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Lucretius in the Middle Ages and early Renaissance: transmission and scholarship

Where did the accent fall on *mulier* in the oblique cases? Medieval students were offered a hexameter that purported to tell them: *siue uirum suboles siue est mulieris origo*. The line scans if the *e* of *mulieris* is read as long, and it follows from the quantity that the accent fell on it. Most of the authors who quote the line attribute it to the tragedy *Orestes* by Statius, a double misapprehension not yet explained.¹ In fact, Lucretius wrote it (*DRN* 4.1232), and the manuscripts save him from the long *e*: they have *muliebris*. The true author was known to Mico of St-Riquier, who towards 850 compiled a work of a kind not attested in antiquity: an anthology of hexameters alphabetically arranged by keyword and labelled with the name of the poet, all chosen because they revealed the quantity of a vowel.² It includes sixteen lines from Lucretius, and *muliebris* has already lost its *b*. Even if, as an overlapping anthology suggests, it was not Mico himself who picked the lines out, the task was accomplished no earlier than about 825,³ and the source was almost certainly a text of Lucretius, because the lines could not have been assembled from other ancient works now extant. The longest passage of Lucretius that a medieval writer quotes, 1.150–6, occurs in a letter written about 850–5 to his abbot by a monk at St Gallen concerned with the quantity of *ri* in *uiderimus*;⁴ and another anthology of hexameters, preserved in St Gallen 870 (s. IX²), includes twenty-eight lines with no attribution.⁵ So much for atoms and fear of death.

Though the writer in the ninth century who quotes Lucretius most often, Hrabanus Maurus, could have found all nine of his quotations in ancient sources, the availability of Lucretius at the time is proved by manuscripts still extant: O (Leiden Voss. Lat. F 30), Q (Leiden Voss. Lat. Q 94), and GVU (Copenhagen Gl. Kgl. S. 211 2^o + Vienna 107 fos. 9–14, 15–18), the last related to Q and probably fragments of one manuscript. About the

¹ Sivo 1988. ² Leonhardt 1989: 81–6. ³ Munk Olsen 1979: 57–64.

⁴ MGH *Epist.* v 1899: 554.6–13. ⁵ Stephan 1885: 266–9; Munk Olsen 1979: 73–4.

origin and history of OQGVU not enough is known. In 812 the Irish scholar Dungal wrote to Charlemagne about an eclipse, and Bernhard Bischoff, who identified him as Lachmann's *corrector Saxonicus* in O, at first assigned O to 'the palace school'; but later he broadened this to 'north-west Germany or thereabouts'.⁶ Neither origin, however, readily fits the career of Dungal, who left St-Denis for Pavia about 820 and bequeathed manuscripts to the nearby monastery of Bobbio.⁷ O received other corrections and glosses up to 1.827 'ca. s. X',⁸ and in 1479 a librarian entered in it an *ex libris* of Mainz Cathedral, where it may already have been in 1417 if it was the manuscript that has left over fifty Italian descendants by way of a lost copy made for Poggio during the Council of Constance⁹ – the copy that restored Lucretius after half a millennium to what he would have called 'the realm of light'. Q, though annotated in the fifteenth century by an Italian hand, reached Paris between 1544 and 1559 from St-Bertin and was assigned to north-east France by Bischoff, who assigned GVU first to south-west Germany but later to 'probably northern Italy (Bobbio?)'.¹⁰ Copies of Lucretius are recorded in the ninth century at Bobbio and Murbach and in the twelfth at Corbie and Lobbes.¹¹ The one at Corbie may have been Q, and the one at Lobbes may explain how Sigebert of Gembloux (†1112) came to write 'Lucretius naturam clandestinam' (1.779) beside a hexameter of his own that included *clandestina*.¹²

In the absence of extant manuscripts written between the ninth century and the fifteenth, scholars have naturally combed medieval works for evidence that Lucretius was nevertheless read. When Ettore Bignone surveyed their efforts, he concluded that the only writers who knew him at first hand were Mico and the monk at St Gallen;¹³ but the copy recorded at Bobbio has since led his countrymen to detect Lucretian influence in north-Italian writers of the ninth to eleventh century, in the Paduan prehumanists about 1300, in Dante, and in Petrarch and Boccaccio.¹⁴ There is more to be said for reversing

their arguments: as we have no evidence that anyone was in a position to read Lucretius, we see what kinds of resemblance might arise by accident. Certainly accident seems a likely enough explanation for the recurrence in Mussato of such phrases as *camposque uirentes* or (in a different sense) *fructum . . . dulcedinis*.¹⁵ Similarly, Lucretius' argument for a temporary vacuum when contiguous surfaces move apart (1.384–97), much debated by medieval philosophers without reference to him, could have occurred to someone else independently.¹⁶

Had OQGVU and their descendants perished, it would still be possible to form some conception of Lucretius' poem from ancient references and quotations. A modern scholar could do so by putting together the *testimonia* assembled in Diels's edition,¹⁷ the passages listed in the indexes of Keil's *Grammatici Latini* and of Lindsay's *Festus*, Nonius, and Isidore,¹⁸ the passages that Servius in his commentary on Virgil and Macrobius in *Saturnalia* 6.1–5 give as the models for passages of Virgil,¹⁹ and the passages or views that Lactantius contests or applauds; not many quotations or references would slip through this net. A medieval scholar would have found it much harder, not just for want of indexes but also because several of the works in question were themselves scarce. Three of the earliest *testimonia*, for instance, occur in a letter from Cicero to his brother Quintus, in Nepos' *Life of Atticus*, and in the history of Velleius, which hardly anyone could have tracked down even if they had had the strange idea of looking.²⁰ The richest source of quotations, 116 in all, is Nonius' dictionary, which like Lucretius' poem had a dormant transmission between the ninth century and the fifteenth.²¹ Indeed, enough traditions surface or resurface in the fifteenth century to cast doubt on the common notion that Christian scruples were to blame for the neglect of a poet who preached the mortality of the soul and the unconcern of the gods.²²

Interest in Lucretius was perhaps most likely to leave a mark in biographical dictionaries or in glosses on works that mention him. Jerome's entry on

⁶ Bischoff 2004: 50 no. 2189.

⁷ Ferrari 1972. She had found no trace of Lucretius in Dungal's works (38).

⁸ Bischoff 2004: 50 no. 2189. In Reeve 2005: 157–61 I discussed the corrections in O and argued that Dungal restored from the exemplar lines that the scribe had omitted by *saut du même au même*.

⁹ Reeve 2005; see 156–7 for new evidence.

¹⁰ Bischoff 2004: 61 no. 2231; Bischoff 1998: 411 no. 1184.

¹¹ For references see Reeve 2005: n. 114, and add Tosi 1984–5: 135–61 for a better text of the catalogue from Bobbio; 'Lib. Lucretii I' is his no. 386 on p. 143. I owe the reference to Fiesoli 2004: 6 n. 10. The copy of Lucretius is not among the books *quos Dunghalus praecipuus Scottorum obtulit beatissimo Columbano* (Tosi 1984–5: 144).

¹² Manitius 1931: 340. ¹³ Bignone 1913.

¹⁴ For references see Solaro 2000: 93–122 'Testimonianze medievali'.

¹⁵ Billanovich 1958: 188–90. ¹⁶ Grant 1981: 86–7.

¹⁷ Diels 1923: xxxv–xlii 'De uita et arte Lucreti testimonia'.

¹⁸ These too appear in Diels's edition, between the text and the main apparatus; Martin 1934 adds little. An inaccuracy in Diels's second entry misled me, Reeve 2005: 163, when I reported P. Thiermann's contention that Brunetti must have known 1.3 from Lucretius himself: in fact Nonius quotes not just 1.4 *concelebras* but 1.3 too.

¹⁹ Pieri 1977 argues that Macrobius bolsters his case by quoting some passages of Lucretius in versions closer to Virgil than they should have been. Gellius 1.21.7 had recognised Virgil's debt to Lucretius.

²⁰ Reynolds 1983: 135–7, 247–8, 431–3.

²¹ Reynolds 1983: 248–52; Milanese 2005.

²² Reynolds 1983: xli–xliii.

him, the source of the notorious allegation that he composed between fits of insanity and killed himself when driven mad by a love potion, lent itself to expansion, but the encyclopedist Vincent of Beauvais in the thirteenth century (*Spec. hist.* 5.95) and the anonymous author of a work *On the life and habits of philosophers* composed early in the fourteenth²³ merely copied it out, and Guglielmo da Pastrengo (†1362) adjusted it only by adding *comicus* to Lucretius' name.²⁴ In an epigram ascribed to him by medieval scholia on verse 419 of Ovid's riddling *Ibis*, Lucretius addresses Asterion in the person of a frustrated admirer Almenicus,²⁵ and a wife Lucilia came on the scene when someone identified Lucretius as the husband she poisons with a love potion in Walter Map's work *On fripperies in courtly circles*.²⁶ Readers of poetry were most likely to meet him in Ovid, at *Amores* 1.15.23–4 and *Tristia* 2.425–6, and the latter passage would hardly have been transparent ('and prophesies that the threefold fabric will collapse'); but whether glossed manuscripts give further details I do not know, nor whether anyone identified the poem 'whose first words are *Aeneadum genetrix*' (*Tr.* 2.261), which could have been done with the aid of Priscian, *Institutio* 7.9, just as the name of its addressee, Memmius, could have been recovered from Servius' introduction to the *Georgics*, or its subject identified as physics and philosophical teaching by anyone with access to Quintilian (1.4.4; 3.1.4) or as *rerum natura* by anyone with access to Vitruvius, who treats Lucretius as an authority on it (9 pr. 17).

When Poggio's copy reached Florence, his friend Niccoli did not write the copy known as L (Laur. 35.30) till the 1430s, just when Traversari's Latin translation of Diogenes Laertius was opening up an easier route to Epicurus' life and thought.²⁷ The first copy of Poggio's copy may well have been not L but instead the lost source of the earliest dated manuscript, A (Vat. Lat. 3276), written in 1442 probably at Naples.²⁸ Two unemended relatives of A (one of these, Madrid Nac. 2885, is cited below as S) best illustrate the difficulties that confronted Italian humanists: non-existent words, erratic word-division, unmetrical lines, strange forms. The remedies adopted in A, probably devised by the poet Antonio Beccadelli (Panormita) or associates of his, concentrate on producing recognisable words and metrical lines, often in defiance of sense and syntax. The same approach recurs in other manuscripts, for instance at 1.487–8, where the faultless reading of OQ had given way to an unmetrical corruption:

²³ Knust 1886: 334 no. CI. ²⁴ Bottari 1991: 139. ²⁵ Solaro 1993: 60–2.

²⁶ Solaro 1997; Solaro 2000: 14–16. ²⁷ Sottili 1984, Gigante 1988.

²⁸ On the Italian tradition see Reeve 1980, Reeve 2005, Reeve 2006.

– etsi difficile esse uidetur credere quicquam
in rebus solido reperiri corpore posse

even if it seems hard to believe that anything in objects can be found with a
solid body

credere OQG: forsitan LSA, Harl. 2554

forsitan et quicquam et si difficile esse uidetur Harl. 2554 mg.

Nevertheless, modern editors rightly accept a number of conjectures that first appear in A. By recourse to Nonius and other ancient material, readers found preferable variants and defences for strange forms such as 1.71 *cupiret*, and in mid-century someone impressively overhauled the text by starting from a good copy of Poggio's manuscript, drawing on a fresh copy or collation of O, consulting a wide range of indirect evidence, and applying thought and a sense of style; the results of this editorial endeavour are best known from F (Laur. 35.31), but its relatives shed more light on the process. Sadly, the editor, who probably worked at Rome, has not been identified.²⁹ Here are two examples of his work from Book 3. Exiles lead a life of tribulation, 'and yet wherever they arrive they sacrifice to the dead and slaughter black sheep . . . and in their distress turn their minds far more intently to religion':

et quocumque tamen miseri uenere parentant
et nigras mactant pecudes et manibus diuis
inferias mittunt multoque in rebus acerbis
acrius aduertunt animos ad religionem.

52

52 et (e V) manibus diuis QV, Nonius: manibus diuis O: manibusque diuisque LS: manibus diuisque A: quas manibus diuis F 53 inferias mittunt Q², LF: inferiamittunt OQ¹ V: inferri amittant SA

So adversity is the true test of a person, 'because only then are true utterances coaxed from the depths of their heart, the mask snatched away':

nam uerae uoces tum demum pectore ab imo
eliciuntur eripitur persona manare.

58

58 eripitur OQVS: et eripitur LAF manare OQVLA²: manere SA¹: manet res F: minaci Morel: mala re Heinze: an manu (cf. 4.843) a re? Martin

In 52 Poggio's copy must have had *manibusque diuisque*, a still unmetrical fudge (since the first syllable of *diuisque* is long) devised by someone

²⁹ In Reeve 2005: 150–1 I tentatively suggested that he might have been Lorenzo Valla, though Valla worked mainly on prose.

confronted with the reading of O who took *manibus* as 'hands' and saw that the metre then went awry; A improves on this by reducing *manibusque* to *manibus*. Whether by drawing on a collation of O or by applying thought, the editor behind F saw that the word required was *mānibus*, 'shades', which scanned if the *s* was ignored as it sometimes is elsewhere in the poem (a phenomenon remarked on by ancient grammarians). In 58 S is free from the conjecture <et> but like A has at the end of the line the commoner word *manere*, which unlike *mānare* scans; neither, however, can be construed or interpreted, whereas the conjecture *manet res*, 'the reality is left behind', satisfies metre, sense, and syntax, so well indeed that it puts the modern conjectures to shame.

By the time that Iohannes Baptista Pius brought out the first commentary on the poem (Bologna, 1511),³⁰ more conjectures were circulating, many of them recently made by Marullus, who ventured transpositions and deletions.³¹ Open discussion of its arguments or literary merits, however, had not kept pace with textual work. In the late 1460s, after spending a fortnight copying out the 7381 lines *ad dei optimi maximi laudem sempiternam*, a scholar who later became a bishop and crossed swords with philosophers, Pietro Barozzi, put a request to fellow-Christians – not that they should take the work with a pinch of salt, but that they should blame on the exemplar any errors of sense and metre, which they would find marked; 'if instead you blame me, then I shall consider you (to quote [Martial 2.8.6]) insensitive'.³² Apologising again for the state of the text, the first editor (Brescia, c. 1473) assures *studiosi* that they will be better off emending it than going without it altogether.

especially since Lucretius steers clear of stories that in the words of the poet entertain unoccupied minds [*Georgics* 3.3] and instead tackles thorny questions of physics, with such intellectual sharpness and such literary flair that all his poetic successors, especially the prince of poets Virgil, model their descriptions on him, to the point of borrowing not just his very words but sometimes three whole lines or more.

When Basil's work on profiting from secular literature had been circulating in Bruni's Latin translation for half a century, even shielding Lucretius behind Virgil might have seemed unnecessary. Thirty years or more of study

by Pomponio Leto, who wrote a manuscript in 1458 and contributed to the annotation in a copy of the second edition (Verona 1486), are not reflected in anything more discursive than brief remarks on the nature of philosophy, its arrival in Rome, the life and reception of Lucretius, the significance of Venus, Vulcan, and Mars, and Cicero's misrepresentation of Epicurus as a voluptuary when his mistake was actually unawareness of God and resurrection.³³ In Vat. Ottob. Lat. 2834, however, a member of Leto's circle wrote this note on the poem:³⁴

If a god is not susceptible to favour or anger, why are you appealing to Venus, who in your opinion is deaf? That suits not you but people who say that the gods are moved by the prayers of mortals. Perhaps, if he had opened with something that other mortals recoiled from, no one would have read him. Writers make a habit in their proems of giving the reader uplift and encouragement. Here, though, he speaks as a human being, later as a madman. If we grant that Venus is the cause of generation, thanking her by paying her compliments would be more rational than being charged with ingratitude, and indeed one might suppose that she can do harm just as she has done good.

In a copy of Niccoli's manuscript that he wrote in the 1470s Bartolomeo Fonzio annotated the section of Book 3 on hellish passions and the death of the great, the section of Book 4 on love, and the section of Book 5 on the early life of man. The deepest appreciation shown of Lucretius in the second half of the fifteenth century is also the hardest to pin down: emulation by poets of the day, above all Bonincontri, Pontano, and Marullus.³⁵

Unless the strange assemblage of garbled verses at the end of the second and third edition (Verona 1486, Venice 1495) was meant to have a programmatic function, it was Aldus who first commended Lucretius editorially (Venice, 1500), as a learned and stylish exponent of Epicurean doctrine and a Latin follower of the innovator Empedocles, whose philosophical verse had survived only in quotation.³⁶ Aldus' editor, the able critic Hieronymus Avancius, introduced an emended text, badly needed after the editions just mentioned, with a snappy account of Lucretius' style. From a Platonic standpoint close to Ficino's, Raphael Francus published apparently not in many

³³ Solaro 2000: 25–30.

³⁴ Reeve 2005: 148 n. 95; I now think the unusual abbreviation *pōa* stands for *postea*, not *poeta*. On Leto see Reeve 2005: 144–7, 148–51. An article is forthcoming by Helen Dixon on the annotated incunabula Utrecht Univ. X 2° 82, the incunabula can be viewed online (<http://digbijzcoll.library.uu.nl/index.php?lang=en&letter=d>, 'De rerum natura').

³⁵ Goddard 1991a: chs. 2–4; Goddard 1991b. On Pontano and Marullus see further pp. 186–9 above.

³⁶ For the place of the edition in Aldus' output see Davies 1995: 40–3.

³⁰ In 1492 Ficino claimed to have burnt *commentariola* that he composed in his youth, probably about 1457–8, when he used Lucretius for a sketch of Epicureanism; but the term surely means 'essays'. See Ficino 1576: 933; Kristeller 1937: II, 9–10, 81–7; Vasoli 1997: 381.

³¹ Deufert 1999. ³² Padua Capit. C 75 fo. 148v; Reeve 2005: 141 n. 79.

copies (only four have been reported) a *Paraphrasis in Lucretium* of Books 1–3 with an appendix on the immortality of the soul (Bologna, 1504); the work has been described as ‘a model of clarity, to the point of tempting the reader to suspect that his disagreement was by no means as deeply rooted as he wished it to be thought’.³⁷ Then, from a surprising quarter, came a fully fledged commentary: previously, Iohannes Baptista Pius had taken to extremes Beroaldus’ crusade for the archaic, flowery, and uncanonical, but he now set Lucretius’ poem, which he represented as bristling with difficulties, in a painstakingly documented and largely unpartisan context of ancient and medieval philosophy dominated by the Presocratics, Aristotle, Albertus Magnus, and Aquinas.³⁸ His introduction avoids explicit controversy: Lucretius aimed at dispelling ignorance, leading his readers to the intellectual bliss described by Virgil at the end of the second *Georgic*, and serving the common good (1.43), for instance by freeing minds from the bonds of *religionum hoc est superstitionum* (a gloss that Lucretius would have rejected if it implied that there were acceptable *religiones*).³⁹ A typical note accompanies Lucretius’ tirade against the notion that the gods made the world for the benefit of the human race (5.156–80): labelled in the margin ‘Why people were created’, it surveys the answers given by Origen, Augustine, and Aquinas, but does not adjudicate. Pius displays many other interests. His note on hermaphrodites (5.839) passes from Pliny, Ausonius, and an epigram (*Anth. Lat.* 786 Riese), to an ancient inscription that he has recently seen near Bologna, and from that to Quintilian, Varro *De re rustica*, Horace with Porphyrio’s commentary (which he emends in passing), Albertus Magnus, and an epigram by Palladas that has been misunderstood.

Incongruously alluding to Apuleius’ *Golden Ass*, Pius ends his frontispiece by promising the reader enjoyment; but at the end of his introduction the Gothic type of the frontispiece returns in a declaration, *Omnia orthodoxe fidei subiicio*, ‘I submit everything to orthodox belief.’ A copy now in Cambridge (CUL Adv. a 25.6) has jottings by an early reader, perhaps Mario Maffei, whose sons and heirs owned it. Underneath *Omnia orthodoxe fidei subiicio* he wrote *Omnia ergo retractanda*, ‘Everything, then, needs revising.’ For this reader, as for many another, the sting was not so easily taken out of the poem.

³⁷ Pizzani 1986: 333; for details of copies see p. 322 n. 43 (only two complete: Tolbiac; Florence Bibl. Naz.).

³⁸ Del Nero 1985–6, a fine appreciation; Raimondi 1974 is more concerned with the place of the commentary in Pius’ chequered career.

³⁹ Solaro 2000: 43–8 reprints the introduction.

Further reading

On transmission generally see Reynolds 1983: 218–22. On ancient testimonia: Diels 1923: xxxv–xlii and apparatus of *testimonia*, Pieri 1977, Milanese 2005. NINTH CENTURY: Stephan 1885, Finch 1967, Munk Olsen 1979, Leonhardt 1989, Ganz 1996, Bischoff 2004. MIDDLE AGES: Bignone 1913, Billanovich 1958, Grant 1981, Sivo 1988, Solaro 1993, Solaro 1997, Solaro 2000: 93–122. FIFTEENTH CENTURY (1417–1511): Lehnerdt (1904), Bertelli 1964, Raimondi 1974, Reeve 1980, Del Nero 1985–6, Pizzani 1986, Goddard 1991a, Goddard 1991b, Deufert 1998, Deufert 1999, A. Brown 2001, Reeve 2005, Reeve 2006.