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# LUCRETIUS' HERCULEAN WARLORDS*

**ABSTRACT**

*The comparison between Epicurus and Hercules at Lucr. 5.22–54 can be read as a polemical critique of the Roman warlords of the 80s, 70s and 60s B.C., who associated themselves with the mythical hero in their propaganda. This case study could form part of a broader web of historical references in the* De rerum natura*. By presenting material that a Roman audience of the time could associate with their contemporary world, Lucretius conveys a pacifist message in contrast to Roman politics of the time, aligning with the Epicurean preference for withdrawal from public affairs.*

**Keywords:** Lucretius; Hercules; Late Republic; Roman generals; Epicurus; historical references

At the beginning of the *De rerum natura* Book 5, Lucretius praises the intellectual achievements of his mentor, Epicurus, and contrasts them to those of Ceres, Liber and Hercules. The profound benefits Epicurus' teachings have brought to humanity are presented as vastly superior to the discoveries of bread and wine and to the mythical hero's taming and killing of monsters in distant lands. After cataloguing some of Hercules' labours, Lucretius claims (5.37–42):

> cetera de genere hoc quae sunt portenta perempta,
> si non uicta forent, quid tandem uiua nocerent?
> nihil, ut opinor: ita ad satiatem terra ferarum
> nunc etiam scatit et trepido terrore repleta est
> per nemora ac montes magnos siluasque profundas;
> quae loca uitandi plerumque est nostra potestas.[1]

All the other monsters of this kind that were slain, if they had not been vanquished, what harm pray could they do alive? None, as I think, seeing how the earth even now teems with swarms of wild beasts, how full it is of unnerving terror through forests and great mountains and deep woods, which places it is mostly in our power to avoid.

Scholars who have discussed this passage have noted Hercules' prominence as a Stoic figure, particularly in light of the ensuing lines where Lucretius catalogues the passions that Epicurus was able to conquer (5.43–54).[2] This traditional reading is deeply

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[1] The text quoted is M. Deufert (ed.), *Titus Lucretius Carus De rerum natura libri VI* (Berlin, 2019); translations are from W.H.D. Rouse and M.F. Smith, *Lucretius On the Nature of Things* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1924).

[2] For instance R. Chambert, 'Hercule Lucrétien et Hercule Stoicien. Évolution et complexité d'un mythe', in R. Poignault (ed.), *Présence de Lucrèce, Actes du colloque tenu à Tours (3–5 décembre 1998)* (Tours, 1999), 149–64.

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embedded in the intellectual and cultural climate of Lucretius' era, making Hercules a fitting target for critique.

Recent scholarship has further highlighted the value of interpreting the poem in relation to Lucretius' engagement with the culture and politics of his time.[3] Stefano Rebeggiani has argued that mythological passages in the *De rerum natura* can function as allusions to Roman politics and historical figures, illuminating the poet's ideological stance.[4] Specifically, he identifies the hymn to Venus (1.1–43), the subsequent praise of Epicurus (1.62–79), and the account of Iphigenia's sacrifice (1.80–101) as references to figures such as Lucullus and Pompey, who associated themselves with mythical heroes such as Agamemnon and Alexander the Great. A central implication of this reading is a critique of the 'imperialist' endeavours of these generals—policies that faced opposition until the mid-50s B.C. from C. Memmius L.f., who is widely believed to be the poem's addressee.[5]

While Rebeggiani's analysis centres on Lucullus and Pompey in the proem to Book 1, I suggest that the comparison between Epicurus and Hercules at the beginning of Book 5 can further evoke these and other key military figures of the Late Republic. By doing so, I propose that Hercules carried additional connotations for Lucretius' contemporary audience (whether a restricted circle of aristocratic readers, the newly wealthy or anyone who might have attended a possible *recitatio* of the poem),[6] evoking not only the image of a Stoic sage but also these warlords.[7] Such an interpretation underscores Lucretius' critique of imperial ambition, contrasting the destructive pursuits of these figures with the philosophical ideal of inner peace championed by Epicurus.

By the time Lucretius composed his poem in the mid first century B.C.,[8] the practice of Roman generals associating themselves with Hercules had become a long-standing tradition. In the previous century, prominent leaders such as Lucius Mummius Achaicus (*CIL* i$^2$ 2.626 = *ILS* 20) and Publius Cornelius Scipio Aemilianus (Plut. *Prae. ger. reip.* 816C)—the conquerors of Corinth and Carthage in 146 B.C. respectively—dedicated temples to Hercules.[9]

[3] S. Harrison, 'Epicurean subversion? Lucretius's first proem and contemporary Roman culture', in D. Norbrook, S. Harrison and P. Hardie (edd.), *Lucretius and the Early Modern* (Oxford, 2016), 28–43.

[4] S. Rebeggiani, 'Roman Agamemnon. Political echoes in the proem to Lucretius' *De rerum natura*', *Mnemosyne* 73 (2020), 441–63. P. Hardie, 'Cicero and Lucretius on deifying the great man', in G. Kazantzidis (ed.), *Lucretian Receptions in Prose* (Berlin and Boston, 2024), 7–21, at 18 also hypothesized a connection between Epicurus and military leaders at Lucr. 1.62–79.

[5] References to the contributions which opposed the identification of Memmius with C. Memmius C. f., proposed by, for instance, G. Hutchinson, 'The date of *De rerum natura*', *CQ* 51 (2001), 150–62, can be found in the most recent contribution on the topic: C.V. Trinacty, 'Memmius, Cicero and Lucretius: a note on Cic. *Fam*. 13.1', *CQ* (2020), 440–3.

[6] See T.H.M. Gellar-Goad, *Laughing Atoms, Laughing Matter: Lucretius'* De rerum natura *and Satire* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2020), 10–11 for a balanced view and bibliography on this issue.

[7] The fact that the rebels of the Social Wars probably favoured Hercules does not rule out that the poem's intended audience could not have perceived the generals' association with the hero. On this aspect of his cult, see L. Morgan, 'A yoke connecting baskets: *Odes* 3.14, Hercules, and Italian unity', *CQ* (2005), 190–203, at 200 with bibliography.

[8] Whether we date the publication of the poem to 54 B.C., following the scholarly consensus, or to the period of the Civil War in 49–48 B.C., as Hutchinson (n. 5) suggested, this choice does not affect the argument presented here: in either case, Hercules could evoke these figures. Pompey's use of Hercules Invictus as the watchword at Pharsalus (App. *B Ciu.* 2.76) does not require dating the poem to the later period for the evocation to remain plausible.

[9] For the purposes of this paper, it is irrelevant whether Mummius dedicated the Temple of Hercules Victor *ad portam Trigeminam*, as proposed by A. Ziolkowski, 'Mummius' Temple of Hercules Victor and the Round Temple on the Tiber', *Phoenix* 42 (1988), 309–33, or a Temple of Hercules Victor on the Caelian Hill, as argued, for instance, by F. Coarelli, *Il Foro Boario dalle origini alla fine della Repubblica* (Rome, 1992$^2$), 185–92.

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This tradition continued with Lucius Cornelius Sulla, who built a temple or a statue of Hercules on the Esquiline (*Notitia Vrbis Romae* 5) and restored the shrine of Hercules Custos near the Circus Flaminius (Ov. *Fast.* 6.209–12). He also organized a festival featuring public offerings of aged wine and abundant meat and dedicated a tithe of his property to the hero as an act of thanksgiving (Plut. *Vit. Sull.* 35).[10] On a more private level, Sulla perhaps possessed a statue of this demigod, allegedly made by Lysippus, which may have belonged to Alexander the Great and Hannibal (Mart. 9.43.10; Stat. *Silu.* 4.6.85–8).

Two of Sulla's legates sought to emulate their commander by fostering a connection with Hercules. During his first consulship in 70 B.C., following his victory over Sertorius' rebellion in Spain the previous year, Marcus Licinius Crassus, the future triumvir, is said to have offered, like Sulla, a tenth of his fortune to the hero. He commemorated the event with public banquets and distributed enough grain to every Roman citizen to sustain them for three months (Plut. *Vit. Crass.* 2, 12).

Similarly, Lucius Licinius Lucullus reportedly made a similar dedication (Diod. Sic. 4.21.4), possibly during the triumph he celebrated upon his return from the Third Mithridatic War between 66 and 63/beginning of 62 B.C.[11] At that time, both Lucullus and his brother found themselves under prosecution by C. Memmius L.f. for the mismanagement of Lucullus' brother during his tenure as *quaestor* under Sulla (Plut. *Vit. Luc.* 37). A statue of Hercules in the Tunic, likely depicting the hero wearing the toga that caused his death, is recorded to have borne an inscription identifying it as part of Lucullus' booty, along with another inscription stating that it was dedicated by his son under a decree of the Senate. A third inscription indicated that the curule aedile Titus Septimius Sabinus restored it to public ownership from private hands (Plin. *HN* 34.93).[12]

Coins can provide further clues that the identities of some generals were linked to Hercules. A denarius minted by P. Cornelius Lentulus Spinther in 74 B.C. (*RRC* 397/1) features the bearded head of Hercules on the obverse and, on the reverse, the Genius of the Roman People crowned by Victory. Although some have suggested that this coin may refer to the war against Sertorius, definitive evidence for this connection is lacking. Nevertheless, the imagery underscores Hercules' role as a god of victory and suggests a broader symbolic connection between the hero and the military successes of Roman leaders during the Late Republic.[13]

This bond becomes even more pronounced in the coins minted between 62 and 54 B.C. by Faustus Cornelius Sulla. One of these denarii (*RRC* 426/2) depicts Hercules with the lion skin on the obverse and Diana on the reverse. It remains unclear whether it was intended to celebrate Faustus' father, Lucius Cornelius Sulla, or his father-in-law, Pompey, under whom Faustus served as both son-in-law and lieutenant during the latter's eastern campaigns. In contrast, the other denarius (*RRC* 426/4), featuring Hercules with

[10] On the details and the potential precedents of this practice, see A. Marzano, 'Hercules and the triumphal feast for the Roman people', in B. Antela-Bernárdez and T. Ñaco del Hoyo (edd.), *Transforming Historical Landscapes in the Ancient Empires* (Oxford, 2009), 83–97.

[11] R. Beryl, 'Pompey and Hercules', *Antichthon* 4 (1970), 30–7, at 34 n. 31 linked the dedication to the triumph.

[12] It is plausible, though uncertain, that the statue was originally displayed publicly and that Sabinus was the urban praetor of 28 B.C.; see P. Scholz, 'Der Hercules *tunicatus* des Lucullus', in S. Bauer and P. Brockkötter (edd.), *Exemplarität und Exeptionalität in der griechisch-römischen Antike* (Göttingen, 2021), 217–36, at 220 n. 8 and 233.

[13] S. Ritter, *Hercules in der römischen Kunst von den Anfängen bis Augustus* (Heidelberg, 1995), 62.

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the lion skin on the obverse and a globe framed by four wreaths on the reverse, is generally understood to honour Pompey.[14]

The latter dedicated a temple to the hero in Rome (Vitr. *De arch*. 3.3.5; Plin. *HN* 34.57), though the precise date of this event is uncertain. Some of the reasons adduced for his connection to Hercules include the influence of the hero's cult in Spain, where Pompey campaigned against Sertorius, and the devotion of Alexander the Great to the hero, a figure with whom the Roman general had been tied since his youth.[15]

The enduring public association between Hercules and Roman generals suggests that a potentially large number of readers of the time might have connected the demigod with key military leaders of the Late Republic.[16] In subsequent years, this tradition was exploited by figures such as Mark Antony and possibly alluded to in texts such as Cicero's *Pro Marcello*.[17] In the *De rerum natura*, the connection in question provides an interpretative framework for understanding the passage that immediately follows the digression on Hercules. In this section, Lucretius contrasts the inner battles and turmoil caused by unexamined desires and fears with the tranquillity offered by Epicureanism (5.43–8):

> at nisi purgatumst pectus, quae **proelia** nobis
> atque **pericula** tumst ingratis insinuandum![18]
> quantae tum scindunt hominem cuppedinis acres
> sollicitum **curae** quantique perinde **timores**!
> quidue **superbia spurcitia** ac **petulantia**? quantas
> efficiunt **clades**! quid **luxus desidiaeque**!

But unless the mind is purged, what battles and perils must then find their way into us against our will! How sharp then are the cares with which lust rends the troubled man, how great also the fears! Or and vices what of pride, of filthy lust, of petulance? How great the devastation they deal! What of luxury and sloth!

Along with vocabulary often associated with kingship or used to slander high-ranking political opponents (*superbia*, *spurcitia*, *petulantia*, *luxus*, *desidia*),[19] in these lines we find terms from the semantics of war (*proelia*, *pericula*, *clades*). This imagery can evoke not only Hercules but also the Roman generals whose campaigns defined the Late Republic, although it is difficult to determine whether Lucretius is referring to a single individual or alluding more broadly to a broader and enduring pattern in Roman political

[14] L.A. Valverde, 'La emisión RRC-446, de Fausto Cornelio Sila', *Numisma* 63 (2013), 19–31, at 25–6.

[15] F. Santangelo, 'Pompey and religion', *Hermes* 135 (2007), 228–33, at 230.

[16] A learned man like Varro apparently argued that anyone who acted bravely was called 'Hercules' (Serv. on Verg. *Aen*. 8.564). According to Macrobius, Varro identified the hero with Mars, the god of war, in the *Menippean Satire* known as ἄλλος οὗτος Ἡρακλῆς (Varro, *Sat. Men*. fr. 20 Ast. = Macrob. *Sat*. 3.12.5–6).

[17] S. Harrison, '*Herculis ritu*: Caesar in Cicero's *Pro Marcello*', *CQ* 68 (2018), 338–43. M.P. Loar, 'Hercules, Mummius, and the Roman triumph in *Aeneid* 8', *CPh* 112 (2017), 45–6.

[18] This much-debated sentence can be interpreted either transitively, as in the translation provided, or intransitively ('must we become involved in'), as preferred by M. Gale, *Lucretius. De rerum natura V. Edited with a Translation, Introduction and Commentary* (Oxford, 2008), 114, without impacting its role in evoking these generals.

[19] On the political connotations of *superbia*, see J. Hellegouarc'h, *Le vocabulaire latine des relations et des partis politiques sous la République* (Paris, 1963), 439–41. Z.M. Packman, 'Ethics and allegory in the proem of the fifth book of Lucretius' *De rerum natura*', *CJ* 71 (1976), 206–12 described this word and the other four in this list as vices on a philosophical level. It should also be noted that even *petulantia*, *luxus*, *desidia* and *spurcitia*, through its cognate *sporcus*, served as ammunition for political attacks (for example Cic. *Verr*. 2.1.94, 2.2.7, 2.2.76; Sall. *Cat*. 37.5).

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discourse that persisted into the era of Antony and Octavian. The martial feats of these figures contrast sharply with the triumph that Lucretius attributes to Epicurus—a victory achieved not through physical force but through reason and intellectual clarity (5.49–51):

> haec igitur qui cuncta **subegerit** ex animoque
> **expulerit dictis, non armis**, nonne decebit
> hunc hominem <in> numero diuom dignarier esse?

He therefore who has vanquished all these and cast them forth from the mind by words not by swords, will it not be proper that he be held worthy to be counted in the number of the gods?

This juxtaposition underscores Lucretius' philosophical critique of imperial ambition, contrasting the fleeting rewards of military conquest with the lasting peace of Epicurean enlightenment.[20] Moreover, it resonates with the Epicureans' general aversion to the glorification of historical figures (for example Cic. *Fin*. 2.67), with the obvious exception of their schoolmaster.

Scholars have already observed how Epicurus' teachings, despite their politically subversive implications, could indirectly benefit the Roman Republic by removing from the citizens' minds those passions that could lead to its demise.[21] Viewed in this context, Lucretius' presentation of Epicurean philosophy can be seen as offering an alternative to the deeds of recent and contemporary political actors.

The placement of this passage at the beginning of Book 5 mirrors a broader compositional strategy in the *De rerum natura*, where Lucretius uses the openings and closings of books to articulate some of his most pointed critiques of political ambition and his most emphatic endorsements of Epicurean philosophy. In the proem to Book 1 (1.29–43), the embrace of Venus and Mars evokes the ideal of peace in response to contemporary civil conflict, casting Epicurean serenity as an antidote to martial violence. The beginnings of Books 2 and 3 (2.1–61, 3.59–73) likewise attack the lust for power and praise the calm afforded by philosophical detachment. In Book 2, Lucretius explicitly denies that wealth, noble birth or royal authority can benefit the mind, unless—he suggests ironically—one believes that superstition, fear of death (2.45 *timores*), and cares (2.46 *cura*, 2.48 *curae*) could be dispelled by watching military legions clash in battle across an open plain, fully equipped and resplendent in arms and purple garments. But since such displays offer no real consolation, and since even the powerful remain afflicted by these fears, the true power lies in reason. The opening to Book 3 extends this critique, presenting the desire for honours as a cause of both personal suffering and political catastrophe. Such ambition drives men to violate justice, betray allies and pursue wealth through civil war, even rejoicing in the funerals of their own brothers. At the end of Book 3 (3.1024–35), the poet starkly confronts the futility of military glory in the face of death, listing figures such as Ancus, Scipio and an unnamed general—likely Xerxes—who, in a display of imperial hubris, bridged the sea to lead his armies across it. These once-exalted men are now mere bones, returned to the earth like those of the humblest

[20] This critique of military figures complements the reading of this passage as part of the poem's attempt to redefine masculinity hypothesized by M. Pope, *Lucretius and the End of Masculinity* (Cambridge, 2023), 103–4, 188–9.

[21] A. Schiesaro, 'Lucretius and Roman politics and history', in S. Gillespie and P. Hardie (edd.), *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius* (Cambridge, 2007), 41–58, at 54. J. Farrell, 'Was Memmius a good king?', in D. O'Rourke (ed.), *Approaches to Lucretius. Traditions and Innovations in Reading the* De rerum natura (Cambridge, 2020), 219–40, at 240 argued that Lucretius may have regarded it as impossible for a good Epicurean to be an active member of the Roman political elite.

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servant. This parade of the dead punctures the illusion of posthumous glory and underscores the futility of conquest when measured against the certainty of death.

The concentration of such critiques at structurally prominent points in the poem—beginnings and endings—enhances the possibility that they are meant to be read in dialogue with one another. Against this backdrop, the critique of Hercules and his modern analogues in Book 5 acquires added weight as part of a sustained argument. The contrast between military and philosophical conquest not only echoes earlier books but also anticipates the later critique of political life and the disastrous effects of ambition found in the account of early civilization (5.1113–42).

By framing Book 5 with these comparisons, the poet underscores the futility of external conquests when compared to the pursuit of inner peace and rational understanding, which are the true paths to human fulfilment according to Epicurean thought.

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