

11 Lucretius – the invisible woman

The following chapter deals with the poet Lucretius (ca. 95–55 BCE). Lucretius mentions female dress only once in his philosophical poem *De rerum natura* (On Nature). His remarks are largely based on Epicurus' writings. He was perhaps also influenced by some other Greek text, a philosophical *diatribe*, when composing this 'satirical' section. All in all, we seem to be entering a Graeco-Roman world in it. On the one hand, we find in it all items of what appears to be a Greek lifestyle. On the other hand, we are faced with intellectual conceptions, such as *patrimonium* (inherited property) and *officium* (duty), which one would rather connect with the Roman elite.

The pertinent passage (4.1121–1130) has already been extensively discussed and commented on.¹ The following remarks therefore focus on the problems of transmission and discuss the garments referred to in the text. In contrast to other poets, for example Catullus (A 12), Lucretius does not talk about elegant dress in order to illustrate and to augment the beauty of an individual woman. The woman and her body instead remain completely invisible. The text therefore offers a seeming paradox: How does one describe women's dress without a woman wearing it?

Lucretius' remarks on dress form part of a section dealing with the negative consequences that love (*amor*) has for men. Among these, Lucretius does not only count the weakening of the physical energy of the man, but also the waste of his wealth and the endangerment of his social position. It is a literary commonplace that we also encounter in Greek New Comedy and Roman Palliata: Male lovers, especially young ones, indulge in banquets with their mistresses instead of pursuing their duties (*officia*); they waste their money on lavish gifts, including luxurious clothes. But to no avail: As is often the case with this trope, bitterness is felt even at the very height of the party (4.1134). Lucretius' version is tinged by Epicurean thought and reads as follows:²

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| Lucr. 4.1121–1130 | |
| <i>adde quod absumunt viris pereuntque labore,</i> | 1121 |
| <i>adde quod alterius sub nutu degitur aetas,</i> | |
| <i>languent officia atque aegrotat fama vacillans.</i> | 1124 |
| <i>labitur interea res et Babylonia fiunt</i> | 1123 |
| <i>unguenta et pulchra in pedibus Sicyonia rident.</i> | 1125 |
| <i>scilicet et grandes viridi cum luce smaragdi</i> | |
| <i>auro includuntur teriturque thalassina vestis</i> | |

¹ Commentaries: Lambinus (1563); Lachmann (1860); Munro (1893); Bailey (1947); Godwin (1986); Brown (1987); Deufert (2018).

² 1124/1123 Avancius (1502); 1124 *vacillans* Marullus: *vigillans* codd.; 1123 *Babylonia* codd.: *Babylonica* post Pium (1511) multi edd.; 1125 *unguenta* codd.: *crucem apposuerunt vel emendaverunt* multi edd.; 1130 *ac Melitensia* Lambinus (1563); *atque Alidensia* codd.: *atque Alideusia* Lachmann (1860); *Ciaque* Lachmann; *Ceaque* Lambinus; *Chiaque* codd.

*adsidue et Veneris sudorem exercita potat.
et bene parta patrum fiunt anademata, mitrae,
interdum in pallam ac Melitensia Ciaeque vertunt.* 1130

Add to this that they waste their strength and perish by toil; add to this that they spend their lives under the command of some other person. They forget their responsibilities, and their reputation falters and suffers. Meanwhile their wealth decays and becomes Babylonian unguents, and beautiful Sikyonian shoes laugh at their feet. Yes, large emeralds with green light are set in gold. The purple cloth is worn down permanently, and drinks, put to hard tests, the salty juice of Venus. The wealth of the fathers won by honest means becomes headbands and headscarves. Occasionally, it is converted into a *palla* and into robes of Malta and Keos.

The situation is basically the same as in comedy, but the mood of the scene is completely different. The author is very serious. Love is no child's game. It is a real social and financial threat. Lucretius is concerned with illustrating Epicurean theory and not with describing an erotic meeting. Understanding the passage presupposes that we understand its philosophical background. The focus is on the waste of financial means and not on sexual debauchery (in comparison to similar passages in Seneca). In contrast to Roman Love Elegy, the beloved woman is fully concealed behind the numerous items of luxury (purchased by the misguided lover). We do not see her, nor do we get to know anything about her personality. The 'materialistic' focus is further enhanced by the fact that Lucretius does not coherently describe an individual banquet, but merely gives a general list of things a banquet normally consists of.

One detail at the end stands out: Because the bodies of the lovers are not shown, the euphemistic physiological detail of male ejaculation (*sudor veneris*) is highly conspicuous. Lucretius does not use as vulgar a term as 'semen.' He instead resorts to the more decent euphemism of the man's 'sweat' (*sudor*) that leaves his body due to physical exertion. This exertion has to do with Venus, the goddess of love and sex. In other words, the text is referring to semen.

In the preceding section, Lucretius described the male lover's insatiable desire for physical union. However, the presence of the expensive clothing adds to the objectionable nature of this desire. In Epicurean philosophy, luxurious clothing is already a non-natural and unnecessary pleasure. The 'sweat of Venus' is absorbed by one such needlessly luxurious garment, specifically a purple one. The absorption creates a threefold criticism of the male lover: This type of clothing (1) not only does not do any good, but (2) it actually does harm by opposing (penetrative) sexual intercourse (a natural, though conditionally necessary pleasure), which in turn (3) impedes the begetting of children.

Even though the euphemism is clear enough, there are several difficulties in the text as it is transmitted to us. The vv. 1123–1125 are problematic as to their sense if we keep the transmitted order. In v. 1123, the adjective *Babylonia* (Babylonian) is not used as a noun anywhere else in Latin literature and lacks a word to which it refers. Verse

1124 interrupts the enumeration of luxury items, but would fit in well with the general statements that precede the passage. In v. 1125, the first word *unguenta* cannot be meaningfully construed. A convincing solution was proposed by Avancius (1502),³ who simply inverts the order of vv. 1123 and 1124. This removes all problems we encounter with the traditional order. The beginning of the list is thus made by a precious Oriental perfume (*Babylonia unguenta*). The reference to the Orient comes through the city of Babylon being used as a metonymy for the entire East. There is no exact parallel for the expression *Babylonia unguenta*, but there is repeated mention of Syrian nard oil in symposiastic poetry, which can be referred to as either ‘Assyrian’ or ‘Achaemenid.’⁴ The ephemeral fragrance seems to be deliberately placed at the beginning in order to achieve the greatest possible contrast to the solid (metal) fortune that is wasted on it. The hyperbole of using the impossibly ancient reference—the city of Babylon had perished centuries earlier—may be used to make the perfume appear very expensive. Though no part of the body is explicitly mentioned by Lucretius, other passages on Roman customs suggest associating this wasteful luxury (at least according to Epicurean philosophy) with hair in particular.⁵

Following the pattern seen with Cicero,⁶ Lucretius’ view connects the head with the feet. He moves from the head to specifically the shoes.⁷ Like with the ‘Babylonian unguents,’ Lucretius also refers to them by a ‘brand name’ (*Sicyonia*). ‘Sikyonian shoes’ are luxurious Greek women’s shoes in the shape of a *soccus*.⁸ In Latin, they are first mentioned by Lucilius in a scene that Lucretius might have imitated.⁹ It may seem surprising that these two parts of the body stand together, the middle of the body being left out. There is, however, a parallel for the connection between the head (again perfume) and feet in the pseudo-Virgilian poem called *Ciris*. It shows us the desperate heroine Scylla, whose luxurious dress—like that of Catullus’ Ariadne (B 11)—is in complete disarray:

[Verg.] *Ciris* 167–169:

*infelix virgo tota bacchatur in urbe,
non storace Idaeo fragrantis vincta capillos,*

³ Cf. more recently by Brown (1987) 252–253 and Deufert (2018) 275 with doxography.

⁴ Cat. 6.2: *Syrio olivo*; Hor. c. 2.7.8: *malobathro Syrio*; [Tib.] 3.6.63: *Syrio nardo*; Cat. 68.144: *flagrantem Assyrio odore domum*; Hor. c. 2.11.16: *Assyria nardo uncti*; Hor. epod. 13.8: *Achaemenio nardo*; further parallels in Brown (1987) 256; on the different *unguenta* and their names, see Marquardt/Mau (1886) 784–785.

⁵ In [Lucian.] *Amor.* 40, the lover also wastes his fortune for precious hair oil for women, cf. Deufert (2018) 275.

⁶ Cf. A 10 p. 204.

⁷ On the following, cf. especially Brown (1987) ad loc.

⁸ Cf. B 30 pp. 551–552.

⁹ Cf. Lucilius 1161 M. (= 1263 Chr./Garb.): *et pedibus laeva Sicyonia demit honesta* [and she is pulling off the pretty *Sicyonia* from her feet with her left hand], cf. A 8 p. 181.

*coccina non teneris pedibus Sicyonia servans,
non niveo retinens bacata monilia collo.*

The unhappy young girl rushes all over the city. Her hair that smells of Idaean perfume is not tied anymore. She has lost her scarlet Sikyonian shoes from her tender feet. She is not wearing her pearl necklace on her snow-white neck anymore.

It is instructive to compare this passage to Lucretius. The ingredients are similar, but they are put to completely different use. In the *Ciris*, we see a woman tormented by love. In Lucretius, no woman is mentioned at all.

Returning to Lucretius, vv. 1126–1128 form the centre of the section. They offer no problems as to their transmission and their general content. However, their precise meaning is difficult to explain. Lucretius is talking of three valuable materials: gold (*aurum*), emeralds (*smaragdi*), and purple cloth (*thalassina vestis*). This passage is the only instance of the adjective *thalassinus*. Greek parallels, however, show us that it must refer to the purple colour obtained from the purple sea snail (*murex*). The Romans used purple for distinction from ancient times on¹⁰—maybe they took up this preference from the Etruscans. Although the materials are clear, it is difficult to determine the specific objects for which they are used. Lucretius is perhaps being deliberately vague in this respect. In the case of the gold and emeralds, he could be referring to valuable rings. He would thus be among the first in a long series of Latin authors denouncing gemstones. On the other hand, it is strange that he does not use a more precise expression. We may therefore also think of other luxury items like beds and couches that could be adorned with gold and precious stones.¹¹ The same difficulty arises with the expression *thalassina vestis* ('purple cloth').¹² This can refer either to sheets or blankets or to the dress of the couple, especially of the woman. Love Elegy contains two mentions of emeralds together with valuable clothes (*vestis*) or purple.¹³ Since we are to think of the couple in bed together, a reference to a couch seems preferable.

Whatever the precise meaning, the couple itself remains invisible. We see neither man nor woman. All we have to focus on is their sexual intercourse and finally the male ejaculation, which affects the purple cloth. Although this is poetically circumscribed, the physiological detail deprives the scene of any erotic sentiment that could detract readers from the shocking philosophical truth: The purple is rubbed off (*teritur*), subject to heavy strain (*exercita*). It finally 'drinks' (*potat*) the man's semen. From the point of view of Epicurean doctrine, Lucretius perhaps wanted to show that neither the clothes nor the bodies are put to their natural purpose (*natura*). To make matters worse, this

¹⁰ Cf. B 11 pp. 445–447.

¹¹ Vergil. Georg. 2.505–506; Petron. 83 (with Habermehl ad loc.); Lucan. 10.123–126; Martial 3.82.5–7; cf. in general Brown (1987).

¹² On the meaning of *thalassinus*, see Brown (1987) 259–260. OLD s.v. still offers the nonsensical "(prob.) resembling the sea in color."

¹³ Cf. Prop. 2.16.43–44; Tib. 2.4.27.

unnatural act ruins expensive clothing (both by soaking it and by rubbing out the costly dye). Taken together, Lucretius presents a useless, even wasteful effort despite all the luxury that accompanies it.

In vv. 1129–1130, the banquet ‘scene’ is finally over, and Lucretius shifts his attention to the woman’s wardrobe. The focus is now on the many ‘superfluous’ items of clothing that are part of the female outfit. The short list is similar to other (misogynous) garment catalogues we find in comedy (A 3–4). In v. 1129, the solid wealth acquired through generations (*bene parta patrum*) is first set in contrast to the flimsy fashion articles for which it is squandered. The *anademata* are headbands (B 14). The Greek loanword is only used here. It probably belongs to everyday fashion language and—unlike the term *vitta* (B 16)—is a neutral term that has no obvious positive moral connotations. The same applies to the term *mitra* (B 13). This is also a Greek loanword and denotes a headscarf. Both headdresses are rather trivial accessories. Lucretius includes them here precisely because they are superfluous items. The contrast between ‘modern’ articles of fashion and ‘ancient’ wealth can also be felt on the linguistic level, since old Latin words stand aside more modern Greek loanwords. Old Roman wealth thus becomes fashionable Greek tinsel. Finally, v. 1130 stresses the cost that is at times (*interdum*) caused by expensive clothes.

The word *palla* is ambiguous since it can either designate a cloak or a foot-long sleeveless robe (*‘peplos’*) (B 3). It is difficult to decide what it means in Lucretius. On the one hand, the Greek source (Epicurus) and the context (the world of ‘banquets’) point to the meaning ‘long robe.’ On the other hand, the usage of Varro and Horace suggest that Lucretius might refer to a luxury cloak.¹⁴ It is hence better to leave the question open. In any case, the term does not allow for a definite conclusion as regards the status of the woman. A possible indicator for her status is the following *Coae vestes* (see below), which could point to a hetaera. The entire scenario is reminiscent of Plautus’ comedy *Menaechmi*, where an expensive *palla* (*‘peplos’*) is given to a meretrix, an act that is presented as squandering money.¹⁵

At the end of his short list of clothes, Lucretius turns to expensive and fashionable dress designated by its provenience. Again, we are faced with some difficulties. The wording is corrupt when it comes to the words *atque Alidensia*.¹⁶ The clothes referred to can neither come from the region Elis nor from the city Alinda in Caria. Neither place is known as a production site for clothes or cloth.¹⁷ In this context, however, there must be talk of a famous luxury brand. A term that fits all purposes is *Melitensia* (clothes

¹⁴ Cf. B 3 p. 286

¹⁵ Plaut. Men. 206 (on the *palla*): *quattuor minae perierunt* [four hundred drachmas are squandered]. On the trope that hetaeras exploit their lovers, cf. vv. 193, 204, 261–262, 340–345, 438–442.

¹⁶ Against Bailey ad loc.

¹⁷ Jessen argues the former and Munro the latter. Another argument against Elis is the wrong length of the vowel A. It is short in *Alidensia*, but has to be measured long in Elis.

from Malta) that is mentioned several times in Roman literature.¹⁸ Lambinus (1563) therefore emended the meaningless *atque Alidensia* to *ac Melitensia*.¹⁹ His conjecture was rejected by Lachmann²⁰ because it involves significant changes to the letters. This reasoning is too strict, since the emendation is not actually very difficult and produces a perfect sense.²¹ *Melitensia* denotes garments made of fine linen, a luxury article also loved by Verres and his wife.²² They also go well with the following *Coae vestes*, which were made of silk (see below).

The next mistake that impedes our understanding at this point seems to be very old. The text of Lucretius apparently already had an error at the time of the Migration Period, as a reference to it in Isidore of Seville (ca. 560–636 CE) shows. Isidore, an author whose genius is much overvalued by modern research on Roman dress, must have found the nonsensical *et bene patra* (instead of *parta*) *patrum* in v. 1129 of his text. He used this reading to give an absurd explanation of the term *patratio*. He argues: *est rei veneriae consummatio* (the word *patratio* denotes the consummation of sexual intercourse).²³ Isidore also knew v. 1130 in a mutilated form, since he gives us a similarly ludicrous definition of a chimaera called *Velenensis tunica: quae affertur ex insulis* (a *tunica* that is imported from the islands).²⁴ He probably came to this explanation by connecting *Velenensis* to *velum* (sail). A *tunica Velenensis* had thus to be imported by ship, hence from islands.²⁵

The last expression in the line offers a problem of its own. It clearly refers to so-called *Coae vestes*, silken clothes that were very expensive and only came into fashion in Rome in Augustan times.²⁶ Lucretius is probably only ‘translating’ a Greek source (see below). In Rome, thin Coan clothes are associated with the emancipated hetaera and are celebrated in Augustan poetry.²⁷ However, our text offers the variant *Chiaque* (not Coaque, as one would first expect). The divergence of orthography may seem a minor

¹⁸ Cf. B 9 pp. 384–385.

¹⁹ Lambinus already derived it from Turnebus.

²⁰ Lachmann’s own proposal *alideusia* (= purple) is not convincing. It creates a new word. Moreover, with the following expression (*Chiaque*), one would expect the corrupt transmission to instead contain a reference to a place.

²¹ Against Brown (1987) ad loc.

²² Cf. B 9 p. 384.

²³ Isid. Etym. 9.52.5.

²⁴ Isid. Etym. 19.22.21.

²⁵ Against Pausch (2003) 138, 142, who thinks Isidore is referring to a real garment.

²⁶ Cf. B 9 pp. 386–391; Becker/Göll III (1882) 284–286; Marquardt/Mau (1886) 493–494; Blümner (1911) 244 and I (1912) 202; Wilson (1938) 4; S. Sherwin-White, *Ancient Cos. An Historical Study from the Dorian Settlement to the Imperial Period*, Göttingen 1978, 82, 378–383; Sebesta (1994) 69; GRD (2007) 37; A. Keith, *Satorial Elegance and Poetic Finesse in the Sulpician Corpus*, in: Edmondson/Keith (eds.) (2008), 194; B. Hildebrandt/C. Gillis, *Silk. Trade and Exchange along the Silk Roads between Rome and China in Antiquity*, Ancient Textile Series 29, Oxford 2017, 35–36.

²⁷ Hor. sat. 1.2.101–102; Prop. 1.2.12, 2.1.5; Tib. 2.3.53–54, 2.4.29–30; Prop. 4.2.23, 4.5.23, 57–58; Hor. c. 4.13; Ovid. Ars 2.297–298.

issue at first glance. Nevertheless, it teaches us something about ‘brand names’ and their origins and may caution us against the supposition that silken *Coae vestes* were necessarily manufactured on Kos or even exported from that island. On the other hand, it shows us a long line of learned philologists trying to find the right solution. At the beginning, Bergk (1853) simply emended *Chiaque* to *Coaque*. However, this correction does not seem necessary. We find a similar variant of the name of the island in Varro. This shows that the origin (and hence the orthography) of the *Coae vestes* was not yet fixed at the time of the Republic. Varro thought that this type of garment did not come from Kos, but from Keos/Kea, the most northwestern island of the Cyclades: *ex hac* (sc. *Kea*) *profectam delicatorem feminis vestem auctor est Varro* (Varro tells us that the elegant female clothes came from Kea).²⁸ The same variant of the name probably caused Lucretius’ *Chiaque*, which he might have derived from his Greek (Epicurean) source.²⁹ For this reason, Lambinus (1563) put *Ceaque*, and Lachmann (1850) put the form *Ciaque* in the text, both excluding the superfluous letter H. As to the Latin form of the name of the island, it is difficult to say what Lucretius himself wrote. Κῆϊος, the Greek word, is variously transcribed in Latin as *Ceus* or *Cius*. The confusion of the vowels possibly stems from early Latin orthography, which expressed a long vowel I with the letters EI. For example, later orthography wrote *silvis*, whereas early texts would have written *silveis*. Later authors might have therefore erroneously thought that the EI in the form *Cei*us stood for the later form *Ci*us (the EI representing a long I). In any case, the discussion of the names of the islands shows that *Coae vestes* might not be named after an island at all.

The short passage in Lucretius shows all problems we have when it comes to understanding the exact ‘cultural meaning’ of a Latin text. It is not easy to say whether Lucretius is describing a Roman scene or a Greek one. And what about the *Melitensia* and the *Coae vestes*? Do they belong to the Roman or rather to the Greek world? Without doubt, Lucretius used a Hellenistic Greek source when writing the section. However, we also know both garments from texts portraying ‘Roman’ life. In conclusion, we may perhaps say that the dichotomy underlying the question is too strict, the Roman world being in large parts also a Greek world. Thus, we might answer the question of whether Lucretius is describing the Roman or the Greek world with this: He is describing both in one.

²⁸ Plin. NH 4.62.

²⁹ Against Lachmann and Bailey ad loc.

