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MICHAEL REEVE
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 sub o/es 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 mis-apprehension not yet explained.1 In fact, Lucretius wrote it (DRN 4.12.32), 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, 1.350–6, occurs in a letter written about 870 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. IX4), 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 GUV (Copenhagen Gl. Kgl. S. 211 2° + Vienna 107 fos. 9–14, 15–18), the last related to Q and probably fragments of one manuscript. About the

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 1427 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 Constance 9 – 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 GUV 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' 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 (58).
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.
13 For references see Solaro 2000: 93–112 'Testimonianze medievali.'
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 fourteenth\[34\] merely copied it out, and Guglielmo da Pastrengo (1362) adjusted it only by adding comicus to Lucretius' name.\[34\] 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,\[35\] 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.\[36\] 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 genetric' (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 pt. 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.\[37\] 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.\[38\] 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 1.4.87-8, where the faultless reading of OQ had given way to an unmetrical corruption:


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**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 capret, 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.\[39\] 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 venere parentant
et nigras macant pecudes et manibus diuis
inferias mitochond multoque in rebus acerbis
acrius aduentant animos ad religionem.

\[52\] et (e V) manibus diuis QV, Nonius: manibus diuis O; manibusque diuisque LS; manibus diuisque A: quas manibus diuis F 53 inferius mittunt Q\[39\], LF: inferiamittunt OQV\[39\] 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 pector ab imo
elicintur eripitur persona manare.

\[58\] eripitur OQVS; et eripitur LAF manare QVLA\[39\]; manere SA\[39\]; manet res P: minaci Morel: malia 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 some one

\[39\] In Reeve 2005: 130-1 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 P saw that the word required was manibus, ‘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 manere 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), more conjectures were circulating, many of them recently made by Marullus, who ventured transpositions and deletions. 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 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’. 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

31 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; Krister 1937: ii, 9–10, 81–7; Vasoli 1997: 381.
32 Deufert 1999.
33 Padua Capit. C 75 fo. 148v; Reeve 2005: 141 n. 79.
34 Reeve 2005: 148 n. 95. I now think the unusual abbreviation poa stands for poetæa, not poeta. On Leto see Reeve 2005: 144–7, 148–51. An article is forthcoming by Helen Dixon on the annotated incunable Utrecht Univ. X 5° 82, the incunable can be viewed online (http://digbijzcoll.library.uu.nl/index.php?lang=en&letter=e, ‘De rerum natura’).
36 For the place of the edition in Aldus' output see Davies 1995: 40–3.
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’.

Then, from a surprising quarter, came a fully fledged commentary: previously, Johannes 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. 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 religio um hoc est superstitionum (a gloss that Lucretius would have rejected if it implied that there were acceptable religiones).

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 ortodoxe 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 ortodoxe 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.

Further reading


37 Pizzani 1986: 333; for details of copies see p. 322 n. 45 (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.