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Ada Palmer, *Reading Lucretius in the Renaissance*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014. Pp. 416, illus. USD\$42.00 (cloth). ISBN: 978-0-674-72557-7.

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The present reviewer studied Lucretius's *De rerum natura* (henceforth *DRN*) as an undergraduate student, took a course on its early modern reception as a Masters student, and has subsequently published on the same topic. Perhaps the best way of summing up the book under review is to say that it would have been an extremely valuable companion at every stage of that journey. Ada Palmer's *Reading Lucretius in the Renaissance* is primarily a study of the early printed editions of Lucretius, and the traces which Lucretius's fifteenth- and sixteenth-century readers left in manuscripts and printed copies of the *DRN*. However, it is also one of the best introductions and guides to the Renaissance reception of the *De rerum natura* and Epicureanism more generally, offering the first serious synthesis of what has become a relatively large body of related secondary literature.

Composed around the middle of the first century BC, Lucretius's six-book poem was a manifesto for Epicureanism addressed to a Roman audience that ranged across, and often joined, the fields of physics, ethics, psychology, politics, and religion. After a broad and accessible introduction, Palmer's first chapter provides a sure-footed overview of the intellectual content of the poem itself and its ancient sources. Rather than treating the *DRN* as a monolithic, sectarian manifesto for the philosophy of Epicurus, Palmer notes points of overlap between the poem's arguments and other ancient philosophical traditions: for example, skepticism (3 ff., 34-35), Stoicism (13-14), and non-Epicurean versions of atomism (11). This groundwork helps the reader to grasp the diversity and versatility of early modern responses to Lucretius exhibited in the rest of the book.

That sympathy for readerly diversity is the book's chief virtue, and its organizing principle. The remaining four chapters concentrate, in turn, on: readers' annotations in manuscript copies of the *DRN* which were made during the Renaissance; ancient biographical and other references to Lucretius, and Renaissance readers' uses of them; the surprisingly lengthy biographies of Lucretius (hardly any reliable information is about him in the ancient record) which were composed during the Renaissance itself; and, finally, the early printed editions of Lucretius, their paratexts, and the notes which contemporary readers left in them. The study of early modern marginalia has grown *ad nauseam* in recent years, but Palmer's survey is by far the most thorough for this particular author. Most importantly, it avoids over-indulgence by combining qualitative studies of particularly interesting individual copies and readers with more austere, detached, quantitative accounts of larger patterns of annotation, the evidence for which is presented with due caution (45-47, 66, 72). This reviewer has a low tolerance for flat, dutiful, decontextualized accounts of how a given early modern individual read a given classical author, but this book never tested it. Palmer's method helps to place extraordinary individual readers like Machiavelli and Montaigne in context, showing what was unusual about their encounters with the *DRN* and what was not.

Summarizing the key themes and findings of Palmer's study is better than describing the contents of each chapter in order. The *DRN* is a complex and multi-faceted poem. Classicists have long known that to make Epicureanism appeal to Roman readers, Lucretius chose to imitate or appropriate features of the philosophies, belief systems, and literary forms which a strict Epicurean ought to have rejected. The *DRN* could thus be confused with, or collapsed into, the very forms of thought which it was meant to repudiate, and that is precisely what happened for much of the poem's reception history. The section on the great sixteenth-century editor Denys Lambin's biography in particular (176-187) shows how a poem whose underlying philosophy was 'functionally atheist' (10) could be treated as a broad, eclectic, and far from heterodox work of Roman moral and natural philosophy that criticized superstition and idolatry rather than theism itself. Similarly, Lucretius's atomism, and the denials of providential accounts of natural phenomena which it enabled, could be downplayed, or simply ignored at the expense of his less unconventional moral reasoning.

Such readings could have been fuelled by fascinating quirks of Lucretius's scholarly reception which Palmer unearths: for example, the notion, not comprehensively debunked until Lambin in later sixteenth century, that the *DRN* originally comprised twenty-one rather than six books, and thus that its atomism was only a small part of a much larger whole (129-131); that Lucretius was a young man when he died, who would surely have come to abandon Epicurus's atomism if he had not died so young (167); and even that Cicero was a virtual co-author of the *DRN* (107-108, 115) which must have given the impression that its doctrines were ultimately part of the mainstream of Roman philosophical culture. All this was further compounded by the strong propensity for syncretism in Renaissance thought: the assumption that ancient sages such as Aristotle, Cicero, Epicurus, and Lucretius had seen as far as they could with their natural reason; and, while they had left the majority of vulgar pagan superstitions behind, they would have purified their thought even further had they been able to benefit from Christian revelation (16-17, 65, 211). Palmer's sensitive, historically-minded treatment of what might appear to be misreadings of Lucretius raises an important question that Palmer herself does not answer: are these misreadings, perhaps, no less legitimate than the interpretations of later scholars of the *DRN*? At any rate, Palmer shows that Lucretius's Renaissance readers were responding to genuine and prominent features of the *DRN*, and doing the best they could with the techniques and evidence at their disposal.

As always, one or two blind spots occur. Palmer shows a commendable relish for the complexity of Lucretius's natural-philosophical reception; however, slightly less attention is given to politics and the reception of Book 5, and even less to the distinctive formal features of Lucretius's poem beyond frequent reminders that readers were interested in its peculiar vocabulary and its use of imagery. Creative literary responses to the *DRN* are perhaps difficult to detect in the evidence that Palmer surveys; further examples of them would have been found had she concentrated more on poetic imitators of Lucretius. Moreover, while a lot of time is spent on biographies and other paratexts, the full depth of the commentary tradition has not quite been sounded nor has the role of paraphrase or vernacular translation (although the latter is admittedly a seventeenth-century phenomenon, and thus falls outside the parameters of this book).

The book is generously and beautifully illustrated (although in greyscale rather than full colour), and largely free of typographical and other errors. Palmer's handling of Latin seems generally reliable, but some slips are evident. For example: in the transcript and translation of Machiavelli's *DRN* annotations (82-83), "nil esse suo densius aut rarius principio" (referring to *DRN* 2.294) surely means "nothing is denser or thinner than its original nature" rather than "nothing is denser or thinner by its fundamental nature"; "exquibus" should read "ex quibus"; "principius" should read "principiis"; and "varie" should read "vario." Later on (90), "manuculum" is surely a solecism; "*manicula*" or "manicule" are the proper terms. In the text of the poem that accompanied the 1486 Verona edition of the *DRN* (197), "insignum" should read "insignem."