

Mortis formidine ut sibi consciscant maerenti pectore letum: **How the fear of death incites suicide in men and women**

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In this paper, I will explain how a few Roman writers explore the process and contemplation that leads to suicide, particularly Lucretius through his work *De Rerum Natura*. I will contrast this Epicurean stance to Stoic perspectives using Vergil's epic *Aeneid*, Seneca's *Epistles* and Cicero's *Dream of Scipio* and *Tusculans*. Each of these authors comments on the act of suicide and the social connotations that accompany self-murder, including its reception based on the suicide's gender. These authors' use of suicide and a person's *virtus* shows how they perceive gender equality or inequality when it comes to death. All of the authors examined in this paper agree that the fear of the death is an important issue in the Roman world. Lucretius' approach to encounter one's fear of death is focus more on physics; this enables him to take a non-gendered approach because all humans are made up of the same atoms just in different compositions. However, Vergil, Seneca, and Cicero construct systems that examine the fear of death from a more ethical side. I will explain that, unlike his contemporaries, Lucretius portrays suicide and the fear of death through specifically gender-neutral references to dispel its fear from all his readers; he explains that everyone experiences the same death and we can all attain *virtus* before death through subscribing to Epicurean ideals.

In this paper, I will explain how a few Roman writers explore the process and contemplation that leads to suicide, particularly Lucretius through his work *De Rerum Natura*. I will contrast this Epicurean stance to Stoic perspectives using Vergil's epic *Aeneid*, Seneca's *Epistles* and Cicero's *Dream of Scipio* and *Tusculans*. These authors wrote in the 1st century B.C. and were well-respected scholars in the ancient Roman realm as well as today. While their individual writing styles vary from letters to epic poetry, each of these authors comments on the act of suicide and the social connotations that accompany self-murder, including its reception based on the suicide's gender. These authors' use of suicide and a person's *virtus* (masculine strength, valor, courage) shows how they perceive gender equality or inequality when it comes to death. I will explain that, unlike his contemporaries, Lucretius portrays suicide and the fear of death through specifically gender-neutral references to dispel its fear from all his readers. He explains that everyone experiences the same death and we can all attain *virtus* before death through subscribing to Epicurean ideals, which afford that pleasure in life can be attained through modest living and active exploration of how the world works on an atomic level. The results of such practices and studies are tranquility and freedom from fear.

The pool of uncertainty lying at the end of life can brew insecurity within a person as they ponder when or how their life will end. This thought, however, cascades as a person debates whether or not they will be wealthy, happy, or the vague and ever elusive 'successful.' For some the pressure to achieve this mortal nirvana can lead to ruthless competition to be the best and achieve the most before his life ends. According to a few ancient philosophers, this competitive behavior has various consequences, some postulate it helps advance one's political career, which in turn yields a pleasant afterlife, and others believe it leads to an unenjoyable life filled with feckless political ambitions and neglect of loved ones. Regardless, all these philosophers agree fear has wormed its way into people's hearts; what they do with the fear and how it displays their *virtus* is where they differ in their opinions.

In the *Aeneid*, an epic poem describing the founding of Rome from the ruins of Troy, Dido, the Queen of Carthage, not only acts as a stereotypical woman by succumbing to her passion for Aeneas but also as a quintessential anti-Epicurean by letting these emotions overwhelm her and drive her to suicide. Vergil mocks Epicurean ideals in his portrayal of Dido as an Epicurean; in that she pursues pleasure but at the same time shows actions and words that

conflict with Epicurean theory in order to mock its tenets. Julia Dyson, a scholar of Latin poetry, examines Dido's will to be an Epicurean and how it is clouded by her passion for Aeneas (Dyson, 207). Dido's episode is part of a larger theme in the *Aeneid* as Vergil uses Lucretian language to consequentially contradict Lucretian tenets. Dido is especially important to this theme due to the shifts in her character from an Epicurean to a woman so overcome with passion she commits suicide, an 'Epicurean villain.' Lucretius condescends such actions through this passionate and adverse description of suicide.

Et saepe usque adeo, mortis formidine, vitae
Percipit humanos odium lucisque videndae
Ut sibi consciscant maerenti pectore letum,
3.79-81

“And often to such an extent, by the fear of death,
A hatred of life and seeing of light seizes the humans
So that they inflict death in the grieving heart,”

These suicides, just like Dido, have become so consumed with their fears and passions that they are no longer able to enjoy life and believe that killing themselves is the only way they will be happy.

Dido's death is shown as specifically feminine because of its eroticized imagery to emphasize the general conservative idea that women are weak and more likely to succumb to these fears than men. She is described as *effera* and *interfusa genas* (*Aeneid* 4.642,644). These two images show her animalistic wildness and her natural feminine blush through *genas* as an accusative of respect: “suffused as to her cheeks with trembling splotches” (*Aeneid* 4.643-4). Vergil juxtaposes Dido's wild and generally imbalanced life to Aeneas, who is portrayed as a *validam quercum* and *mens immota manet* after the pleas of Dido and her sister, Anna, for him to stay in Carthage (“strong oak tree”, *Aeneid* 4.441, “the mind removes unmoved”, *Aeneid* 4.449). Both Dido and her sister's frenzied behavior suggests their general emotional imbalance through superlative adjectives such as *miserrima* and *exterrita* (“most miserable” *Aeneid* 4.437, “frightened” *Aeneid* 4.450). Her distinctly feminine character is also shown in the way she *recludit* Aeneas' sword to impale herself (“unsheathes”, *Aeneid* 4.646). Catharine Edwards, a scholar of ancient Roman identity, points out that “it

is surely not fanciful to see the imagery here as phallic” which, if taken within the context, would further insinuate her as a woman (Edwards, 184). If this image is taken as such, then it further characterizes her as a woman whose life is dictated by her lovers' sword. While this act is seen as distinctly non-Epicurean, Vergil uses her conflicting words and actions to truly show her as an Epicurean villain, ranging from her sincere prayer to the gods to condemn Aeneas, to shortly before when she sarcastically and doubtfully responds to Aeneas' plea for understanding that Apollo has ordered him to leave:

nunc augur Apollo, 376
nunc Lyciae sortes, nunc et Ioue missus ab ipso

now the prophet Apollo,
now the Lycian destines, and now sent by Jove
himself

This anaphora of *nunc* is used to emphasize the sarcastic character of these lines (*Aeneid* 4.376-7). By showing her duplicitous nature, Vergil mocks not only Epicurean ideals, but also the instability of women. He continues to define women as unpredictable through the conclusion of Mercury's last warning to Aeneas: *varium et mutabile semper femina* (“a woman is a fickle and changeable thing”, *Aeneid* 4.569-70). These qualities lead to Dido's fear of *religio*, which she professes through her cries toward Jupiter asking him why her lover is leaving her: *Pro Juppiter!* (“Oh Juppiter!”, *Aeneid* 4.590).

The imagery of her being truly sickened at heart because of her unhealthy obsessions further demonstrates her inability to grapple with reality and therefore incites fear in her heart that she may lose Aeneas. Lucretius specifically warns against these obsessions stating that adverse situations lead people to “turn their minds to religion much more harshly” (Lucretius, 3.54). Vergil introduces Dido as a feminine character in the beginning of book 4 through his description of her as a *regina* “wounded by the serious care and picked by blind fire” from being obsessed with Aeneas (“queen”, *gravi iam dudum saucia cura / vulnus alit venis et caeco carpitur igni*, *Aeneid* 4.1,1-2). If taken historically this introduction to Dido recalls another queen drunk with power to most Romans' minds: Cleopatra. This reference reinforces the tragic suicide of a woman overcome by passion and helps to explain to the reader how simi-

lar Dido and Cleopatra are in that Dido's good qualities are overshadowed by her irresponsible ambition. Vergil uses these similarities to show exactly the kind of behaviors he is against because it creates a paranoid and neurotic mindset that leads to careless obsessions like a fear of death that makes Dido and Cleopatra *pallida morte futura* ("pale with the future death", *Aeneid* 4.645 and *Aeneid* 8.709).

Similar to Dido's "wound from blind fire", Lucretius writes about the obsessions of the *incerti [amantes]* who are wasting away from this *vulnere caeco* ("from the invisible wound", "uncertain [lovers]", Lucretius 4.1120). The particularly negative angle Lucretius puts on love through referencing it also as a disease shows how it predisposes them to self-destruction and in Dido's case: death. It is this *religio* that leads Dido to

Sacra Jovi Stygio, quae rite incepta paravi, 638
Perficere est animus finemque imponere curis
Dardaniique rogam capitis permittere flammae

"finish the sacrifices for Stigian Jove, which duly began to be prepared and to place an end to the cares, and to permit the pyre of flames of the Dardanian head"

(*Aeneid*, 4.638-40). These lines show how Dido's obsession with Aeneas has made her turn her head more toward *religio* to relieve her grief which in turn leads to her demise.

Vergil portrays Dido as weak and fearing death in order to emphasize that men cannot be overtaken by such powerful emotions. During the fall of Troy the men are described as "wolves" who *vadimus haud dubiam in mortem* ("we rush into not uncertain death", *Aeneid* 2.355,359). The litotes in line 359 is used as an understatement to emphasize their valor as they rush into the city to protect their families from the infiltrating Greeks, where they are in fact certain to die. This description furthers Vergil's theme of men who are unafraid to die as long as it is a courageous fight for their lives, while women are just weak. While Priam fights, primarily in vain, Vergil describes the end of his life with this phrase: *haec finis Priami fatorum* ("this is the end of the fate of Priam", *Aeneid* 2.554). While Priam looks out upon *incensam Trojam* at his death, Dido herself is the one who is *incensa* as she "rages" through her own city (*Aeneid* 2.555, 4.300). Priam's portrayal

is characteristic of Vergil's view of men dying quickly and valiantly, while Dido's death is a long, drawn out narration of her actions reflecting her weakness as a woman in despair.

Dido's political ambitions and inability to control her emotions result in her death and her portrayal as not Epicurean. Her suicide is ostentatious, and even Aeneas and the rest of his fleet were able to see her unlucky flames, leaving them with a grim foreboding of what was about to come which shows how Dido's behavior is not only self-destructive but also harmful toward others (*Aeneid* 5.3). In Book 3 of *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius explicitly condemns such behaviors for many reasons, but primarily because of her neglected responsibilities to the Carthaginians in exchange of her own pursuits. She lets herself become subject to the fear of death and therefore *in summa pietate evertere suadet* ("she persuades to turn her back on the greatest devotion", Lucretius 3.84). This phrase speaks strongly to Dido's actions because the *Aeneid* is centered on Aeneas' piety as a growing leader and Dido is shown to turn away from her responsibilities in the wake of her demise. This self-destructive and brazen display is exactly what Lucretius advises against and Vergil shows Aeneas and his men's negative opinion when they look back on her city because even though they didn't know what had caused the fire they do know "the harsh sufferings after a great love is defiled, and the knowledge of what a crazy woman is able" to do (*duri magno sed amore Dolores/ pollute, notumque furens quid femina possit*, *Aeneid* 5.6-7). While Vergil displays the weakness and madness of Dido, which leads to her self-destruction, Seneca emphasizes that suicide can bring out a person's *virtus* and *pietas* (duty, loyalty).

Cato's suicide functions as a contrast to Vergil to show that confronting death for *pietas* is masculine; he illustrates the suicide's *virtus*, not his weakness. His *Epistle IV* begins with a rhetorical question that sarcastically asks the reader if virtue would be as efficacious as an excessive fear? By this phrasing, Seneca explains how ridiculous these fears are and forcefully states that a man's life will be restless and unsatisfied as long as he is trying to lengthen it or live it only for political ambition of a consulship. Later in *Epistle XIV* Seneca continues on this topic and uses Cato's withdrawal from corrupted politics to show that "good health" of the soul and then the body "results from such moderation" in politics (Gummere, 84). Stoics believed that complete removal from politics was unnecessary, but

that sensitivity to politics' involvement in one's life was crucial. By having this as the main stress for men, Seneca comments that only men have these power roles that can easily corrupt their minds. Seneca addresses that *virtus* can only be achieved by abstaining from political ambitions and therefore only men can be dignified in their deaths. This distinctly virile reference shows that Seneca views death and the fear of death as a manly occurrence.

Seneca uses political engagements, which are masculine by nature, to show that a man gains his *virtus* when he is able to surpass his fear of death, focusing especially on Cato the Younger. In Seneca's *Epistle XXIV* on despising death, he comments that after Cato took his life he had *minus sanguinis....minus virium... non tantum* ("less blood but no less strength", Seneca *Epistle XXIV*). This line is important because it draws a connection to Lucretius and it comments on Cato's manly strength through *virium*. Cato's reasons for killing himself are twofold in that he wanted to preserve himself from corruption of Caesar's tyrannical rule and he wanted to portray the *pietas* he had for his country. By emphasizing that after his death Cato had less blood, Seneca not only agrees with Lucretius' idea that inside us there is a coagulation of blood atoms (Lucretius, 1.838) but compounded with references to Cato as a general he creates the depiction of him as a war hero.

Seneca and Lucretius both share the idea that transcending this fear of death is how you become known as a person of character and gain *virtus*, however Seneca finds that this is only for men and could be by committing suicide, while Lucretius believes it is through a natural death and living a fulfilled life lacking fear. He even mentions in *Epistle XIII* that if you "wrench from Cato's hand his sword, the vindicator of liberty, and you deprive him of the greatest share of his glory" (Gummere, 36). This explicit praise of Cato's suicide explains Seneca's belief that it was dignified and liberating, bringing him *virtus*. A few lines later, Seneca emphasizes that while Cato did receive glory from his actions that it is not the only way for men to gain respect and transcend the fear of death. He explains that these goals are the same ones laid out by nature herself and therefore you should be further encouraged to surpass the fear of death and achieve *virtus*. Unlike Seneca, Lucretius never promotes such displays but instead uses vibrant and very negative imagery of suicide episodes to show those who are so driven by the "fear of the light and hatred of seeing" kill themselves

(*De rerum Natura* 3.79-80). Lucretius' description of these *humanos* serves as a distinct contrast to Seneca's masculine suicide references (*De rerum Natura* 3.79-80).

Seneca holds men, such as Epicurus, in high esteem in *Epistle XXXIII* because they are real men who are ready to fight the battle of life even if it is through poetry. In this letter Epicurus is first mentioned as showing *mollitiam* ("effeminacy", Seneca *Epistle 33*) but then Seneca refutes his claim by saying that Epicurus is prepared to gird himself up against life and fortune and is therefore not effeminate. Lucretius uses him as a role model in a different way. While he is referenced in the beginning of Book 3 as a *Graeciae gentis decus* ("the pride of the Greek race", Lucretius 3.3), his name is not explicitly stated until the end of book 3 when Lucretius describes his rise to the top and his acceptance of his death. By portraying Epicurus as a person who has "risen above the human race in intelligence" instead of a girded military character, Lucretius implies this transcendence is for all humans not just military men (Lucretius, 3.1042).

Cicero, like Seneca, emphasizes his masculine view of death because of the deviation of *virtus* from *vir* in *Tusculans II* and therefore each person's death will be determined by their good or poor military and political endeavors (Cicero, *Tusculans* 2.43). This approach to a person's *virtus* also implies that only men can die in a glorified way, since women are barred from war and the politics. Cicero views this aspect differently than Lucretius because he believes that these types of endeavors incite the fear of death.

Denique avarities et honorum caeca cupido Quae
miseros homines cogunt transcendere finis Iuris
3.59-61

"Furthermore the greed and blind desire of honor
which face the miserable men to cross the ends of
the law"

These lines are particularly intense because they construct a physical metaphor for those crossing social barriers, by showing these miserable men, haunted by their self-imposed fears, crossing the border of defined law into crime.

Cicero uses his *Dream of Scipio* to display how to obtain true honor in life through praise for the gods and deep *pietas* for one's country. Africanus informs

Scipio that if he continuously looks up to the heavens he will never be in their favor, but instead, let *ipse virtus trahat ad verum decus* (“let that virtue drag honor to truth”, Cicero 6.25). This line is used specifically to reassure the reader that other people’s opinions are not as important as the gods’ opinion is. Africanus, and therefore Cicero, strongly stresses the legacy of a Roman soldier by condemning souls *earumque se quasi ministros praebuerunt* (“as if they yield themselves to the services of them”, Cicero 6.29). This strong attack on those who do not serve their country expounds that they will have no virtue and will suffer the consequences in their afterlife. Lucretius on the other hand refutes those who defend their *patria* (fatherland) for the wrong reasons like the distraught planter who strives for the piety of his ancestors only to bring him good harvests (Lucretius 2.1170), and those who claim to possess *pietas* turn their back on their *patria* because of their fears (Lucretius 3.84). While Lucretius emphasizes that this *pietas* to the gods or to their *patria* will not advance his readers because the gods have no control over us, Cicero believed that virtue, which will give its owner an “open road by which you may enter heaven” (Cicero 6.26), can be achieved by only holding a consulship. While Cicero sees *virtus* in war heroes and political leaders, Lucretius looks to Epicurean role models as exemplars for obtaining *virtus* through *ratio*. Lucretius portrays Epicurus and Democritus as facing death not as men but as human beings to show that all his readers can follow in his own footsteps and achieve *virtus* through transcending the fear of death. After first introducing Epicurus as a *primum graius homo* who was able to challenge oppressive *religio* and overcome his fear of death in book 1, Lucretius explains further that this can happen to all *homines* if they are able to resist the greed and desire that would encourage them to cross the boundaries of Epicurean law (“first Greek man”, 1.66, “people”, 3.60). He describes Epicurus not as a *vir* but as a *homo* to dispel ideas that this way is only for men. If these *humani* are not able to resist *religio*, they might be driven to suicide (3.81), but if they are they will become just like Epicurus who was able to encounter death *decurso lumine vitae* (“after he had run through the light of life”, Lucretius 3.1041) and Democritus who as able to realize that he was aging, and *sponte sua leto caput obuius optulit ipse* (“he willingly provided the head for his own death”, Lucretius 3.1040). Lucretius then rhetorically asks “will you be uncertain to resent to encounter” death to his readers

(3.1045). By implementing unisex language and second personal verbs, Lucretius utilizes both of these Epicureans as examples for his male and female readers to show these decisions are their own and they are not the ones “snoring” through life and cannot find the source of their distress (Lucretius 3.1047).

Lucretius uses the more mythical example of personified nature to further rebuke all mortals for clinging excessively to life instead of leaving willingly. He displays nature as rebuking *alicui nostrum* (“someone of us”, Lucretius 3.932) and asking them “why they fear and flee death” (*quid mortem congemis ac fles?* Lucretius 3.934). Nature specifically addresses her people as *mortalis*, which shows their insignificance in respect of all of nature and references them as just a species, not dividing them into their genders (“mortals”, Lucretius 3.933).

Lucretius uses obsessions with assent to political or military power and with one’s lover to show how these all-consuming fixations inflict physical and mental pain. In book 4, Lucretius uses the deluded lover to show how the man becomes more involved in his woman’s life and lets his erotic obsession mask his existential insecurities. Lucretius uses similar imagery and invokes the beginning of book 3 to show that any kind of obsession has repercussions. In the section of book 3 that describes the fear of death, Lucretius depicts those who still fear death as “defiled by a foul crime” (*foedati crimine turpi*, Lucretius 3.49). The similar language in the passage of the deluded lover in book 4 used to describe both genders relates the portrayal of two different obsessions as both “foul” and “vexing” (*quoniam foedo afflicentur amore*, Lucretius 4.1158). Lucretius’ usage of “others” as the subject of main verb shows the blatant non-gendering of his examples to explain that these obsessions are common to all humans because, as he said in Book 1, people are all the same, just with varying compositions (*alios alii irrident*, Lucretius 4.1157).

Lucretius uses an even more extreme story of the plague at the end of book 6 to show that the fear of death can consume men so much that they castrated themselves to avoid death. They were described as “anyone great was going under this kind of death” (*optimus hoc leti genus ergo quisque subibat*, Lucretius 6.1246). He also calls such a man *optimus*, which shows that this fear is very self-destructive because these men used to be “good” and upstanding but have been consumed by fear and lost their character because of it.

While Lucretius does use castration as the most vivid example of self-mutilation, he also follows by saying “no one was not remaining without hands and feet” (*manibus sine non nulli pedibusque manebant* 6.1210). This triple litotes emphasizes the line and shows that he accounts for women as well as men, by showing self-mutilation through means other than castration. By taking the plague out of its historical context and using vivid imagery to describe the scene, Lucretius specifically uses the ending to his last book to show how the insecurities of people who fear death are tested in stressful times and expose their true *virtus*. When the perception of Cybele in book 2 intimidates her followers so much that they castrate themselves, Lucretius is able to make the same emphasis that he did on the fear of a loss of lover and the fear of death. It is not only the fear of death but obsessive behaviors in general that pollute one’s brain.

All authors examined in this paper agree the fear of the death permeates the ancient Roman world. Lucretius’ approach to encounter one’s fear of death is focus more on physics; this enables him to take a non-gendered approach because all humans are made up of the same atoms just in different compositions. However, Vergil, Seneca, and Cicero construct systems that examine the fear of death from a more ethical side. These systems enable men to shine in their *virtus*, through either being condescending towards women or portraying the triumph of death only through virile activities and characteristics. Lucretius’s deliberate use of gender-neutral references offers another perspective on his reader’s about the workings of the world. Due to the nature of his work, he encourages resolving one’s fears through the development of *ratio* not *religio*. I believe that he and these other authors use suicide as a way to explain these fears because it is an accountable action. The fear of death develops through personal meditation and reflection and therefore by killing oneself the suicide is attempting to deal with his or her apprehensions. It is the perfect model for Lucretius to explain the extremity to which a lack of *ratio* can lead to utter self-destruction.

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