



LUCRETIUS' HOMERIC MOURNERS

ABSTRACT

Lucretius (3.894–9) puts words into the mouths of mourners as part of his attack on the fear of death. The language of the passage has been read simply as mockery of the bereaved, but the poet is using language strongly reminiscent of Homer, in particular from Circe's speech advising Odysseus about the dangers of hearing the Sirens' singing. This adds a level of irony to the passage as the poet has a complex relationship with the bewitching power of poetry.

Keywords: Lucretius; Sirens; Homer; Epicurus; death

As part of the diatribe against the fear of death in Book 3 of the *De rerum natura*, Lucretius puts words into the mouths of unenlightened mourners. In a famous and often imitated passage the mourners address the dead man and commiserate with him on his losses (3.894–9):

'iam iam non domus accipiet te laeta neque uxor
optima, nec dulces occurrent oscula nati
praeripere et tacita pectus dulcedine tangent.
non poteris factis florentibus esse tuisque
praesidium. misero misere' aiunt 'omnia ademit
una dies infesta tibi tot praemia uitae.'

'Your happy home will no longer welcome you, nor your excellent wife, nor will your sweet children run to snatch kisses and touch your heart with unspoken sweetness. You will not have the power to protect either your prosperity or your family. One hateful day (they say) has pitifully robbed pitiful you of all these things—so many rewards of life.'

The passage has been described as sentimental kitsch which can only be rescued if it is read as sarcastic parody.¹ Kenney,² for instance, describes its tone as one of 'irony, rising at times to parody and overt mockery', and describes the sentiments expressed as 'conventional ideas' which the poet attacks 'using the technique of the diatribe'. Both Kenney and Wallach remind readers of the traditional epitaph form as seen in an inscription³ from third-century Alexandria:

οὐκέτι δὴ μάτηρ σε, Φιλόξενη, δέξατο χερσὶν
σὰν ἐρατὰν χρονίῳ ἀμφιβαλοῦσα δέρην,
οὐδὲ μετ' ἀθῆων ἄν' ἀγάκλυτον ἦλυθης ἄστῳ
γυμνασίου σκιερῷ γηθόσυνος διαπέδω.

¹ P. Gordon, 'Kitsch, death and the Epicurean', in S. Yona and G. Davis (edd.), *Epicurus in Rome: Philosophical Perspectives in the Ciceronian Age* (Cambridge, 2022), 129–46, at 133–4; B.P. Wallach, *Lucretius and the Diatribe against the Fear of Death: De Rerum Natura III 830–1094* (Leiden, 1976), 46–7.

² E.J. Kenney, *Lucretius De rerum natura Book III* (Cambridge, 2014²), ad loc.

³ F. Preisigke and F. Bilabel, *Sammelbuch Griechischer Urkunden aus Aegypten* (Strassburg, 1915), 321, no. 4314, quoted by R. Lattimore, *Themes in Greek and Roman Epitaphs* (Urbana, IL, 1942), 176.

No longer,⁴ Philoxenus, does your mother receive you and cast her arms lingeringly about your lovely neck, nor do you go to the famous city with the young men and rejoice in the shaded floor of the gymnasium.

Wallach compares the Lucretian speech unfavourably with Virgil's imitation of it at *G.* 2.523–4 and also Ovid's account (*Tr.* 1.3.63–8, 79–81) of his 'death' on leaving Rome, suggesting that Lucretius' words 'are intended as a parody of the type of expression found in grave inscriptions ... or in the lamentation sections of *epicedia*'.⁵

The language of the mourners may be mawkish, but it is not without skill: the repeated *iam iam* imitating the wailing grief, the expressive use of *laeta* as applied to the house itself, the juxtaposition of the key terms *optima ... dulces*, the assonance of *optima ... occurrent oscula* evoking the open-mouthed children, the repetition of *dulces ... dulcedine*, the dental consonants of *tacita pectus dulcedine tangent* perhaps indicating the frisson of pleasure enjoyed by the father. The repeated use of enjambement (*optima ... praeripere ... praesidium ... una*) adds powerful movement to the speech, along with emphasis of the element of competition in *praeripere* and the importance of familial *praesidium*. Their speech ends with the thing which the dead man misses most—*uitae*. The fact that the imagery of the passage inspired Virgil (*G.* 2.523–4) to imitate it might cause us to think again about its literary quality.

Mynors⁶ comments on the Virgilian imitation ('Lucretius began it [3.894–6]'), but this is to ignore Lucretius' debt to earlier literature, and in particular to Homer⁷ who is later singled out as 'the one and only ruler of the poets' (*quorum unus Homerus | scepra potitus*, 3.1037–8) among those poets who belong to the 'great dead'. Kenney⁸ observed that the dead man's future inability to be a source of protection to his family (3.897–8) recalls the scene in Homer's *Iliad* (6.441–65) where Hector is taking his leave of Andromache and is grieving in advance for the suffering which his death will cause her 'when some bronze-clad Achaean' will take her away in tears and reduce her to the status of a servant at the loom of an unnamed woman.

Tellingly, Hector ends his speech (6.464–5) with the wish that he should be dead before any of this can come to pass, on the understanding that as a dead man he will not suffer it—an understanding which Lucretius would certainly share.

There is, however, far more Homeric material than this in Lucretius' words. To begin with, the poignancy of dying abroad and not coming home again is a common topos⁹ in Homer's *Iliad*. At 14.503–4, for example, Peneleos holds up the head of his enemy Promachos and predicts that his wife will not 'rejoice in the homecoming of her dear husband': closer to Lucretius is Sarpedon's request (5.684–8) to Hector to rescue his body:

⁴ One of the anonymous referees for this article has pointed out that *iam iam* (in the sense of *non iam*) is strikingly close to the sense of οὐκέτι in the Philoxenus inscription and compares the similar sentiment at Verg. *Aen.* 11.71. οὐκέτι as first word is also a common motif in funerary epigrams (e.g. *Anth. Pal.* 7.189, 192, 200–4).

⁵ Wallach (n. 1), 48–9.

⁶ R.A.B. Mynors, *Virgil Georgics* (Oxford, 1990), 174.

⁷ The literature on Lucretius and epic is vast, but good starting points are: D. West, 'Lucretius and epic', in M.R. Gale (ed.), *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies: Lucretius* (Oxford, 2007), 289–99; R. Mayer, 'The epic of Lucretius', *PLLS* 6 (1990), 35–43; M.R. Gale, *Myth and Poetry in Lucretius* (Cambridge, 1994), 106–17.

⁸ Kenney (n. 2), 193.

⁹ J. Griffin, *Homer on Life and Death* (Oxford, 1980), 106–11 discusses, inter alia, 20.389–92, 11.817–18, 17.301–3.

Πριαμίδη, μὴ δὴ με ἔλωρ Δαναοῖσιν ἐάσης
 κεῖσθαι, ἀλλ' ἐπάμυνον· ἔπειτά με καὶ λιποὶ αἰῶν
 ἐν πόλει ὑμετέρῃ, ἐπεὶ οὐκ ἄρ' ἔμελλον ἔγωγε
 νοστήσας οἶκον δὲ φίλην ἐς πατρίδα γαῖαν
 εὐφρανέειν ἄλοχόν τε φίλην καὶ νήπιον υἱόν.

'Son of Priam, do not leave me to lie as prey to the Danaans, but help me: let life leave me in your city, since I am not destined to return home to my own native land, **to gladden my dear wife and infant son.**'

More graphically, Diomedes (11.393–5) tells Paris that, if he hits a man, 'his wife's cheeks are gashed in grief, his children are orphaned, while he rots, reddening the earth with his blood, and there are more birds around him than (weeping) women.'

The notion of dying far from home and leaving one's family was, of course, to become something of a feature of funerary laments and elegies,¹⁰ but it is tempting to believe that the precedent for this sort of language was to be found in the Homeric epics, and that Lucretius (writing in the same epic metre) was well aware of the epic intertext, especially in view of the massive use made by later writers of themes from the *Odyssey* in particular, as demonstrated by Kaiser.¹¹ When Lucretius' mourners use this same combination of home, wife and children as part of their exploration of the pathos of death, they are tapping into the language of Homer's *Iliad*, with the significant difference that Homer's speakers are living men anticipating death, whereas Lucretius' mourners are addressing a corpse who cannot share their sadness.¹² But there is a closer and even more pertinent source for the mourners' lament.

In the *Odyssey* (12.39–46) Odysseus is being given guidance by Circe about what is in store for him and his men if and when they pass by the Sirens:

Σειρήνας μὲν πρῶτον ἀφίξεις, αἶ ῥά τε πάντας
 ἀνθρώπους θέλγουσιν, ὅτις σφραγ εἰσαφίκηται.
 ὅς τις ἀδρεῖη πελάσῃ καὶ φθόγγον ἀκούσῃ
 Σειρήνων, τῷ δ' οὐ τι γυνὴ καὶ νήπια τέκνα
 οἴκαδε νοστήσαντι παρίσταται οὐδὲ γάνυνται,
 ἀλλὰ τε Σειρήνες λιγυρῇ θέλγουσιν αἰοιδῇ
 ἤμεναι ἐν λειμῶνι, πολὺς δ' ἄμφ' ὅστεόφιν θις
 ἀνδρῶν πυθομένων, περὶ δὲ ῥινοὶ μινύθουσι.

'First of all you will arrive at the Sirens, who beguile everyone who comes to them. Whoever unwittingly draws near to them and hears the voice of the Sirens—**for him no wife and infant children stand by thrilled as he returns home.** On the contrary, the Sirens bewitch him with their clear-toned singing, as they sit in a meadow, and around them is a massive beach of bones from putrefied humans, with the skin shrinking all round them.'

The same basic elements are here again: the home, the wife and the children. The wife lacks an epithet, but the νήπια τέκνα ('infant children') share with her the combination of the verbs παρίσταται ('stand by') and γάνυνται¹³ ('are thrilled'), which well

¹⁰ It actually figures less than one might expect in the funerary epigrams, with the exception of the sequence of 'shipwreck' deaths commemorated at *Anth. Pal.* 7.282–307, with Lattimore (n. 3), 199–202; cf. Catull. 68.97–100 for a contemporary of Lucretius using similar language of his own brother's death in Troy.

¹¹ E. Kaiser, 'Odyssee-Szenen als Topoi', *MH* 21 (1964), 109–36 and 197–224.

¹² Homer's heroes do address corpses but mostly to express contempt, as most famously in the case of the Greeks' taunting and maltreating of the corpse of Hector at *Il.* 22.364–75: see also *Il.* 21.122–4.

¹³ Cf. Eur. *Cyc.* 504.

encapsulates both their standing in wait for his return and also their shared excitement at seeing him. The theme of joy in γάννυται is picked up in Lucretius with *laeta*, and οἰκάδε νοστήσαντι becomes Lucretius' *domus accipiet*. Striking also is the contrast of the cosy domestic scene (which will not happen) with the dreadful certainty of the dead sailors as a 'beach of bones from putrefied humans, with the skin shrinking all round them': this same contrast (of hope vs reality) is also found in the *Iliad* (for example 11.816–18).

The Sirens lure sailors with the promise of giving them knowledge,¹⁴ but actually secure their deaths via what Halliwell¹⁵ calls 'a kind of psychotropic paralysis (12.39–46)'. This point was remembered by Plato (*Symp.* 216a), when Alcibiades compares the power of Socrates over him to that of the Sirens: βία οὖν ὥσπερ ἀπὸ τῶν Σειρήνων ἐπισχόμενος τὰ ὄτια οἴχομαι φεύγων, ἵνα μὴ αὐτοῦ καθήμενος παρὰ τούτῳ καταγῆράσω, 'So I am forced to withhold my ears as if from the Sirens, and make off as fast as I can, for fear I should go on sitting beside him till old age was upon me.'

At this point we need to recall that Epicurus was critical of the dangers of poetry and 'culture', and warned against it in terms reminiscent of the Sirens (Diog. Laert. 10.6):¹⁶

παιδείαν δὲ πᾶσαν, μακάριε, φεύγε τάκατιον ἀράμενος

Hoist the sails, my boy, and steer clear of all culture.¹⁷

Lucretius may well be tapping into the topos of 'Siren voices' in his choice of language here, but things are not simple. The mourners are not quoting the Sirens themselves—nobody could do that and live, with the sole exception of Odysseus. They are quoting from Circe's dire warning against approaching the Sirens—and Circe's own bewitching of Odysseus had itself been foiled by the hero being forewarned and forearmed by the god Hermes.¹⁸ Lucretius is thus having it both ways and adding a layer of irony to the text whereby the mawkish mourners are actually undermining their own case by the intertextual reminiscences at work.

Inspired and informed by the divinity (Hermes/Circe/Epicurus), the wise man/Odysseus uses his intelligence to hear the mourners' sentimental irrationality without incurring disaster.¹⁹ The poetic lament for the losses suffered by the corpse is itself a

¹⁴ Hom. *Od.* 12.187–91.

¹⁵ S. Halliwell, *Between Ecstasy and Truth: Interpretations of Greek Poetics from Homer to Longinus* (Oxford, 2012), 91–2.

¹⁶ Cf. 10.120. See also N. Freer, 'Virgil's *Georgics* and the Epicurean Sirens of poetry', in B. Xinyue and N. Freer (edd.), *Reflections and New Perspectives on Virgil's Georgics* (London, 2019), 79–90, at 81 ('the myth of the Sirens perfectly encapsulates Epicurus's views on poetry') and cf. M.R. Gale, *Myth and Poetry in Lucretius* (Cambridge, 1994), 14–18. For wider discussion of the Epicurean attitude towards poetry, see e.g. E. Asmis, 'Epicurean poetics', in D. Obbink (ed.), *Philodemus and Poetry* (Oxford, 1995), 15–34; M.R. Gale, 'Otium and uoluptas: Catullus and Roman Epicureanism', in S. Yona and G. Davis (edd.), *Epicurus in Rome: Philosophical Perspectives in the Ciceronian Age* (Cambridge, 2022), 87–108, at 92–3.

¹⁷ Cf. Plut. *Mor.* 15D = *De audiendis poetis* 1, *Mor.* 1094D = *Non posse suauiter uiui secundum Epicurum* 12.

¹⁸ See Kaiser (n. 11), 208–10 on this scene.

¹⁹ One of the anonymous referees for this article points me towards Diog. Laert. 10.120: 'only the wise man will be able to converse correctly about music and poetry' (μόνον τε τὸν σοφὸν ὀρθῶς ἀνὰ περὶ τε μουσικῆς καὶ ποιητικῆς διαλέξεσθαι).

seductively pathetic view of death, which readers have found beautiful enough to imitate²⁰ but which the poet at once swats with the voice of Epicurean philosophy:

illud in his rebus non addunt: 'nec tibi earum
iam desiderium rerum super insidet una.'

they do not also say at this point: 'but you will no longer have any craving for these things by now.'

Odysseus faces the threat of imminent death unless he heeds the advice of Circe, while we will all one day end up part of the inanimate heap of bones on the Sirens' shoreline. The Epicurean wise man, however, will face this prospect armed with the atomic truth about life and death, just as the reader of Lucretius cannot harbour any romantic views of death after the grim realism of the poet's description of putrefaction (3.580–91, 719–21). The Sirens lure sailors with a seductive song which claims to be giving knowledge but only deals out death: Lucretius gives us the knowledge which allows us—like Odysseus—to enjoy the pleasure of the song without losing sight of the fundamental statement (Lucr. 3.830, Diog. Laert. 10.124–5) that 'death is nothing to us' and the serenity which acceptance of this can bring.

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²⁰ Besides Verg. *G.* 2.523–4, Kenney quotes Thomas Gray, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* 21–4.