

LUCRETIUS, EURIPIDES AND THE PHILOSOPHERS: *DE RERUM NATURA* 5.13–21*

confer enim divina aliorum antiqua reperta.
namque Ceres fertur fruges Liberque liquoris
vitigeni laticem mortalibus instituisse;
cum tamen his posset sine rebus vita manere,
ut fama est aliquas etiam nunc vivere gentis.
at bene non poterat sine puro pectore vivi;
quo magis hic merito nobis deus esse videtur,
ex quo nunc etiam per magnas didita gentis
dulcia permulcent animos solacia vitae.

Lucretius, *De rerum natura* 5.13–21.

Here in the proem to his fifth book Lucretius is praising the philosophical achievements or discoveries ('reperta') of Epicurus through favourable comparison with other discoveries of traditional heroic or divine figures; first, in this passage, with the products of bread and wine associated with the gods Ceres and Liber (Bacchus), and later with the deeds of the god-hero Hercules. This technique clearly derives from the σύγκρισις of formal rhetoric, one of the basic exercises (προγυμνάσματα, *exercitationes primae*) through which composition was taught in ancient schools,¹ and Lucretius begins with 'confer', an imperative which has something of a formulaic force in rhetorical comparisons.² But it is not the purpose of this note to point out the rhetorical qualities of this passage; Lucretius' treatment of Ceres and Liber has other important literary and philosophical associations, links which have not been noted or explored by scholars.

Lucretius' attack here on the 'reperta' of Ceres and Liber effectively inverts a common means of praising these divinities. The 'reperta' of Ceres and Liber, namely bread and wine, are here as often presented as the two sustaining staples of ancient existence,³ and the idea that Ceres and Liber were the 'discoverers' (πρώτοι εὑρεταί, *repertores*) of these vital foodstuffs is something which appears in the literary praise of these two deities: Ceres (Demeter) is hymned by Callimachus (*H.* 6.19–21) and Ovid (*Met.* 5.341–2) as the first to discover the use of corn, and the celebration of Dionysus/Bacchus as the 'inventor' of the vine or of wine is even more common in poetry.⁴ But Lucretius is using more than a general literary tradition here; there is one

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¹ On the προγυμνάσματα, in use in Roman as well as Greek schools by Lucretius' day, cf. W. Kroll in *RE Suppl.* vii.1117.22ff, S. Bonner, *Education in Ancient Rome* (London, 1977), pp. 250–76; on σύγκρισις in particular, much used in literary criticism, cf. Russell on Longinus 12.4 and F. Focke, *Hermes* 58 (1923), 327–68.

² cf. Cicero, *Rosc. Com.* 20, *Sulla* 74, Ovid, *Ep.* 12.204, Juvenal 13.144.

³ cf. Dodds on Euripides, *Bacchae* 274–85, Varro, *RR* 1.1.5.

⁴ For Dionysus as 'inventor' of the vine or of wine in poetry, cf. Bömer, on Ovid, *Fasti* 2.239 and *Met.* 4.14, McKeown on Ovid, *Am.* 1.3.11; for the theme of πρώτος εὑρετής in general cf. Nisbet and Hubbard on Horace, *Odes* 1.3.12, Hunter on Eubulus, fr. 72.1 and A. Kleingünther, *Πρώτος Εὑρετής* (Leipzig, 1933).

specific and prominent passage of ancient poetry where similar praise of Ceres and Liber, in their Greek forms of Demeter and Dionysus, occurs, and Lucretius can be seen employing it as a model.

At Euripides, *Bacchae* 274–80 Tiresias tries to convince Pentheus of the greatness of Dionysus, but prefaces his argument with similar assertions about Demeter:

δύο γάρ, ὦ νεανία,
 τὰ πρῶτ' ἐν ἀνθρώποισιν· Δημήτηρ θεά –
 γῇ δ' ἐστίν, ὄνομα δ' ὁπότερον βούλη κάλει·
 αὕτη μὲν ἐν ξηροῖσιν ἐκτρέφει βροτούς·
 ὃς δ' ἤλθ' ἔπειτ', ἀντίπαλον ὁ Σεμέλης γόνος
 βότρυος ὕγρὸν πῶμ' ἡὔρε κείσσηνέγκατο
 θνητοῖς...

For there are, young man, two prime elements among men: the goddess Demeter (earth, that is – call her by whatever name you wish), she who nourishes mortals on dry food, and he who came after, the son of Semele who discovered the moist drink of the grape to rival her, and introduced it to mortals.

The similarities between the two passages are clear: not only does Lucretius have the same two gods as Euripides and follow him in stressing Dionysus/Liber as a *πρῶτος εὐρετής* (cf. 279 *ἡὔρε*), but he even seems to echo the diction of the Greek tragedian: 'mortalibus instituisse' seems to pick up *κείσσηνέγκατο* | *θνητοῖς*, and the elaborate periphrasis 'liquoris | vitigeni laticem' follows that of *βότρυος ὕγρὸν πῶμα*. These echoes must be ironical in this context, for Lucretius is of course not confirming but undermining the assertions of Euripides' speaker about the gods; this is underlined by 'fertur' (14), which is not only a cross-reference to a known literary source but also a 'reporting' device which suggests the poet's scepticism.⁵ As a good Epicurean Lucretius does not believe myths about the gods intervening in the world or bringing benefit to mankind (cf. 2.646–51), and though the inventions of wine and bread are not specifically mentioned in his history of the earliest civilization in this same book, it is clear that he would have regarded them as human discoveries made through trial and error (cf. 5.1361–78).

Lucretius' use of Euripides in this knock-down argument is notable; but the material of the passage has philosophical as well as literary connections. As Dodds and others have noted, the passage from the *Bacchae* quoted above shows some links with the views of Euripides' contemporary the sophist Prodicus, who seems to have described the religion of early man as the deification of material elements which were perceived to be of benefit, and to have claimed that Demeter represented the deification of bread, Dionysus of wine.⁶ This would be interesting but incidental for Lucretius were it not for the fact that most of our knowledge of these Prodician views comes from the *De pietate* of Lucretius' Epicurean contemporary Philodemus, which seems to have provided a doxography of theories on the primitive origins of conventional religion. This doxography indicates that Lucretius, in addition to echoing Euripides, may also be engaging with a later revival of Prodician views by the third-century Stoic Persaeus, pupil of Zeno and courtier of Antigonos Gonatas, in his work *On the Gods*.⁷

⁵ So similarly at Vergil, *Aeneid* 10.189 'namque ferunt' introduces a story which the poet avoids vouching for and which is evidently an echo of the Hellenistic poet Phanocles (fr. 6 Powell). On such 'reporting' devices in general cf. Nisbet and Hubbard on Horace, *Odes* 1.7.23, T. C. W. Stinton, *PCPS* n.s. 22 (1976), 60–89.

⁶ cf. Dodds on Euripides, *Bacchae* 274–80.

⁷ On Persaeus and his *Περὶ Θεῶν* cf. *SVF* i.96–102 and Deichgräber in *RE* xix.928.34ff.

The version of Persaeus' neo-Prodician theology, given in Philodemus' *De pietate* at *P. Herc.* 1248, II.28–III.13 runs as follows:⁸

ὅταν ἐν τῷ Περὶ Θεῶν μὴ [ἀπ]ίθανα λέγῃ φαίνεσθαι τὰ περὶ <τοῦ> τὰ τρέφοντα καὶ ὠφελοῦντα θεοὺς νενομίσθαι καὶ τετευμησθ[αι] πρῶτον ὑπὸ [Προ]δίκου γεγραμμένα, μ[ε]τὰ δὲ ταῦτα τοῖς εὐρύοντας ἢ τροφὰς ἢ [σ]κέπας ἢ τὰς ἄλλας τέχνας ὡς Δήμητρα καὶ Διόνυσον] καὶ τοῖς Διοσκούροις.

... when in his *On the Gods* he says that those things appear not unpersuasive which were written by Prodicus concerning the notion that things which nourish and give benefit were first believed in and honoured as gods, and after these those people who discovered foods or shelter or other skills, such as Demeter and Dionysus and the Dioscuri.

The exact meaning of this passage is not clear: the words ὑπὸ Προδίκου γεγραμμένα could be taken to apply both to the clause introduced by πρῶτον and to that following μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα, i.e. it may be that the passage signifies that Prodicus talked about the deification of both foodstuffs and their inventors as part of early religion, or alternatively that Prodicus mentioned only the deification of foodstuffs, with Persaeus himself adding the second element concerning the deification of πρῶτοι εὐρεταί. That Persaeus included both these kinds of deification is confirmed by the other major piece of evidence for his theological views, to be found in the writings of Cicero. In the *De natura deorum*, written perhaps a decade after Lucretius' poem, Cicero summarizes the theology of Persaeus (1.33):

at Persaeus eiusdem Zenonis auditor eos esse habitos deos a quibus aliqua magna utilitas ad vitae cultum esset inventa, ipsasque res utiles et salutare deorum esse vocabulis nuncupatas, ut ne hoc quidem diceret, illa inventa esse deorum, sed ipsa divina...

Whatever the development of these ideas between Prodicus and Persaeus,⁹ the notion of deified πρῶτοι εὐρεταί which emerges would seem to be an obvious target for Lucretius, especially as it was the subject of contemporary discussion in both Philodemus and Cicero, and Philodemus' doxography on the primitive origins of religion would appear to be an obvious source for Lucretius at the beginning of a book where he is to deal with the topic of primitive man. Moreover, the claim that Demeter and Dionysus were deified for their useful discoveries is a natural target for Lucretian attack; despite their quasi-divine honouring of their founder,¹⁰ Epicureans generally believed that men could become gods only in a metaphorical sense, achieving a god-like existence on earth through the philosophical life.¹¹

Lucretius has usually been thought to be using the ideas of Posidonius in some parts of his account of primitive man which occurs later in Book 5;¹² there is accordingly no reason why he should not engage with other Stoic views on early humanity in the proem of the same book. At 5.1161–1240 Lucretius is careful to prove that the traditional gods were an invention of primitive and misguided superstition; here in the proem he employs for rhetorical purposes a more rational and rationalizing view of their creation. Thus we can see that Lucretius in 5.13–21 both imitates Euripides and makes a point in a recognizable philosophical debate:

⁸ For discussions of the text and interpretation of this papyrus, cf. Pease on Cicero, *Nat.* 1.38 and especially A. Henrichs, *Cron. Herc.* 4 (1974), 5–32 and *HSCP* 79 (1975), 93–123.

⁹ The version which ascribes both views to Prodicus is persuasively argued for by Henrichs (see previous note), and is supported by the account of the theology of Prodicus and Persaeus given by Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 21.2: 'Prodicus assumptos in deos loquitur, qui errando inventis novis frugibus utilitati hominum profuerunt. in eandem sententiam et Persaeus philosophatur et adnectit inventas fruges et frugum ipsarum repertoires isdem nominibus.'

¹⁰ cf. Cicero, *Tusc.* 1.48.

¹¹ Lucretius 3.322, Epicurus, *Ep. Men.* 135.

¹² cf. Ernout/Robin on 5.1105–7 and W. Lück, *Die Quellenfrage im 5. und 6. Buch des Lucrez* (Breslau, 1932).

whatever the consequences for the complex issues of Lucretius' use of Stoic targets¹³ and of his relation to his contemporary fellow-Epicurean Philodemus,¹⁴ this passage, like so much of Lucretius' poem, clearly constitutes a successful marriage of poetry and philosophy.

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¹³ On Lucretius' relations with Stoics in general cf. J. Schmidt, *Lucretius und die Stoiker* (Diss. Marburg, 1975). The persuasively cautious account by D. Furley, *BICS* 13 (1966), 13–33 (now reprinted in id., *Cosmic Problems* [Cambridge, 1989], pp. 183–205) considerably discounts Stoic targets in favour of Platonic and Aristotelian ones.

¹⁴ On this difficult issue more caution is required than shown by G. Della Valle, *Tito Caro Lucrezio e l'epicureismo campano* (Naples, 1935): cf. D. Clay, *Lucretius and Epicurus* (Ithaca, NY, 1983), pp. 24–5.