

Reading Lucretius in the Renaissance. Ada Palmer.

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Of the several books recently published on the revival of Lucretius in the Renaissance, this is easily the most helpful in assisting our attempts to understand how and why actual readers — many thousands of them — in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries undertook what was for them a spiritually dangerous poem, *De rerum natura*. Enlisting a statistical approach to the evidence left by readers in the margins of the manuscripts, *Reading Lucretius* also ambitiously surveys and analyzes the paratexts in print editions as well as manuscripts, in particular the biographical material that greeted readers before they encountered the Latin verses themselves. Palmer has at her command virtually the whole manuscript and printed witnesses to Lucretius through 1600, so that when she generalizes about how reading the Epicurean poet fundamentally changed over the course of the period, she has decidedly earned the right.

The structure of the book — two chapters on manuscript readers, two chapters on biographical material, and a chapter on print editions and their paratexts — can on occasion seem repetitious. Palmer's admirable insistence on adhering to evidence entails that the final chapter (Montaigne's copy of the Lambinus Lucretius excepted) is anticlimactic, since readers of print editions (for reasons that Palmer explains) largely stop marking up their books. To some extent, Palmer's increasing reliance on paratexts qualifies the extent to which the book can confidently claim to capture "the real experience of reading Lucretius in the Renaissance" (5), since paratexts attempt to guarantee a reading experience that may or may not occur.

These minor problems notwithstanding, this book is chockablock with rich and compelling material. On the local level, I would single out Machiavelli's distinctive interest in the concept of the swerve; the humanist fascination with Lucretius's satire on sexual obsession; the uncommon labeling of "Lucretius Phisicus" by Petrus Crinitus in 1505 (153); the editor Lambinus's penchant to extricate Lucretius from his Epicurean master's most problematic ideas; and the way in which Lucretius's medical metaphor for the rhetorical power of his poem challenged humanist assumptions that good rhetoric can proceed only from a good person (a factor that prompted early biographies to establish the virtue of the Epicurean poet: not Virgil's treacherous opposite, but his morally legitimate near contemporary). On the general level, Palmer accentuates those factors that changed the reading of Lucretius on the threshold of the seventeenth century,

including the shift of the printing enterprise from Italy to France, the diminishing need for the humanist project that recovered and corrected ancient texts, and the replacement of a morally instructive focus of readers and editions with the early modern fascination with atomism and scientific method. Palmer's biggest claim is that this shift in reading reflects and contributes to the birth of the modern, including "the separation of natural science from theology" (6). Aptly, however, she resists overemphasizing this modernist narrative, more rigorously anatomizing types of humanist interests, how those interests gave way to others, and whether a particular reader is unusual or typical. In fact, Palmer is especially adept at historicizing the experience of reading as well as key concepts such as atheism or "proto-atheism," in which she locates six diacritical ideas. She lucidly explains the combination of dogmatism and skepticism that emerges from Lucretius's version of Epicureanism. Along the way, Palmer situates the fortunes of Lucretius's reputation within the context of changing views of heresy and error. In unfolding her intellectual history of the reception of Lucretius, Palmer inflects ideas with her extensive experience of the physical dimensions and features of manuscripts and print editions.

Any review of this book would be sorely remiss if it did not stress just how powerfully and engagingly it is written, including its prefatory provocation for modern readers to consider how spiritually perilous it was for Renaissance readers to turn to Lucretius, its turns of phrase ("more interest in *Rebus Veneriis* than in *Rerum Natura*" [70]), and its carefully crafted sentences ("for Lambin, absence of evidence is evidence of Epicureanism" [177]). The book is as scrupulously edited as it is argued: mistakes (Frances for Francis Bacon [85]) are rare. It is also generously illustrated and digests an abundance of information in its tables and appendixes. *Reading Lucretius* is a splendid debut from a scholar who is as bold and innovative as she is rigorous and learned.

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