

Lucretius' Dedication: Why Memmius?

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Introduction

I hope it will not be too obvious in what I have to say today that this is my first venture into Lucretius scholarship.

I will begin by rehearsing some well-known facts about Lucretius and Memmius, then propose what I believe to be a totally new arrangement for them, before examining objections and implications. I should say right up front that I do not hope to convince you all that the hypothesis I am presenting is necessarily or even probably true, but I do hope you will agree that it is at least possible, and has some definite points in its favor. It also has some interesting consequences, as well as some even more interesting non-consequences. You will all see what I mean by that in a few minutes.

1. The Problem

Much of classical studies consists of constructing complex hypotheses from scattered bits of evidence. This can be fun. Where modern historians suffer from a superabundance of data, and must dig through huge heaps of ore to find the important bits, classicists enjoy a severe lack of data, and can rearrange their very few building blocks with much more freedom — maybe too much freedom, though there's always the possibility of something emerging from Oxyrhynchus or Herculaneum to restrain our wilder fantasies.

At the risk of boring you all, I will begin by rehearsing three or four of the very few facts about Lucretius and Memmius. None of them will be new to anyone in this room, but I want to emphasize how poorly some of them fit together:

1. Jerome's testimony (quotation **1** on your handouts) hardly qualifies as an established fact. He puts Lucretius' birth in 94 and his death in 51 or 50,

but few have cared to follow him. The fact that he wraps up his dates in fairytales about love-potions, suicide, and Ciceronian editorial work does not inspire confidence. That he is demonstrably wrong on Catullus' dates, putting them at least three years too early, is even less encouraging.

2. Second, we know from one of Cicero's letters to his brother Quintus (quotation 2 on your handouts) that the brothers were reading Lucretius' *poemata* (whatever exactly that means) in February of 54.
3. Third, we know that *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius' only surviving work and only attested work, is dedicated to a Memmius, generally assumed to be the Gaius Memmius whose campaign for the consulate of 54 was so spectacularly corrupt that he was driven into exile in Athens in 52. I will not argue with this. Lucretius' addresses to Memmius are oddly distributed, all in Books I and V and the first part of Book II. I have listed them, rather imprecisely, as quotation 3 on your handouts.
4. Fourth, we know from two more letters of Cicero (*Ad Familiares* XIII.1 and *Ad Atticum* V.11) that in the summer of 51, Gaius Memmius attempted to destroy the ruins of Epicurus' house, and that Cicero wrote to dissuade him (quotation 4a). Cicero's attempts were apparently either successful or unnecessary, to judge from what he writes soon after to Atticus (quotation 4b).

The problem I wish to address is the relationship between the last two facts. Why should Lucretius dedicate his work to so unpromising a man as Memmius? And why would the Roman addressee of the greatest work of Roman Epicureanism, apparently already in circulation more than three years before, want to destroy an Epicurean monument?

Unless the contrast between Lucretius' dedication and Memmius' character and his actions in 51 is just an amazing coincidence, we seem to be forced to some unsatisfactory conclusions:

a. Perhaps, it has been suggested, Memmius was so annoyed by Lucretius' dedication that he decided to destroy the ruins of Epicurus' house for spite. In that case, surely Cicero would have said something about the previous offense. And surely he would have been a little more shocked himself, and not referred to the *peruersitas* of the local opposition. There was obviously not much left of Epicurus' house to destroy, but the motive adduced should have caused offense. We also have to ask whether Memmius already owned the ruins. If so, that's another coincidence. Or did he go out and buy the estate that contained them, just so he could destroy them? That is what M. F. Smith says (quotation 5), though Cicero's letters do not support the statement, and it would be truly pathological behavior.

b. A more complex hypothesis is possible. Perhaps (some might say) Memmius already owned the ruins in 54, and Lucretius knew it. He assumed that Memmius was therefore at least mildly well-disposed towards Epicureanism, if not a card-carrying member of the school, and decided to dedicate his didactic-philosophical epic to him. Unfortunately, Memmius' ownership of the ruins was purely coincidental, since he had bought the estate for its other amenities, or even because it offered interesting possibilities for rubble-clearing and rebuilding. He was in fact not the slightest bit interested in Epicurus, and was therefore so annoyed by Lucretius' presumptuous dedication that he decided to take out his spite on senseless stones, until dissuaded by Cicero and the Athenian Epicureans. Even this modified hypothesis supposes a considerable degree of psychosis on the part of Memmius and incompetence on the part of Lucretius. Surely the poet was not such a fool as to risk annoying someone who could harm his hero, even posthumously? (Not that Epicurus could in fact be harmed in any way by the destruction of what was left of his house, but you see what I mean.)

This brings me to a more controversial 'fact' about Lucretius and Memmius. Some have argued that Lucretius treats Memmius much the same way Hesiod treats his brother Perses: as a fool desperately in need of helpful advice, though apparently incapable of following it. The best exposition of this case that I have seen is by Philip Mitsis in "*Mega Népios*", the special issue of *Materiali e Discussioni* devoted to the addressee in didactic epic. I find his argument from the tone of Lucretius' advice totally convincing,

though he does not connect it to the historical Memmius' numerous character flaws. Being forced to play Perses to Lucretius' Hesiod would certainly explain Memmius' resentment towards the Epicurean school. However, we still have to ask why Lucretius would have treated a Roman statesman, even one so undistinguished as Memmius, as a Hesiodic *népios* figure. What had Memmius done to deserve such treatment? And Cicero's silence is still difficult to explain.

2. My Hypothesis

So far, nothing but problems. I suggest that it is time to cut the Gordian knot and rearrange the data. My hypothesis is quite simple, and comes in two parts. The less original suggestion — it has been anticipated by Canfora — is that Lucretius was still alive in 51, as Jerome says, and (I add) still working on *De Rerum Natura*. (Just what the Ciceros were reading three years earlier is a point to which I will return.) The more original part of my hypothesis is the suggestion that Lucretius dedicated his poem to Memmius in a mocking fashion because Memmius had already tried to destroy what was left of Epicurus' house. To Lucretius, Memmius was just another mediocre and corrupt politician — though more so in both respects than most — until he distinguished himself from the general run of corrupt mediocrities by his building plans, and thereby induced Lucretius to make him the butt of his mocking exhortations. I imagine that Lucretius only put Memmius into his book in 51. Before that, there was either no named addressee, as in Books III, IV, and VI, or someone else served as his Perses. There is no shortage of names of the right metrical shape: Mummius, for instance, or Persius (a good name for a Romanized Perses), or Iulius, or even Tullius would do, just to name some of the most obvious possibilities — not that there is much point in trying to guess who would have been the original addressee, if there was one.

3. Advantages of my Hypothesis

My reversal of the usual chronology has its problems, and I will get to them in a moment. First I want to say something about the advantages.

The principal point in favor of my hypothesis is that this sequence is psychologically far more plausible. In my interpretation, Memmius is not a psychopath with an insane grudge against all Epicureans, Roman and Greek, because one of the Roman ones had annoyed him. (Not to mention that he would have to have been an easily-dissuaded psychopath, if such a thing could even exist.) Instead, he is a rich and powerful (or formerly powerful) man, used to getting his own way, who doesn't see why some broken-down useless ruins that happen to be on his property should stand in the way of his plans to add an extra wing (or whatever) to his house. In other words, he is crass, vulgar, materialistic, and self-centered, but not insane, and he had nothing against the Epicureans until they tried to stop his building plans. Similarly, on my hypothesis Lucretius is not a fool but a wit, taking a purely literary and philosophical revenge for Memmius' crime against philosophy, a revenge that would last as long as his poem continued to be read.

A second advantage to my hypothesis is that it explains Cicero's silence about Lucretius in his letter to Memmius. If the latter had been annoyed by Lucretius' dedication, surely Cicero would have mentioned it? He goes out of his way to show how annoying he thinks Patro could be — patronizing the poor philosopher in two different ways, if you'll excuse the pun. Surely a mocking dedication of the greatest monument of contemporary Roman verse (after Cicero's own, of course) would have been more to be deprecated than the objections of some historical preservationists? Even if Lucretius' dedication was sincere, or if everyone was politely ignoring its tone and pretending that it was sincere, surely such a great honor from a Roman Epicurean would have been worth mentioning as balancing the scales a bit. Memmius would have owed the Epicureans something in return for his immortalization.

4. Objections and Replies: The Chronology

The main objection to my hypothesis is that there is some evidence that points to 54 as the likely publication date for *De Rerum Natura*. Of course, 'publication' is a slippery concept in the ancient world, and the letter to Quintus (quotation 2) proves only that the Cicero brothers were reading some poetic work or works by Lucretius in 54, and that its poetic quality was roughly on a level with the one work we know. Sandbach (on your

handouts) has shown that *Lucreti poemata* can mean “the poetry of Lucretius”, “the passages of Lucretius”, or “the passage of Lucretius”, so we are left with a wide range of possibilities.

On the other hand, James Zetzel has argued (quotation 6) that Cicero’s *De Re Publica*, in its final six-book form — he had originally planned nine —, was modeled on the form of Lucretius’ epic. Besides the similarities in overall structure, Zetzel points to two specific passages where the verbal similarities are too close to be coincidental. If he is right — and I am very curious as to what others here think about that —, then *De Rerum Natura* must have been available to Marcus Cicero in something like its current form when he was writing his own work, and that puts us right back in 54. Verbal similarities can prove only that whatever the Ciceros were reading overlapped a good bit with what survives, which is hardly surprising: we have no good reason to believe that Lucretius ever wrote on anything except Epicureanism. But the large-scale structural similarities, if they are too close to be coincidental, can only be explained if Lucretius had more or less finished his poem in the form we have it today, with the six books in the same order as they are now. Of course, he need not have published it yet. The fact that the Ciceros could read it does not show that it was available for purchase by strangers in public bookstores, which is how I would define publication.

Even if *De Rerum Natura* was in general circulation before Memmius conceived his abortive building plans, that would not invalidate my hypothesis. Lucretius could have added Memmius to a second edition. Second editions are rarely attested in the ancient world, though there are a few well-established examples, such as Ovid’s *Amores* and Cicero’s *Academica*. However, the paucity of parallels is not particularly significant, since for most ancient works we have little or no evidence of a first edition. Of course, anything that survives must (in general) have been published at least once. But in calculating the likelihood of a second edition, we cannot compare attested second editions to the whole mass of surviving work, assuming that all the rest were only published once. We must compare attested second editions to attested first editions — works that we would know were published, and published for the first time, even if they had not survived. I have not yet attempted to calculate the ratio, but it is much smaller than the other

one, and second and third editions may have been quite widespread in the ancient world. In any case, we would have no inkling that Ovid had done two editions of his *Amores* if he did not tell us so in his introductory quatrain.

If we ask then what the chances were that Lucretius did more than one edition of *De Rerum Natura*, I would say fairly high. If Catullus is a fox, always trying something new, Lucretius is a hedgehog, with one big, indeed universal, idea. After publishing a complete account of his (or rather Epicurus') philosophy of life, death, nature, history, and the position of mankind in the universe, what could he possibly have written for a sequel? It seems likely that his *magnum opus* would have remained an *unicum opus*, and that he would have reworked it as he thought of new and better ways to express his ideas, rather than starting something new. Since his didactic intention is not just a poetic pose, he would not have kept a finished work from the public for continual repolishing, either. He surely would have published it as soon as it was finished, and then, unless he died soon after or gave up thinking about the nature of things, saved up his second thoughts for a second edition.

Of course, specific evidence for a second edition is hard to detect, though the peculiar distribution of the addresses to Memmius and the omission of one promised part of the argument (promised in one of the addresses to Memmius, as it happens) have often been used as evidence of incompleteness. They could just as easily be evidence that what survives is an incompletely re-vised second edition, like Ovid's *Fasti*, where Book I was obviously reworked after the first six were written. (Not that I mean to imply that Ovid's original Book I was ever published: this may be a pre-publication overhaul.) The general disorder of Lucretius' text could also point towards incomplete revision, though it may just as easily be due to the cumulative incompetence of generations of scribes faced with a very difficult text.

5. Criteria for Deciding

At this point, we have to ask whether there is anything in *De Rerum Natura* itself that gains from my rearrangement of the historical sequence. Do any of the mentions of

Memmius — or other passages where he is still the implied reader — gain in point if he had already attempted to destroy Epicurus’ house, and other readers knew it? (I will just give the line numbers, since I assume everyone here has brought along a text of Lucretius.)

The only piece of evidence I have been able to detect comes in the first few pages of Book V. In the prologue, Lucretius assures Memmius (line 8) that Epicurus is a god. This is the first time he has addressed him since early in Book II. Just a few pages later, he assures us (147) that “This, too, it cannot be that you should believe, that there are holy abodes of the gods in any parts of the world”, *Illud item non est ut possis credere, sedis / esse deum sanctas in mundi partibus ullis* — so much for Epicurus’ abode. And then, in lines 156 and following, he emphatically asserts that only a fool would think that the homes of the gods can be destroyed. There he is talking about the Epicurean gods of the *intermundia*, not to be confused with the gods of traditional Greek religion, whose homes, and the entire world, can indeed be destroyed. If Epicurus is a god, he is some other kind different from both. So the passage is quite confusing. Nevertheless, I find it intriguing that Lucretius should speak of Epicurus as a god, and of the possible or impossible destruction of the houses of the gods in such close proximity. His words would certainly gain some resonance from Memmius’ actions in Athens in 51.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, I must admit, with some disappointment, that the example I have given is not much to go on. At the beginning of my paper, I mentioned the consequences and non-consequences of my proposal to redote Lucretius’ dedication to Memmius to 51 or later. The latter are actually surprisingly numerous, and my hypothesis makes less difference than it ought. If we ask how Lucretius’ didactic epic is appropriate or inappropriate to Memmius the still-successful (and very ambitious) politician of 54, to Memmius the disgraced and exiled failure of 51, or even to Memmius’ general character (or lack of character) in both periods of his life, it is very difficult to see that it makes much difference. Again, this might suggest that what we have is a partially rewritten poem, and that Lucretius had not finished integrating Memmius into his work when he

died. If so, perhaps Jerome is right after all, and Lucretius did die in 51 or 50. Then again, other reconstructions of the scanty evidence are obviously still possible.

Finally, if anyone finds my hypothesis absurd on the face of it, I would point out that it is in some ways entirely unoriginal. It merely combines Smith's emphasis on the inappropriateness of Memmius as an addressee with Mitsis' emphasis on his Hesiodic contempt for Memmius, and Canfora's (and Jerome's) late date for Lucretius' death. I just draw out the implications of combining these three strands. The facts with which I started are like one of those optical illusions where a two-dimensional shape on the page looks three-dimensional, but can be either concave or convex, or jump from one to the other, depending on how you look at it. Canfora (page 47) and others think that Memmius is absent from Books 3, 4, and 6 because of his political disgrace. I suggest that his bad character is the reason for his presence in Books 1, 2, and 5. Similarly, Shackleton Bailey, commenting on the passage of the letter to Memmius in which Cicero talks of laughing at the Epicureans (section 4, line 12 on your handouts), remarks "If this Memmius (and not his namesake C. Memmius Gai filius) was indeed the dedicatee of the *De Rerum Natura*, he must have changed his views, or else Lucretius was sadly mistaken in him." If I am right, there was no mistake, and Lucretius had Memmius pegged.

Leftovers: Cut for Lack of Time

1. It would be possible to depict Memmius as a promising recruit in some ways. He is already living a life of pleasure and retirement, will not be participating in politics again any time soon (whether he wants to or not), shows no excessive respect for common decency, and (like Epicurus) doesn't much care for the labor of writing, though according to Cicero he goes further than Epicurus in not caring for the labor of thinking, either. Is he a parody of the ideal Epicurean recruit?
2. Some have suggested that Memmius' disgrace is what drove Lucretius to his supposed suicide. This unlikely possibility would have to be considered in a longer version.
3. Memmius is not mentioned between 1.411 and 1.1052. In 1.411, Lucretius says that he could go on forever proving the existence of the void. A friend suggests that he is not addressed in the next 600+ lines because, in his role as virtual reader, he has fallen asleep.

HANDOUT

I. Texts

1. Jerome on Lucretius (apud Eusebius, *Chronica*, Ol. 171.3 = 94 B.C.):

Titus Lucretius poeta nascitur; postea amatorio poculo in furorem uersus cum aliquot libros per interualla insaniae conscripsisset quos postea Cicero emendauit, propria se manu interfecit anno aetatis XLIII.

2. Cicero, *Ad Quintum Fratrem* II.10.3 (= 14.3 SB):

Lucreti poemata ut scribis ita sunt, multis luminibus ingeni, multae tamen artis. sed cum ueneris.

3. Lucretius' addresses to Memmius:

Book 1	25-43	Prologue: Venus and Mars
	136-48	(Memmius not named: difficulty of putting Greek ideas in Latin)
	411	Conclusion that there is a void: I could go on proving it forever!
Book 2	1052	False theory that the world has a center
	143	Mobility of nature
Book 5	182	Promise to tell later of the non-divine nature of the universe
	8	Prologue: Divinity of Epicurus
	98	Future destruction of the universe
	164	Only a fool thinks the houses of the gods can be destroyed
	867	Mankind as guardians of the animals
	1282	Discovery of iron — weapons of war

- 4a. Cicero, *Ad Familiares* XIII.1 (= 63 SB):

M. CICERO S. D. C. MEMMIO

Etsi non satis mihi constiterat cum aliquane animi mei molestia an potius libenter te Athenis visurus essem, quod iniuria quam accepisti dolore me adficeret, sapientia tua qua fers iniuriam laetitia, tamen uidisse te mallet; nam quod est molestiae non sane multo leuius est cum te non video, quod esse potuit voluptatis certe, si uidissem te, plus fuisset. itaque non dubitabo dare operam ut te videam, cum id satis commode facere potero. interea quod per litteras et agi tecum et, ut arbitror, confici potest, agam nunc, ac te illud primum rogabo, ne quid inuitus mea causa facias, sed id quod mea intelleges multum, tua nullam in partem interesse ita mihi des si tibi ut id libenter facias ante persuaseris.

Cum Patrone Epicurio mihi omnia sunt, nisi quod in philosophia vehementer ab eo dissentio. sed et initio Romae, cum te quoque et tuos

omnis observabat, me coluit in primis et nuper, cum ea quae voluit de suis commodis et praemiis consecutus est, me habuit suorum defensorum et amicorum fere principem et iam a Phaedro, qui nobis cum pueri essemus, ante quam Philonem cognovimus, valde ut philosophus, postea tamen ut vir bonus et suavis et officiosus probabatur, traditus mihi commendatusque est.

Is igitur Patro cum ad me Romam litteras misisset, uti te sibi placarem peteremque ut nescio quid illud Epicuri parietinarum sibi concederes, nihil scripsi ad te ob eam rem quod aedificationis tuae consilium commendatione mea nolebam impediri. idem, ut veni Athenas, cum idem ut ad te scriberem rogasset, ob eam causam impetravit quod te abiecisse illam aedificationem constabat inter omnis amicos tuos. quod si ita est et si iam tua plane nihil interest, velim, si qua offensiuncula facta est animi tui perversitate aliquorum novi enim gentem illam, des te ad lenitatem vel propter summam tuam humanitatem vel etiam honoris mei causa. equidem, si quid ipse sentiam quaeris, nec cur ille tanto opere contendat video nec cur tu repugnes, nisi tamen multo minus tibi concedi potest quam illi laborare sine causa. quamquam Patronis et orationem et causam tibi cognitam esse certo scio; honorem, officium, testamentorum ius, Epicuri auctoritatem, Phaedri obtestationem, sedem, domicilium, vestigia summorum hominum sibi tuenda esse dicit. totam hominis vitam rationemque quam sequitur in philosophia derideamus licet si hanc eius contentionem volumus reprehendere. sed mehercules, quoniam illi ceterisque quos illa delectant non valde inimici sumus, nescio an ignoscendum sit huic si tanto opere laborat; in quo etiam si peccat, magis ineptiis quam improbitate peccat.

Atticum sic amo ut alterum fratrem. nihil est illo mihi nec carius nec iucundius. is non quo sit ex istis; est enim omni liberali doctrina politissimus, sed valde diligit Patronem, valde Phaedrum amavit sic a me hoc contendit, homo minime ambitiosus, minime in rogando molestus, ut nihil umquam magis, nec dubitat quin ego a te nutu hoc consequi possem etiam si aedificaturus esses. nunc vero, si audierit te aedificationem deposuisse neque tamen me a te impetrasse, non te in me illiberalem sed me in se neglegentem putabit. quam ob rem peto a te ut scribas ad tuos posse tua voluntate decretum illud Areopagitarum, quem UPOMNHMATISMON illi vocant, tolli.

Sed redeo ad prima. prius velim tibi persuadeas ut hoc mea causa libenter facias quam ut facias. sic tamen habeto, si feceris quod rogo, fore mihi gratissimum. Vale.

4b. Cicero, *Ad Atticum* V.11.6 (= 104.6 SB):

apud Patronem et reliquos barones te in maxima gratia posui, et hercule merito tuo feci; nam mihi is [ter] dixit te scripsisse ad se mihi ex illius litteris rem illam curae fuisse, quod ei pergratum est. sed cum Patron mecum egisset ut peterem a uestro Ariopago upomnematismom tollent quem Polycharmo praetore fecerant, commodius uisum est et Xenoni me et post ipsi Patroni ad Memmium scribere, qui pridie quam ego Athenas ueni Mytilenas profectus erat, ut is ad suos scriberet posse id sua uoluntate fieri; non enim dubitabat Xeno quin ab Ariopagitis inuito Memmio impetrari non posset. Memmius autem aedificandi consilium abiecerat, sed erat Patroni iratus. itaque scripsi ad eum accurate; cuius epistulae misi ad te exemplum.

5. Smith on Memmius' building plans (xlvi):

“. . . during his exile in Athens he went out of his way to upset the Epicureans by obtaining possession of the revered ruins of Epicurus' house and announcing his intention to demolish them and erect a new building on the site.”

6. Zetzel on the parallels between *De Rerum Natura* and *De Re Publica* (245):

“. . . each work has six books; in each, the books are in pairs. In *De rerum natura*, the three pairs deal respectively with atomic motion, the constitution and nature of the human *animus*, and the larger structures of the world and cosmos, moving from the smallest constituents of nature to the largest. In *De re publica*, they proceed from the administrative and constitutional order of the state, to the institutions (law and education) which shape it, to the role of the individual citizen and statesman. And while in one sense the progression in *De re publica* is from large to small, from the state down to the human beings who constitute it, there is also a progression in the opposite direction, from the administrative workings of government to the natural law which governs states and individuals alike to the cosmic rewards that await the true statesman.”

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