BOOK REVIEW


As Gellar-Goad acknowledges in his introduction (69) 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 topos 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 the 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 Naturais* 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"—γελάν ἀμία δέ καὶ ἱλιστοφορήσῃ καὶ οἰκονομήσῃ καὶ τῶς ἱλιστοὺς σώκειμασί κρήσῃ καὶ μηδὲν χηρετὰ λῆγεν τὸν ὡς ἐκ τῆς ἀρετῆς ἱλιστοφορίας φωνὰς ἀριστότας.

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 Lucre-
tian passages in which specific traits are identified occasionally appear at consid-
erable textual distance from one another. Upon a rereading of Book 1 of De Re-
rum 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 de-
scription 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 in-
tended 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 seilicet (134). Owing to the diversity of
authors and breadth of texts treated, a novice audience may require supplement-
ary orientation to some of the content, but Gellar-Goad routinely defines key
terms and reviews influential scholarship in such a way that advanced undergrad-
uates 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 sa-
tiric 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 sur-
viving this erudite study.

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