

# Lucretius' Venus and Mars Reconsidered

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## 1. Asmis' Interpretation

The opening sections of Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* have been the source of much puzzlement and interpretive speculation. Why does Lucretius begin with an invocation of the goddess Venus when one of the key tenets of Epicureanism is that the gods inhabit a distant realm of tranquility and are unconcerned with the affairs of men? Indeed, the Epicureans saw religion as a source of self-deception, error, and evil. This paper will attempt to ease the paradoxical tension present in these opening passages.

We will begin by considering Elizabeth Asmis' article, "Lucretius' Venus and Stoic Zeus,"<sup>1</sup> which offers an interpretation that she believes is "the key to a solution"<sup>2</sup> to this problem. We will agree with Asmis that it is interpretively useful to see a substitution for Stoic Zeus taking place in the text. However, we will argue against her interpretation on three crucial points: (1) that Venus *alone* supplants Stoic Zeus, (2) that Venus triumphs "utterly" over Mars, and (3) we will take strong exception to an argument she offers to 'save the text' via a distinction she draws between Zeus and Venus. We will then offer an alternative reading of the text, which, while falling well short of a "key to a solution," may make better sense of the text. We will begin by sketching Asmis' three central contentions, and then deal with them in reverse order.

The central contention of Asmis' article is that Venus is put forward by Lucretius as an allegorical rival to Zeus, the patron god favored by the Stoics. The Stoics and Epicureans were vying for converts to their respective ways of life and association with a traditional deity was seen as a kind of enticement to conversion. According to Asmis, Venus is identical to Zeus with regard to her omnipotence, but crucially different in how she wields her power over the

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Asmis, "Lucretius' Venus and Stoic Zeus," *Hermes* 110 (1982): 458-470.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 458.

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cosmos. Zeus is “the omnipotent god who imposes his will upon the world by force.”<sup>3</sup> Venus is “likewise omnipotent, but her supremacy is achieved by the allurements of pleasure.”<sup>4</sup> Zeus represents the Stoic belief in the rule of reason, fate, and will, and it is by the imposition of will that Zeus rules and orders reality. Venus represents pleasure, desire, and freedom—she rules immanently from within the cosmos—a dominion of enticement rather than coercion.

It is probable that Asmis’ belief that Venus alone takes the place of Stoic Zeus is based upon her reading of the so-called ‘Mars Episode.’ On her view the god Mars is simply another of Venus’ subjects, “Venus’ power over Mars is just as immediate and pleasurable as her power over the cosmos as a whole and the animals in it.”<sup>5</sup> This power over Mars is neither temporary nor recurrent, but permanent and final, “Venus utterly conquers Mars,”<sup>6</sup> to rule alone in the place of Zeus. Asmis’ interpretation drops Mars and the relationship of Venus and Mars from the allegorical picture and, in so doing, makes a fatal error.

If Asmis simply demonstrated that the invocation to Venus was present in the text in order to erect an Epicurean rival to Stoic Zeus, we would still be left with an aura of paradox. So, she sets herself the more difficult task of answering the question “is Lucretius’ invocation of the goddess Venus in conflict with his belief that the gods have nothing to do with the world?”<sup>7</sup> She offers two arguments for why the answer to this question is no.

Her first argument is enigmatic and appears to contradict her earlier assertions. She offers simply: “Venus is an allegorical deity, who in opposition to Stoic Zeus represents pleasure and a variety of functions derived from pleasure.”<sup>8</sup> Does she mean that Venus is merely an allegorical figure limited in

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 463.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 466.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 469.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

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the scope of her representation to pleasure and a few other qualities? If so, it is hard to see how this rather limited figure can be said to supplant Zeus as an equal with regard to omnipotence, and be a deity who “achieves everything that Zeus does, and more.”<sup>9</sup> Even with such a watered down deity one would still be left to wonder why Lucretius bothered with any invocation at all.

Her second argument is better and much easier to grasp, but equally untenable. The gist of her argument is that Venus is an allegorical figure that represents the expulsion of the gods from active participation in the world of mortal experience. She admits that this argument is *prima facie* paradoxical, “. . . Venus represents precisely the freedom of the world from divine intervention. Venus, it turns out, stands for the Epicurean belief that the gods have nothing to do with the world. Paradoxically, a supremely powerful goddess signifies the ejection of the gods from the cosmos.”<sup>10</sup> How does she argue for this paradoxical result? She holds that there is a critical distinction between what Stoic Zeus allegorically represents and what Venus stands for. The former “is identical with the order of the physical universe and the totality of bodies that make up the world.”<sup>11</sup> Venus, by contrast, “is nothing but the laws which govern the movement of the atoms in the universe.”<sup>12</sup> Here, she is not watering down her conception of the power and omnipotence of Venus, for Venus “is identical, just like Zeus, with the material cosmos.”<sup>13</sup> The difference between them is that in Zeus the Stoics “exalt the physical to the divine,”<sup>14</sup> but Venus stands for laws which themselves trump her divinity *qua* intervening actor and, hence, “Lucretius . . . uses the identity to eliminate divinity altogether.”<sup>15</sup> So, Venus is an allegory for laws of desire, pleasure, and freedom, which apply to Venus

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 467.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 469.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

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herself such that her divinity is expelled from the cosmos. She is subject to the very laws she represents.

Asmis grounds this argument on the following interpretation of a passage from Lucretius which she translates as follows, "I shall unfold the principles (*primordia*) of things, from which nature creates all things and increases and nourishes them, and to which the same nature dissolves them upon destruction."<sup>16</sup> The key move by Asmis here is that she translates "*primordia*" as "principles" and then gives this term the sense of some kind of natural laws operative in the universe in such a way that Venus herself is subject to these "principles." She writes: "the reference to 'principles' suggests that nature is in fact nothing but these principles; it follows that the gods are themselves bound by natural law and not the arbiters of it."<sup>17</sup>

I believe this argument is fatally flawed and cannot survive a careful scrutiny of the passage from Lucretius upon which it rests. Asmis' critical error is her translation of "*primordia*" as "principles" and her interpreting "principles" to mean some kind of ruling laws along the lines of the laws of natural physics. Let us look at how some reputable translations deal with the same passage. The Loeb Classical Library edition offers "the first beginnings of things,"<sup>18</sup> and this phrase is accompanied by a footnote that reads "the atoms."<sup>19</sup> Latham translates it as follows, "I will set out to discourse to you on the ultimate realities of heaven and the gods. I will reveal the atoms . . . ."<sup>20</sup> Martin Ferguson Smith offers "the primary elements of things"<sup>21</sup> and this, too, is accompanied by a footnote that reads, "the atoms."<sup>22</sup> This shows clearly that the "principles"

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, trans. W.H.D. Rouse and rev. Martin F. Smith (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1992), 7.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., note d.

<sup>20</sup> Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, trans. R.E. Latham (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 11.

<sup>21</sup> Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, trans. Martin Ferguson Smith (Indianapolis; Hackett Publishing, 2001), 4.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., note 6.

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(*primordia*) of things are the atoms. These should not be construed as some kind of ordering law along the lines of modern physics, but *as beings*, that is, construed ontologically in a materialist sense quite foreign to contemporary notions of natural laws.

### **2. Venus and Mars Reinterpreted**

We will subsequently take strong exception to Asmis' view that Venus alone supplants Stoic Zeus, this erroneous step is in part founded upon what I will argue is a misinterpretation of the 'Mars episode.' It will be helpful to cite a translation of the relevant passage from Lucretius.

For you alone can delight mortals with quiet peace, since Mars mighty in battle rules the savage works of war, who often casts himself upon your lap wholly vanquished by the ever-living wound of love, and thus looking upward, with shapely neck thrown back, feeds his eager eyes with love, gaping upon you, goddess, and as he lies back his breath hangs upon your lips. There he reclines, goddess, upon your sacred body, you bending around him from above, pour from your lips sweet coaxings, and for your Romans, illustrious one, crave quiet peace.<sup>23</sup>

Asmis reads this passage to mean that Venus "utterly conquers" Mars— once and for all—such that Venus alone remains to supplant Zeus. The words "wholly vanquished" lend some credence to this reading, but there is no reason not to read it to mean that her power over Mars is temporary and recurrent. Hence, the text says Mars "often" succumbs to the charms of Venus. Two astute readers of the text have interpreted it in exactly this way. Henri Bergson wrote: "Venus, who exerts *some influence* on Mars, *may* be able to secure for him the

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<sup>23</sup> Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, trans. W.H.D. Rouse and rev. Martin F. Smith (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1992), 5.

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peace required for philosophical studies.”<sup>24</sup> George Santayana took the view that “the Mars of the opening passage, subdued for a moment by the blandishments of love, is raging in all the rest of the poem in his irrepressible fury.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed he goes on to speculate that had Lucretius finished his poem he might have appended a scene which featured “. . . Mars aroused from his luxurious lethargy, reasserting his immortal nature, and rushing, firebrand in hand, from the palace of love to spread destruction throughout the universe.”<sup>26</sup> Asmis’ reading is a possible one, but it is interpretively more useful to view Venus’ conquest of Mars as temporary, for such a reading will allow *both* gods to supplant Stoic Zeus. It is better to view Mars and Venus as in an eternally recurrent struggle— with Mars temporarily held in abeyance by Venus’ seductive powers—only to reawaken regnant and rampant. This represents the eternal recurrence of life/ death, and being/ non-being—the being of becoming at the heart of Epicurean philosophy.

Asmis’ reading—with Venus timelessly triumphant— misses a very important aspect of the text: the intertwining and co-mingling of the two deities. Mars “reclines” upon the lap of Venus, and she, in turn, “bends around him from above.” Mars, god of strife and war is nevertheless subject to love and desire, and Venus has the breath of Mars “hang upon her lips.” The relationship of the deities is as crucial as either god taken simply as a *relata*. Paying heed to this relation allows one to view Venus as an allegorical figure for the atoms and Mars for the void. All phenomenal appearances are an admixture, a relationship of these two ruling principles: “since there is void in created things there must be solid matter round about it.”<sup>27</sup> Lucretius states that nature “compels body to be bounded by void and that again which is void to be bounded by body, so that

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<sup>24</sup> Henri Bergson, *Philosophy of Poetry: The Genius of Lucretius*, trans. and ed. Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), 14 (emphasis mine).

<sup>25</sup> George Santayana, *Three Philosophical Poets*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1947), 42.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>27</sup> Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, Loeb Classical Library, 43.

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by this alternation she renders the universe infinite.”<sup>28</sup> The figures of Mars and Venus intertwined appear to mimic this mutual encompassing of void and atoms found in the phenomenal world. As Santayana writes, “The Mars and Venus of Lucretius are not moral forces, incompatible with the mechanism of atoms; they are this mechanism itself . . . . Mars and Venus, linked in each others arms, rule the universe together . . . .”<sup>29</sup>

So, it is not Venus alone who supplants Stoic Zeus, but the twin allegorical figures of Venus *and* Mars. The former represents the atoms, peace, freedom, desire and the possibility of philosophy. The latter the void, destruction, war, and death. Mars and death are indispensable elements of Epicurean philosophy, for the figure of Venus alone “would really contradict a mechanical view of nature—if it were not balanced by a figure representing the opposite tendency, the no less universal tendency towards death.”<sup>30</sup> The whole promise of the Epicurean path is to learn to exercise our freedom and channel our desire so as to achieve a kind of divine peace. Fear of death is one of the key obstacles on this path. As Pierre Hadot writes,

A grave threat impairs human happiness. Can pleasure be perfect if it is disturbed by the fear of death . . . . As is shown with great force by Lucretius, it is the fear of death which is, in the last analysis, at the base of all the passions which make people unhappy.<sup>31</sup>

The would be Epicurean must come to understand that death itself is “more peaceful than any sleep.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>29</sup> George Santayana, *Three Philosophical Poets*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1947), 40.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>31</sup> Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University press, 2002), 117-118.

<sup>32</sup> Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, Loeb Classical Library, 265

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Venus and Mars represent an eternally recurrent cycle of beginning and end, alpha and omega, birth and death. In between is the time granted for a human life and with it the possibility of philosophy. Venus stands for this possibility and hence she, and her powers of freedom and desire, is invoked at the outset. She, like philosophy, achieves peace by words—so she is implored to—“pour forth from your lips sweet coaxings,” to lull Mars into somnolent abeyance. This itself is an allegory for Lucretius' own poetry by which he hopes to remedy Memmius' and our 'sickness unto death.'

We have reviewed the shortcomings of Asmis' argument whereby Venus stands for the expulsion of the gods from activity in this world. We will now argue for a reading that draws a qualitative distinction between the Epicurean pair, Venus and Mars, and Stoic Zeus— such that the power of Venus and Mars are limited in an appropriate way. By this argument we hope to show how it is possible for Lucretius to invoke the gods, for these allegorical figures are limited in a fashion such that they are, in an important way, different kinds of deities (partaking in a more limited sense of divinity) than Stoic Zeus.

To accomplish this we will borrow a distinction from the scholarly discussion of the divinity of Anaximander's *apeiron*.<sup>33</sup> Three senses of divinity are usually distinguished: (1) divine in the sense of being unlimited, and unbounded, (2) divine in the sense of being everlasting, or immortal, (3) divine in the sense of a guiding rational will or mind. Presumably, Stoic Zeus is divine in all three senses. We shall argue that Venus and Mars, *qua* allegorical figures for atoms and void, are only divine in the first two senses.

Lucretius is clear that atoms and void are infinite with respect to limits, that is, divine in the first sense. He does this by pointing out the impossibility of either one being finite: “. . . if space were finite, it could not contain an infinite

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<sup>33</sup> One might wonder how it is legitimate to import this into a discussion of Lucretius. It is offered simply as an interpretive tool that is admittedly imported from afar. It is simply an interpretive device and we are not implying that such a distinction was derived by Lucretius from Anaximander.

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amount of matter; and if matter were finite, neither sea nor land . . . could stand fast for the fraction of an hour.”<sup>34</sup>

With regard to divinity in the second sense, as everlasting, there are three such beings: atoms, void, and the interaction of the two, the totality.

Again there can be only three kinds of everlasting objects. The first owing to the absolute solidity of their substance . . . are the atoms of matter . . . The second kind can last forever because it is immune from blows. Such is empty space . . . Last is that which has no available place surrounding it into which matter can disperse and disintegrate. It is for that reason that the sum total of the universe is everlasting . . . <sup>35</sup>

This does not appear to mean that any particular universe is everlasting, but only that there will always be some extant totality. We can see why it is important to never lose sight of Venus and Mars as co-mingled, for this relation is an allegory for the eternity of some phenomenal world as eternally recurrent.

Lucretius denies the third type of divinity to the atoms (and presumably the void): “certainly the atoms did not post themselves purposefully in due order by an act of intelligence, nor did they stipulate what movements each should perform.”<sup>36</sup> By this limitation fate, necessity, and will have given place to freedom. The atoms are not subject to the over-arching plan of a divine will or intelligence, chained like Marcus Aurelius’ dog to some inevitably moving cart; rather they are free, of themselves, by virtue of the *clinamen*. So, Venus and Mars— as allegorical figures for the atoms, void, and their interaction— can be distinguished from Stoic Zeus. They are infinite and immortal, but they do not intervene in the world in the manner of a divine mind or will.

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<sup>34</sup> Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, Loeb Classical Library, 85.

<sup>35</sup> Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, trans. R.E. Latham (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 87.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

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In summary, we have agreed with Asmis that it may well be fruitful to take the view that Lucretius is offering some kind of allegorical substitution for Stoic Zeus in the invocation of Venus at the outset of his poem. We have attempted to show that her substitution of Venus alone does not work. Furthermore, we have tried to show that her argument that Venus represents “the elimination of the divine” is fatally flawed. Positively, we have argued that it is a better reading to have Venus and Mars supplant Stoic Zeus. Finally, we have offered our own argument—based on three notions of divinity—that there is a way to meaningfully distinguish the divinity of Stoic Zeus and Epicurean Venus and Mars such that the paradoxical dimension of the invocation diminishes.

Asmis had hoped that her article would provide a “key to a solution” to the paradoxes surrounding the invocation of Venus in Lucretius’ poem. I believe that we have shown that her interpretation suffers from some serious shortcomings. Indeed, I suspect that there cannot be and that we should not seek such a key. At best there can be more or less plausible readings which lesson the tensions present, but never succeed in eliminating them. This is because the great texts of philosophy often provoke wonder by beginning with familiar and unquestioned truths and then effect a reversal of sensibilities such that the reader is not sure what to think, or what to make of the former certainties, which have crumbled before their eyes. The invocation of Venus may serve just such a purpose, and hence we should not seek to remove, once and for all, the puzzlement that greets any thoughtful reader of Lucretius. Here, we hope to have offered a better and deeper reading—one that provokes thought—without dispelling all of the paradoxes inherent in the text itself.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> I would like to thank Dr Therese-Anne Druart of Catholic University who first drew my attention to Asmis’ article and the problems surrounding the invocation of Venus.