has on Lucretius' philosophical program. The current paper attempts to reconcile the satiric element of mockery with the Epicurean theory of multiple explanations.

Works Cited

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