

Training the bulls within: Epicurean mastery of the passions in Vergil's *Georgics* 3

Much of the *Georgics* is about more than it appears on the surface. Just so, the central panel of *Georgics* 3 is superficially about successful strategies for productively mating cattle and horses and training them for great events like the Olympics. With its highly symbolic vignettes of bulls battling over a heifer (3.209-41), Leander drowning on his way to Hero (3.259-63), and the madness of a mare in heat (3.266-83), as well as the emphatic correlation of human passions to animal passions (3.242-63), *Georgics* 3 is clearly about more than animal husbandry. Nappa (2005), for one, has suggested plausibly that there is a latent political message here about the destructive powers of craving and passion as it pertains to civil strife. But, the latent philosophical messages found repeatedly in the *Georgics* — such as the Epicurean ‘allegory of the bees’ in *Georgics* 4 — and the frequent allusions to Lucretius’ Epicureanism (Gale 2004), suggest that a therapeutic message directed at individuals is more likely meant than a political one in these passages. This paper scrutinizes Vergil’s vignettes on the dangers and promises of passion, specifically *amor* or sexual craving, as seen in the ‘battle of the bulls,’ as an allegory demonstrating Epicurean strategies for attaining what Arenson has called “the Epicurean goal of healthy functioning” (Arenson 2019).

I argue that the contradictory images of sexual passion’s destructiveness (e.g., the violence of the bullfight and Leander’s futile death) and the beneficial honing of virtues that passion can instigate (e.g., the bull toughening his horns to avenge his loss) demonstrate a clear and sophisticated Epicurean message. First, we find evidence of the Epicurean distaste for sexual craving as something radically destructive that has “never profited a man” (Vat. 51) in the violence of Vergil’s depiction of the bulls and Leander last swim. The bulls and Leander

foolishly risk both physical and mental pains in their quest caused by the ‘pricks of blind love’ (*caeci stimulus ... amoris*, 3.210; Lucr.*DRN*.1058-1208) to attain merely bodily pleasures. When viewed in parallel with Epicurus’ therapeutic instructions on attaining pleasures and averting pains — via the typology of desires as Natural, Necessary, or Vain (Ep.*Men* 127; KD 18, 29, and 30) and balancing Kinetic and Katastematic pleasures (Cic.*Fin.*2.10 and 2.31) — we find a message teaching readers how to attain the proper balance of physical and mental pleasure and thereby achieve the “goal of living blessedly” (τοῦ μακαρίως ζῆν τέλος, Ep.*Men*.128; Arenson 2019). Finally, I argue that Epicurus’ view that seemingly insatiable physical desires are empty imaginings (παρὰ τὴν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου κενοδοξίαν, KD 30) and the equally fundamental Epicurean goals of *aponia* and *ataraxia* show Vergil’s primary message in his symbolic presentation of the dilemma of sexual desire. In essence, recognizing the interdependence of controlling the physical passions as well as the mental ones is crucial in attaining the Eudaimonist-Hedonist goal of “healthy functioning.”

Selected Bibliography

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