

THE ROOTS OF LUCRETIUS' TREE-MEN,  
*DE RERUM NATVRA* 2.702–3

At *DRN* 2.333–729, Lucretius offers a series of arguments concerning atomic shape, concluding this sequence at lines 700–29 by arguing that not all atomic combinations are possible. His argument for this latter thesis is rooted in the non-existence of species-hybrid monsters and portents, a simple appeal to visible evidence running as follows: if all atomic combinations were possible, we would see species-hybrid monsters; but we don't see any such monsters; therefore, the kinds of atomic combinations that would create species-hybrid monsters cannot occur. Lucretius gives us four types of impossible portent, of which three are very familiar to us from myth: centaurs (*semiferas hominum species* 2.702), chimaeras (2.705) and *conecti terrestria membra marinis* (2.704), which is generally taken to be a reference to Scylla.<sup>1</sup> It might therefore seem probable that the fourth example would, similarly, contain a reference to a well-known myth; however, this fourth portent, *altos* | ... *ramos eigni corpore uiuo*, that is, a part plant, part mammal hybrid, does not appear to correspond to a specific mythological figure. A myth of human origin from trees is not uncommon in antiquity,<sup>2</sup> but no extant example gives any indication that these tree-born humans were hybrids. We can find many mythological tales of humans being changed into trees, but hybridity is present only for the duration of the actual metamorphosis.<sup>3</sup> A possible candidate might be the Dryads, wood nymphs strongly associated with individual trees: certainly, there are representations of the nymphs' relationship with their trees that emphasize their arboreal origins, or quasi-humanize the trees themselves. Pausanias, for example, refers to *νύμφης, οἷαι τὸ ἀρχαῖον λόγῳ τῶν ποιητῶν ἐφύοντο ἀπὸ τε ἄλλων δένδρων καὶ μάλιστα ἀπὸ τῶν δρυῶν* (10.32.9); and at *Hom. Hymn.* 5.256–72, the life of each individual nymph is said to end with the death of the particular tree to which she was linked.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, in both Callimachus' and Ovid's versions

<sup>1</sup> See C. Bailey, *Titī Lucreti Cari De Rerum Natura Libri Sex* (Oxford, 1947), 915. Lucretius explicitly names Scylla, along with the centaurs and the Chimaera, when he dismisses the possibility of the existence of species-hybrid monsters (5.787–924), good evidence for the identification here.

<sup>2</sup> Such a myth has long been regarded as underlying e.g. *Hom. Il.* 22.126, *Od.* 19.163 and *Hes. Theog.* 35. See further M.L. West, 'Hesiodea', *CQ* 11 (1961), 130–45, at 143; M.L. West, *Theogony. Hesiod* (Oxford, 1966), 167–8; W.H. Roscher (ed.), *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie: vol. 2.1 Iache–Kyzikos* (Leipzig, 1884–1937), s.v. *Wellschöpfung*, coll. 500–1. Verg. *Aen.* 8.314–16 (*haec nemora indigenae Fauni Nymphaeque tenebant* | *gensque uirum truncis et duro robore nata*, | *quis neque mos neque cultus erat*) is evidence, perhaps, for a similar myth of origins in Italy.

<sup>3</sup> Ovid describes eight in the *Metamorphoses* – Daphne becomes a laurel (1.548–52), the Heliades become poplars (2.246–66), Leucothea becomes an incense bush (4.252–5), Philemon and Baucis become twin trees growing from a single trunk (8.712–20), Cyparissus becomes a cypress tree (10.136–42), Myrrha becomes a myrrh tree (10.489–502), the Thracian women become oak trees (11.67–84) and the Apulian shepherd becomes an oleaster (14.521–6); Ovid also briefly refers to the transformation of Attis into a pine tree (10.103–5). Some of these trees retain characteristics linked to their human predecessors – the Heliades cry amber tears, the drops of myrrh secreted by myrrh trees are said to be Myrrha's tears, and the wild olives of the oleaster are said to be bitter in reflection of the Apulian shepherd's character; but none is physically a species hybrid after metamorphosis is completed.

<sup>4</sup> Callim. *Hymn* 4.84–5 states rather that the nymphs *χαίρουσιν, ὅτε δρύας ὄμβρος ἀέξει, | ... δ' αὖ κλαίουσιν, ὅτε δρυσὶν μηκέτι φύλλα*.

of the story of Erysichthon, the tree in the nymphs' sacred grove which falls victim to his axe is given human attributes.<sup>5</sup> Callimachus has the tree weep (*πλαγείσα* [sc. *αἰγείρος* 37] *κακὸν μέλος ἴαχεν ἄλλαις*, *Hymn* 6.39), and in Ovid the tree trembles, groans, grows pale and 'bleeds' (*contremuit gemitumque dedit Deoia quercus*, | *et pariter frondes, pariter pallescere glandes* | *coepere ac longi pallorem ducere rami*. | *cuius ut in trunco fecit manus impia uulnus*, | *haud aliter fluxit discusso cortice sanguis*, *Met.* 8.758–62). Yet at no point in the extant evidence do we find humanoid-tree hybrids. Virgil's dramatic representation of the bushes which drip with the blood and speak with the voice of Polydorus is found only in the *Aeneid* (3.19–46);<sup>6</sup> similarly, the vine-women and tree-men of Lucian, *Ver. Hist.* 1.8 and 1.22 are, in common with the rest of the work, the author's own invention.

A search through extant mythological sources, then, does not yield a suitable candidate for this tree-mammal hybrid. It is possible, therefore, that the source of this portent is not mythological, but rather philosophical. In particular, given the topic under consideration, it seems very probable that Lucretius is referring to a (now lost) argument by his philosophical didactic predecessor, Empedocles. Monsters and portents are not permitted under Epicurean physics, but Empedoclean zoology emphatically asserts their existence, as we can see from e.g. DK 31 B 61 (*πολλὰ μὲν ἀμφιπρόσωπα καὶ ἀμφίστερνα φύεσθαι*, | *βουγενῇ ἀνδρόπρωρα, τὰ δ' ἔμπαλιν ἐξανατέλλειν* | *ἀνδροφυῇ βούκρανα, μεμειγμένα τῇ μὲν ἀπ' ἀνδρῶν* | *τῇ δὲ γυναικοφυῇ σκευροῖς ἡσκημένα γυίοις*). The influence of Empedocles on the *DRN* as a whole has been much discussed, and is undeniable; furthermore, Empedoclean traces can be found throughout the lines concerning atomic shapes which precede the reference to tree-mammal hybrids.<sup>7</sup> Whilst there is no reference to a tree-mammal hybrid in the extant remains of Empedocles, the evidence of DK 31 A 70 implies that, in his zoogony, the first living things to grow from the earth were tree-like entities, which combined the formula for male and female beings (*Ἐ. πρῶτα τὰ δένδρα τῶν ζώων ἐκ γῆς ἀναφῶναι φησί*); in DK 31 B 82, he claims equivalence for hair, leaves, feathers and scales: *ταῦτὰ τρίχες καὶ φύλλα καὶ οἰωνῶν πτερὰ πυκνά* | *καὶ λεπίδες γίνονται ἐπὶ στιβαροῖσι μέλεσσιν*. Such passages encourage the speculation that Empedocles did discuss (at some now lost

<sup>5</sup> These nymphs are likely to be Hamadryads; cf. N. Hopkinson, *Callimachus, Hymn to Demeter* (Cambridge, 1984), 115.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. R.D. Williams, *P. Vergili Maronis Aeneidos Liber Tertius* (Oxford, 1962), 57.

<sup>7</sup> D. Sedley, 'Lucretius and the new Empedocles', *Leeds International Classical Studies* 2.4, <<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/classics/lics/2003/200304.pdf>> proposes an underlying Empedoclean inspiration for 2.593–7; G. Campbell, *Lucretius on Creation and Evolution: A Commentary on de Rerum Natura 5.772–1104* (Oxford, 2003), 132, argues for a possible Empedoclean origin for the Lucretian *lanigerae pecudes* ... | *buceriaeque greges* found first at 2.662–3. M. Gale, *Myth and Poetry in Lucretius* (Cambridge, 1994), 72, connects the emotive scene of calf-slaughter at 2.352–66 to Empedocles' revulsion at the idea of sacrifice, and the *sanguinis* ... *flumen* of 2.354 could well echo Empedocles fr. 129 Wr., *κρηνῶν ἀπο πέντε ταμῶν ταναήκει χαλκῶ* (for which, see M.R. Wright, *Empedocles: The Extant Fragments* [New Haven and London, 1981], 290). The lengthy and widely varying list of animal types at 2.341–6 could, similarly, be an imitation of Empedocles, as this kind of list is typical of Lucretius' didactic predecessor: cf. e.g. DK 31 B 21.10–11 (*δένδρεά τ' ἐβλάστησε καὶ ἀνέρες ἡδὲ γυναῖκες*, | *θήρες τ' οἰωνοὶ τε καὶ ὕδατοθρέμμοις ἰχθύς*), and also DK 31 B 23.6–7, (*δένδρεά τ' κτίζοντε καὶ ἀνέρας ἡδὲ γυναῖκας* | *θήρας τ' οἰωνοὺς τε καὶ ὕδατοθρέμμονας ἰχθύς*). That Lucretius imitates such Empedoclean lists has been shown by A. Martin and O. Primavesi, *L'Empédocle de Strasbourg (P. Strasb. Gr. Inv. 1665–1666): Introduction, édition et commentaire, with an English summary* (Berlin and New York, 1999), 230.

point) the existence of tree-mammal hybrids;<sup>8</sup> Empedocles is also generally agreed to be Lucian's target at *Ver. Hist.* 1.22,<sup>9</sup> which further endorses the idea that his zoogony admitted tree-mammal hybrids.

I therefore propose that, rather than (or, perhaps, in addition to) referring to a specific mythological being or beings, Lucretius' reference to tree-mammal hybrids at 2.702–3 is designed to engage with and discredit a now lost passage of Empedocles, who raised the possibility of such hybrids. This fits well with Lucretius' argumentative and poetic strategy throughout his treatment of atomic shape,<sup>10</sup> and furnishes us with an origin for his otherwise mysterious tree-men.

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<sup>8</sup> Whilst Arist. *Ph.* 2.8.199b10–13 would seem to imply that Empedocles did not propose plant-plant hybrids (πότερον οὖν καὶ ἐν τοῖς φυτοῖς ἐγίγνετο, ὥσπερ τὰ βουγενῇ ἀνδρόπρωρα, οὕτω καὶ ἀμπελογενῇ ἐλαιόπρωρα, ἢ οὐ; ἄτοπον γάρ· ἀλλὰ μὴν ἔδει γε, εἴπερ καὶ ἐν τοῖς ζώοις), that in itself does not necessarily indicate that Empedocles did not propose plant-human hybrids.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. A. Georgiadou and D.H.J. Larmour, *Lucian's Science Fiction Novel True Histories: Interpretation and Commentary*. *Mnemosyne* Suppl. 179 (1998), 127.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Sedley's argument for a recognizable Empedoclean 'fingerprint' on passages of the *DRN* containing multiple compound adjectives (Sedley [n. 7], 6–11); *semiferas* (2.702) and *omniparentis* (2.706) suggest such a 'fingerprint' here.

## VIRGIL, *ECLOGUES* 4.28–9

At simul heroum laudes et facta parentis  
iam legere et quae sit poteris cognoscere uirtus,  
molli paulatim flauescet campus arista  
incultisque rubens pendebit sentibus uua  
et durae quercus sudabunt roscida mella.

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There is a recognized difficulty in line 28: we expect the advance towards the Golden Age to be described in terms of various marvels but, as Clausen remarks, there is 'nothing marvellous about a field gradually turning yellow with grain'.<sup>1</sup> Like many others, he suggests Virgil's meaning to be that 'the field has not been cultivated, like the briars in the next line'; but it is very awkward to supply retrospectively the notion of 'uncultivated' from line 29. In fact the latter line is itself not free from difficulty: since thorn bushes are proverbially uncultivated (Lucr. 5.206–7 *quod superest arui, tamen id natura sua ui | sentibus obducit*), *incultis* is redundant.

<sup>1</sup> W. Clausen, *Virgil: Eclogues* (Oxford, 1994), 136. In his commentary R. Coleman renders *campus* as 'any flat land' (*Virgil: Eclogues* [Cambridge, 1977], 138) but the difficulty with this interpretation is that *campus* is regularly used of agricultural land (*TLL* 3.213.28 ff., where indeed our passage is listed).