

## BOOK REVIEW

*Laughing Atoms, Laughing Matter: Lucretius' De Rerum Natura and Satire*. By T. H. M. GELLAR-GOAD. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2020. Pp. 290. Hardcover, \$85.00. ISBN 978-0-472-13180-8.

As Gellar-Goad acknowledges in his introduction (6-9) and with comprehensive citation throughout this book, scholars have long detected satiric themes, voices and passages in *De Rerum Natura*. With this thorough study, Gellar-Goad revisits, supplements, explicates and theorizes these in a way that will benefit how scholars read Lucretius and his relationship with satire henceforth.

A concise introduction reviews previous scholarship on didactic and satiric poetry and articulates the author's views on *De Rerum Natura's* audience and the persona of the first-person speaker (he refers to the "Lucretian-ego" *vel sim.*, throughout). The final pages of the introduction provide a précis of the book that mirrors the titles of chapters and subsections outlined in the table of contents.

Chapter 1 lays essential groundwork for the study by introducing the two ways in which Gellar-Goad approaches satire: 1) with an eye on Roman verse satire, primarily poetry by Ennius, Lucilius, Horace, Persius and Juvenal; and 2) through the satiric mode, or works that "do satire" (26) but are not part of the circumscribed Roman genre. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on earlier and later verse satire, respectively, with most sections documenting textual allusions between *De Rerum Natura* and poems by specific satirists. The latter half of Chapter 3 varies the approach by identifying *topoi* that appear in Lucretius and recur in Horace, Persius and Juvenal in ways that reflect the distinct satiric voices and tendencies of these later poets. Chapter 4 pivots to documenting the satiric mode in *De Rerum Natura*, with particular attention to the Lucretian speaker's satiric voice, and Chapter 5 identifies and tugs at the knot that forms between satiric and didactic modes when the "indefinite, ambiguous, and elusive" (173) nature of the satiric voice conflicts with the "straightforward, fair, and consistent" (174) ambitions of didaxis. Chapter 6 acknowledges the centrality of Rome to both verse satire and Lucretius' poem before identifying "set pieces" (185) of civic satire at the ends of

Books 2-6 of *De Rerum Natura*. In a brief conclusion, Gellar-Goad suggests that satire in *De Rerum Natura* creates and caters to a “divided audience” (215-219) and thus encourages diverse reading—and rereading—experiences.

Detailed signposting appears throughout, ensuring that readers receive regular reminders of what is under discussion in a given section and of how it relates to the broader argument. A further consequence: after the first chapter, much of book can be read out of sequence, as Gellar-Goad’s conclusion tacitly acknowledges when he summarizes the chapters in a different order than that in which they unfold. A comprehensive general index and *index locorum* also permit readers to browse to specific topics, terms and passages.

Gellar-Goad’s book succeeds absolutely in its aim of documenting “how important satire is to Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*, and how important *De Rerum Natura* is to satire” (211), and explorations of the satiric mode make Chapters 4 and 5 especially rewarding. Gellar-Goad also evinces a talent for concisely reviewing historical or ongoing debates in scholarship and situating his own conclusions—constructively—within those debates. Quarrels feel more like quibbles when set against the extent of Gellar-Goad’s evidence and accompanying argumentation, but there remain a few larger questions that I wish someone with such command of the material had explored at greater length.

A section in Chapter 1 on the risks of satire contains the succinct declaration: “[O]ne of the greatest risks of the satiric act [...] is its challenge to epistemic certainty” (37). I agree, yet the statement raises the question of what the Lucretian-*ego*, whose avowed objective involves *instilling* epistemic certainty in his addressee(s) about the nature of the universe, achieves with a satiric voice that he could not have achieved without it. Gellar-Goad profitably identifies tensions between didactic and satiric modes in Chapter 5 (172-179, in particular), but a satisfying answer to *why* Lucretius’ speaker engages with satire is never supplied. One also wonders what influence Epicurus’ writings may have had on Lucretius’ selection of a mode associated with humor and laughter. Consider, for example, the primacy of laughter in Epicurus’ *Sententiae Vaticanae* 41: “It is necessary at the same time to laugh and philosophize and govern one’s house and use one’s other resources and in no way to cease putting forth the sayings of correct philosophy”—*γελᾶν ἅμα δεῖ καὶ φιλοσοφεῖν καὶ οἰκονομεῖν καὶ τοῖς λοιποῖς οἰκειώμασι χρῆσθαι καὶ μηδαμῆ λήγειν τὰς ἐκ τῆς ὀρθῆς φιλοσοφίας φωνὰς ἀφιέντας*.

When Gellar-Goad details features of the satiric mode and traits of the satirist, also in Chapter 1, he skillfully distills the work of various scholars of ancient and modern satire. Features of the satiric mode include a target, a formal antecedent,

humor and ambiguity (26). Traits of the satirist involve the use of a personalized voice, comic mockery or blame, justified indignation and collusion between the satirist and audience (26-27). Gellar-Goad does not initially indicate in what quantity or concentrations the features must appear in a given text to trigger an audience's detection of the satiric mode, nor does he seem to subscribe to the idea that all traits must be present in the same passage in order for a satiric voice to become audible, despite a vague statement in Chapter 4 that "Taken together ... these traits make up the particular voice of the satirist" (127). But the Lucretian passages in which specific traits are identified occasionally appear at considerable textual distance from one another. Upon a rereading of Book 1 of *De Rerum Natura* with Gellar-Goad's schema firmly in mind, I registered the Lucretian speaker's indignation at the evils precipitated by religion (*DRN* 1.80-101) but failed to detect much in the vein of "comic mockery" (my emphasis) in the description of human sacrifice. Must it be supplied from the subsequent vignette parodying the dream of Ennius (*DRN* 1.102-126)?

Gellar-Goad's style is clear, his tone often playful and all quotations of ancient and modern world languages are translated into accessible English, although his renderings of what he asserts are satiric passages in *De Rerum Natura* occasionally beg the question with their use of colloquialisms and contractions that seem intended to evoke a comic or satiric register, e.g., "it'd take a long time if I was gonna try to say the rest of the things of this type" for *cetera de genere hoc longum est si dicere coner* (65) and "hell yes, they do!" for *scilicet* (134). Owing to the diversity of authors and breadth of texts treated, a novice audience may require supplementary orientation to some of the content, but Gellar-Goad routinely defines key terms and reviews influential scholarship in such a way that advanced undergraduates and beyond will find themselves comfortably oriented.

Scholars of Lucretius should read this book carefully to hone their sensitivity to the satiric mode in *De Rerum Natura* (and beyond) and consider if and how satiric voices sharpen or blunt their various readings and conclusions. Readers of Roman verse satire, especially of Lucilius, Horace, Persius and Juvenal, are likely to view the genre—and Lucretius' place within it—more expansively after surveying this erudite study.

Caleb M. X. Dance

*W & L University*, [dancec@wlu.edu](mailto:dancec@wlu.edu)