

CHAPTER I

Introduction

Sergio Yona

The popularity of Epicureanism in Republican Rome among people of all backgrounds, including men, women, farmers, poets, politicians and many others, would seem – at least according to some prominent sources – to be somewhat paradoxical. Indeed, it is difficult to ascertain how an allegedly introverted, apolitical and atheistic philosophical tradition, foreign to Italy and espousing unorthodox doctrines regarding issues fundamentally integral to Roman society, could attract so many followers. Epicurus, for example, provocatively declared that gods are not concerned with human affairs (KD 1; *Men.* 123–124) and that political ambition poses serious challenges to true happiness (DL 10.119: οὐδὲ πολιτεύσεσθαι).¹ Furthermore, he preached pleasure over virtue for its own sake (*Men.* 129) and encouraged private communities (οἱ οικείοι, who engage in fruitful conversations and forge bonds not experienced by “outsiders” or οἱ ἔξωθεν) as opposed to universal networks of power and influence (cf. *Men.* 135).² And even though such views challenge many notions undergirding the commonest platitudes that frequent the works of influential Roman conservatives, their promise of tranquility through

¹ The KD 1 statement is as follows: Τὸ μακάριον καὶ ἀφθαρτον οὔτε αὐτὸ πράγματα ἔχει οὔτε ἄλλω παρέχει· ὥστε οὔτε ὀργαῖς οὔτε χάρισι συνέχεται: ἐν ἀσθενεῖ γὰρ πᾶν τὸ τοιοῦτον, “That which is blessed and immortal neither has trouble itself nor causes trouble to another being; thus, it experiences neither anger nor favor, for this sort of thing pertains to weakness.” Cf. Lucr. 1.44–49 (= 2.646–651). Also important are Epicurus’ observations in *Men.* 123–124. See Rist: 1972, 140–163, Mansfeld: 1993, Lorca: 1996, 852–855, Tsouna: 2007, 244–246 and, more recently, Torres: 2018, 455–487 and Erlar: 2020, 79–94 for a convenient overview of Epicurean theology. For qualification regarding Epicurean involvement in politics tailored to a Roman audience, see Fish: 2011.

² For the importance of communal living and interaction for Epicureans in general, see the edition of Konstan et al: 1998 of Philodemus’ treatise *On Frank Criticism*. See Nussbaum: 1994, 117–136 for an overview of what the typical experience of philosophical education within the Epicurean community might have been like. Cf. Clay: 1998, 75–102 for cults and communal gatherings devoted to Epicurus. For general introductions to Philodemus, see the following overviews: Tait: 1941, 1–23, Asmis: 1990, Gigante: 1995, Yona: 2018, 18–27 and Armstrong and McOsker: 2020. Introductions to editions of his treatises also include bibliographical information.

fellowship in the midst of extreme civil strife in the final years of the Republic proved particularly attractive. As Cicero observes in *On Ends*, Epicurus' universal call to philosophy (cf. *Men.* 122) appealed not only to educated Romans, but also to rustics and farmers (2.12): *vos de plagis omnibus colligitis bonos illos quidem viros, sed certe non pereruditos*, "you gather from every quarter of the countryside doubtless respectable but certainly not profoundly learned adherents."³ The apparent popularity of Epicureanism among commoners, whose testimony is regrettably unavailable to modern scholars, is difficult to understand precisely because the evidence comes exclusively from elite and often biased sources, like Cicero himself.

What emerges is an obviously incomplete account characterized by tension and contradiction on all sides, even among social elites: On the one hand is Cicero's calculated criticism of the Garden as incompatible with *Romanitas* in every way, while on the other is the opposite witness of Atticus and also Lucretius' powerful endorsement of Epicureanism in *On the Nature of Things* as the antidote to contemporary turmoil. Somewhere in the middle are important figures like Julius Caesar and Catullus, whose attitude toward the sect is in each case ambiguous and therefore debatable. The essays in this volume consider all of this and collectively ask broader questions: What exactly does Roman Epicureanism entail, at least from the perspective of prominent citizens, in terms of identity and culture? Furthermore, what possible solutions does it offer contemporary Romans and how do these correspond to the political and social trends of the day? Although answers are not eminently forthcoming, the following chapters strive to elucidate many nuances of the rhetorically charged debate among the likes of Cicero and Lucretius regarding the presence of Epicureanism in the Roman Republic's final days.

This volume offers a fresh take on the complex tension between Epicurus and Rome through examinations that, in contrast to many recent collections, focus on a single philosophical tradition while considering the voices of more than one prominent author within that particular group. Unlike relatively recent volumes such as Miriam Griffin and Jonathan Barnes' *Philosophia Togata* (Oxford 1997) and Myrto Garani and David Konstan's *The Philosophizing Muse* (Cambridge 2014), for example, this study is exclusively centered on Epicureanism as opposed to Greek philosophy in Rome generally speaking.⁴ In considering the works of authors

³ See Yona: 2018, 252–253.

⁴ Additionally, the horizon of our project is further expanded by Mitsis: 2020, which extends the time-span of reception into the Renaissance and beyond. Finally, there is Volk: forthcoming a.

like Cicero, Caesar, Atticus, Catullus and of course Lucretius, the following examinations also provide a broader scope than volumes like Daryn Lehoux, A. D. Morrison and Alison Sharrock's *Lucretius: Poetry, Philosophy, Science* (Oxford 2013) and Clara Auvray-Assayas and Daniel Delattre's *Cicéron et Philodème: la polémique en philosophie* (Paris 2001), but without reaching beyond antiquity to discussions of later reception such as Brooke Holmes and W. H. Shearin's *Dynamic Reading* (Oxford 2012). Additionally, this collection does not consider the development of Epicurean tradition per se in connection with difficult ethical and theological doctrines, like Jeffrey Fish and Kirk Sanders' *Epicurus and the Epicurean Tradition* (Cambridge 2011); instead, it tackles the thorny issue of how to justify – or not – the lifestyle of Romans, especially powerful and influential ones, who were sympathetic to a philosophical tradition (with everything it entailed) that ran contrary to mainstream culture. What this volume does, then, is attempt to understand the paradoxical appeal of a system allegedly incompatible with Roman politics and culture through the contrasting (and at times seemingly dialectical) accounts of its most prominent opponents as well as proponents.

One of the major challenges to exploring the popularity and nature of Roman Epicureanism in the late Republic is the unreliability of mostly biased sources, especially Cicero. His public attacks on Epicureanism and its apparent incompatibility with Roman culture, particularly in *On Ends*, is framed within a rhetorical context designed to highlight the un-Epicurean attributes of famous Romans of the past.⁵ Thus, he exploits tradition and the *mos maiorum* by selectively introducing exempla that fit his narrative and thereby cleverly establishing a false dichotomy: The fluidity of culture – in this case Greek and Roman – is replaced by a hard-and-fast distinction, again designed to establish insurmountable distance between Epicureanism and *Romanitas*. As the chapters of Geert Roskam (“*Sint ista Graecorum: How to Be an Epicurean in Late Republican Rome – Evidence from Cicero’s On Ends 1–2*”) and Daniel P. Hanchey (“Cicero’s Rhetoric of Anti-Epicureanism: Anonymity as Critique”) in this volume demonstrate, however, contemporary Epicureanism is more nuanced than Cicero would allow one to believe. In fact, rather than being unqualifiedly prohibited, political involvement for Epicureans was, depending on one’s situation, permissible and even

⁵ Cf. Essler: 2011, who examines Cicero’s use and abuse of Epicurean theology in representing such doctrines in his work *On the Nature of the Gods*. A similar study, in relation to Cicero’s misrepresentation of the Epicurean hedonic calculus, is that of Hanchey: 2013b.

preferable (perhaps reflecting an adaptation to tradition spurred on by the criticism of Roman statesmen like Cicero). The issue, then, is not as one-sided as Cicero suggests, although tension still remains: The idea of calculating pleasure and pain, for example, which is certainly practical, still poses – at least for Cicero – a fundamental threat to the collective progress of Roman society.

In his private communications, too, the statesman mentioned immediately above offers concerted resistance to Epicureanism and even impassioned critique of individual Romans, such as close friends and colleagues, who were possibly members of the Garden or at least seem to have sympathized with its teachings. As Nathan Gilbert argues in his chapter entitled “Was Atticus an Epicurean?,” Cicero’s correspondence with his friend Atticus, who was most likely an Epicurean, underscores the former’s familiarity with and passionate rejection of the philosophical tradition in question. At the same time, his analysis of the hybridization of tradition and philosophy in the person of Atticus makes a crucial point: His limited engagement with politics and successful but controlled financial success, all of which are consistent with Epicurean tenets, prove (to Cicero’s chagrin) that it is indeed possible for a prominent Roman to be involved with such a philosophical system – to be a “serious Epicurean” – without completely abandoning local tradition. At the same time, the question of what it meant to be a “serious Epicurean” was not always easy to answer. A case in point is Katharina Volk’s chapter on the Epicureanism of Julius Caesar (“Caesar the Epicurean? A Matter of Life and Death”), which hits the reset button, so to speak, on the issue of identity. The evidence from sources in this particular regard is inconclusive. How many Romans were Epicureans and how can one know for sure? This is a slippery question, and one that emphasizes the overwhelming mutability of a moving target such as an individual’s affiliation to any given intellectual tradition. A similar challenge arises in connection with the covert Epicureanism of another suspected enthusiast of the Garden who was quite familiar with Caesar, namely, Catullus. Here again the evidence, which is perhaps even more problematic since its origin is an author who famously drew a clear distinction between a poet and his work,⁶ is not forthcoming. Monica

⁶ Cat. 16.5–6: *nam castum esse decet pium poetam | ipsum, versiculos nihil necesse est*, “For the honorable poet must be chaste himself, but it is not at all necessary for his verses to be so.” Cf. Lee: 2008, xx: “In literary studies, as in most other departments of life, fashion swings from one grotesque extreme to the other. In the nineteenth century many scholars took poetic statements as too literally related to

Gale, in her chapter entitled “*Otium and Voluptas: Catullus and Roman Epicureanism*,” provides a fresh reconsideration of this evidence and argues that, despite the language Catullus employs in his poems (some of which focus on *otium* and *voluptas* – two very Epicurean concepts), the poet’s antagonism toward prominent Epicureans like Lucius Calpurnius Piso Caesoninus (cos. 58), Philodemus and Lucretius ultimately precludes any association of him with that philosophical sect.

Turning from problematic sources or unreliable evidence to the work of a Roman Epicurean like Lucretius undoubtedly involves an obvious shift in focus, from how fellow citizens view the sect from the outside to how Roman Epicureans view the world and society around them. Like Cicero, the work of Lucretius is understandably biased in its tone, although his testimony represents countervailing convictions that both problematize the discussion and somewhat neutralize the negative criticism of Epicurus’ detractors. In other words, Lucretius’ *On the Nature of Things* offers modern scholars a glimpse into the inner workings of the mind of a contemporary Epicurean enthusiast and devoted follower, thus countering Cicero’s forceful criticisms about its inability to provide solutions to Romans of his day and age. Actually, in the context of civil strife, violence and death, Lucretius’ advice on living a complete life and not fearing the inevitable (death) turns out to be rather relevant. That is to say, for all of the interconnectedness and fluidity that characterizes society’s hybridization of Epicurean and Roman traditions, Lucretius draws a stark contrast between the incorrect, popular (Roman) view toward death and the correct (Epicurean) understanding of the unavoidable or, as Lucretius puts it, *mors immortalis* (cf. 3.869).⁷ Elizabeth Asmis, in her chapter “Love it or Leave it: Nature’s Ultimatum in Lucretius’ *On the Nature of Things* (3.931–962),” masterfully explains the arguments Lucretius introduces in Book 3 on the fear of death.⁸ This, however, is more than just an intellectual performance: Natura’s therapeutic (if harshly frank) advice is

real life; in the twentieth many have believed that poetry has no relation at all to life but exists in a self-referential vacuum or self-contained world of literary allusion.” The truth, as usual, is probably somewhere in between. For persona theory, particularly in relation to Horace and Roman satire, see Freudenburg: 2010, 271–272, Anderson: 1982, 9–10 and Freudenburg: 2005, 27–29. For a study of the “Lucretian ego,” see Gellar-Goad: 2020, 127–163.

⁷ Epicurus regards the fear of death in general as the “most horrible of evils” (*Men.* 125: τὸ φορικωδέστατον . . . τῶν κακῶν) because of its complexity and profoundly destructive effects on human beings.

⁸ As Fish: 1998, 101 n. 12 notes, the bibliography on Epicureanism and death is “immense.” For extremely helpful documentation of the debate, see Nussbaum: 1994, 204–212, Armstrong 2003, 28 n. 28 and D. Armstrong: 2004, 31 n. 36. For a general study of the topic, Wallach: 1976, Warren: 2004, Torres: 2018, 347–362, Long: 2019, 115–151 and Erler: 2020, 42–58.

potentially beneficial not only for Lucretius' immediate audience, but for all Romans suffering from this irrational fear, which introduces a paradox of sorts. The very philosophical tradition that some view as detrimental to the Republic (and Roman society in general) claims to have the solution to problems this same society has created for itself. Indeed, Lucretius associates greed, ambition and crime in general with a profound fear of death,⁹ for which Epicurus has the remedy.

But Lucretius' defense and promotion of the conviction that "death should not be feared" goes beyond the popularization of arguments and maxims; indeed, Lucretius challenges Romans to face head on the gruesome reality that death entails: decomposition, decay and more. In this sense, Pamela Gordon's chapter, entitled "Kitsch, Death and the Epicurean," invites readers to consider the uncomfortable truth about the human condition; only then can one accept mortality and begin to focus attention on living. Beginning with a definition of kitsch as that which "excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence," Gordon provides a novel reading of Lucretius' diatribe against the fear of death as an attack against the denial of human mortality and its logical consequence: putrefaction. By introducing passages that feature vivid and often grotesque descriptions of decomposition, she shows how Lucretius attempts to combat the refusal to acknowledge the truth of human existence. Finally, she explains how the poet's censure of excessive grief through "clichéd lamentations" at the death of a loved one is consistent with the Epicurean view of frank criticism as therapeutic, which also plays a role in Philodemus' *Epigrams* and is the topic of one of his surviving ethical treatises.

Lucretius' attack on false beliefs, however, does not stop at personifications of nature or disturbingly detailed literary descriptions of death; indeed, he is acutely aware of the dangerous influence of popular

⁹ Lucr. 3.59–64:

denique avarities et honorum caeca cupido,
 quae miseros homines cogunt transcendere fines
 iuris et inter dum socios scelerum atque ministros
 noctes atque dies niti praestante labore
 ad summas emergere opes, haec vulnera vitae
 non minimam partem mortis formidine aluntur.

Greed, moreover, and the blind lust for honor, which compels wretched humans to transcend the limits of justice and contend day and night, sharing and scheming crime, to climb with exceeding toil to the summit of riches, all of these sores of life are nourished in no small way by the fear of death.

entertainment on average Romans through various sensory (visual, oral, aural etc.) experiences. This of course includes dramatic performances, which were vastly popular at the time, as well as wall paintings, many of which depicted scenes from traditional mythological stories involving vengeful gods. One of the most prominent of these tales, as Mathias Hanses discusses in his chapter “Page, Stage, Image: Confronting Ennius with Lucretius’ *On the Nature of Things*,” is the sacrifice of Iphigenia. It is important to recognize that the majority of Romans were exposed to such visual representations and, according to Lucretius, at risk for developing (or feeding already developed) false beliefs about menacing gods. More specifically, Hanses provides new evidence of Lucretius’ engagement with Rome’s first national poet. Through a consideration of the language and content of various passages of *On the Nature of Things*, Hanses underscores the Epicurean poet’s efforts to challenge his predecessor’s influence as a mythological, religious and even philosophical authority. This study, however, examines far more than the intertextual connections between Lucretius and Ennius. Hanses’ exploration of the Lucretian sacrifice of Iphigenia passage, which he argues is Ennian in its language, leads to considerations of the popularity of this scene as part of dramatic performances as well as the subject of works of art. Such venues would have made the horrors of *religio* more accessible and perhaps more appealing to the general public, he suggests, thus prompting Lucretius to provide his readers with a “toolkit” for confronting such displays through his didactic epic. To be sure, this criticism of Ennius is a boldly direct challenge to average Romans to reconsider certain aspects of their received tradition in light of Epicurus’ teachings. Lucretius’ outspoken criticism of Rome’s premier poet at the time, however, is not a complete rejection of *Romanitas* for Epicureanism, but rather a further (salubrious, for Lucretius) “hybridizing” of the two.

This emphasis on visual arts and the importance of perception also relates to natural phenomena, such as the well-known question of the actual size of the sun. The final chapter in the volume is more scientific than the rest, but it is consistent with the notion of “thinking like an Epicurean” and viewing the outside world – to the degree that it can be understood at all, given our limitations – as a follower of the Garden living in Rome. In his examination, entitled “Lucretius on the Size of the Sun,” T. H. M. Gellar-Goad tackles a rather curious epistemological conundrum. He begins with an overview of criticisms of Epicurus’ claim that the sun is the size it appears to be before offering careful analysis of key passages from Epicureans, especially one from Book 5 of *On the Nature*

of *Things* regarding the sun's heat. This passage's content and intricate syntax, Gellar-Goad explains, is designed to emphasize the difficulty of drawing accurate conclusions about celestial phenomena (thus posing an indirect challenge to those who claim to have done so). By means of an explanation of the Epicurean theory of knowledge, which is founded upon the ability to acquire clear sense perceptions, he identifies the many challenges associated with the observation of objects as distant as the sun. The result, he suggests, is that regarding this issue the Epicureans were careful to suspend their judgment in order to avoid drawing false – and potentially harmful – conclusions. For the Epicureans, then, the sun is in fact “perceived” to be the size of a foot, since for them sense perceptions are infallible; the “actual” size of the sun, however, is undoubtedly beyond our limits to determine.

The overall objective of the essays collected in this volume is to present to modern audiences the rhetorical intricacies of the social, political and essentially philosophical conversation (or rather debate) that was a central feature of the final days of the Roman Republic. The manner in which Cicero's mischaracterization of Epicurus' teachings clashes with Lucretius' zealous promotion of the same tradition powerfully underscores Romans' desperate struggle to provide their countrymen with meaningful solutions, especially at such a crucial turning point in their history. At the same time, this tension reflects the collective identity crisis of a people undergoing a violent transition from republic to empire and struggling to mitigate – or even prevent – such a tumultuous and fundamental change. These are the voices of citizens seeking stability and, above all, answers to the question “What does it truly mean to be Roman?” For Cicero, this involves political engagement and striving for traditional virtue for its own sake, all of which are at odds with Epicureanism; for Lucretius, the Master's teachings offer his fellow compatriots knowledge, peace and physical as well as psychological repose, all of which seemed like impossible ideals in the midst of so much civil strife. The answer, again, is likely somewhere in between, and the contrasting (though interconnected) arguments in the following chapters provide a starting point for understanding the complex compromise that the label “Roman Epicureanism” implies.