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Lucretius, Atheism, and Irreligion in Renaissance and Early Modern Venice

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Research on Lucretius in Renaissance and early modern Italy is often focused on Florence, and with good reason. The text of the *De rerum natura* was first brought to light by a Tuscan, Poggio Bracciolini, in 1417; and although Poggio's copy remained in Niccolò Niccoli's sole possession at Florence until the 1430s, it subsequently served as the main source for European knowledge of the text. Florence became, as Alison Brown has shown, a key centre for the study and dissemination of Lucretian ideas well into the sixteenth century.¹

But Florence was not the only city where Lucretius was read. While many of the earliest manuscript copies of the *De rerum natura* were produced in Florence, others were owned in Rome and Naples, and interest was evident in north-east Italy as well. Two fifteenth-century manuscripts of the *De rerum natura* survive in the Biblioteca Capitolare in Padua, for instance, one with the coat of arms of Jacopo Zeno (1418–81), the other copied by Pietro Barozzi (?1441–1507). Both men were Venetian patricians.² And the earliest four printed editions of the text were produced in the Venetian Republic: the *editio princeps* by Thomas Ferrandus at Brescia in about 1473; the second by Paulus Fridenperger at Verona in 1486; the third in Venice by Theodorus de Ragazonibus in 1495; and the fourth—edited by the Veronese humanist Girolamo Avanzio—by Aldus Manutius in

¹ See esp. Brown (2010a).

² A list of Lucretius MSS can be found in Palmer (2009) 354–7.

Venice in 1500.³ The Venetian humanist Giovanni Battista Cipelli (1478–1553)—more usually known as Battista Egnazio—was reportedly lecturing on Lucretius in Venice in the early years of the sixteenth century.⁴ And in 1515, the last Italian edition of the *De rerum natura* for over 100 years was published, again in Venice and again by Aldus. The text for this edition had been newly edited by the Venetian patrician Andrea Navagero, a prolific editor of the classics who was appointed public historiographer of the Republic in the following year; it became the basis for the later editions of the *De rerum natura* produced in Basel, Lyons, and Paris.⁵

Despite these indications of a serious local interest in, and engagement with, the *De rerum natura*, there has been little modern research on the reception and influence of Lucretius in the Venetian Republic in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.⁶ The Venetian example may nonetheless help us to test and develop some of the arguments and interpretations that have been advanced by scholars who have worked in the records of other Italian cities and states.

Venetian readers of Lucretius were undoubtedly aware that elements in the *De rerum natura* were at odds with contemporary Christian teaching, as they were with the Roman religion of the poem's own time. Throughout the poem, in fact, religious belief is presented as delusional, and a source of evil and crime (as 1.80–101, 5.1217–39). Among its most obvious challenges to Catholic belief are the materialism of Lucretius's understanding of atoms (as 5.417–32), his rejection of any notion of divine creation or providence (as 1.149–50, 2.1048–63, 4.833–43, 5.157–70), and his denial of an after-life (as 3.418–25, 799–800). These subversive themes were not lost on Venetian publishers and readers. At the end of the second printing of the poem, for example, after recording publication details (*Paulus hunc impressit*

³ See Palmer (2009) 363–7, (2014) 258–64 for a list of Lucretius edns; cf. also (2009) 310–19, Palmer (2014) 258–64, and Ferguson Smith and Butterfield (2010) for a possible additional printing at Brescia in 1496. Avanzio was born in Verona; he also worked with Aldus on his edns of Pliny and Catullus: Lowry (1979) 245, 257.

⁴ Fleischmann (1971) 352.

⁵ Palmer (2009) 244, 327, (2014) 162–3. For Navagero, see Lowry (1979) 204–5, 230–1; Marchesi (2012). Only two other edns of the *De rerum natura* were produced in Italy in the 15th and 16th cents.: one at Bologna in 1511 and the other at Florence in 1512.

⁶ An important exception is S. Campbell (2003), who suggests that Lucretius's poem provides 'an interpretative frame' (323) for Giorgione's *The Tempest*, which is often dated to 1505–6.

fridenperger in verona . . .), the publisher inserted an additional little verse of his own, constructed for the most part from largely unaltered lines taken from the *De rerum natura* itself, in which Fridenperger recognized the importance of atoms (*semina rerum*) to Lucretius's thinking, but urged the reader in the publisher's own words to discard everything in the volume that was false (*Si autem sint falsa et ratio quoque falsa et sensus: relinque*). The verse ends with a confident statement—including a line reworked from 4.467–8—that truth and falsehood can be distinguished by reason: *Nam nihil egregius est: quam res cernere a dubiis apertas. / Ratio enim neminem decipit nec decipitur nunquam*.⁷ Aldus Manutius made a rather different case on the opening page of his first Venetian edition of 1500, in the dedicatory letter to his former pupil, Alberto Pio di Carpi. While acknowledging that much of what Lucretius had written was wrong, Aldus argued that the poem should nonetheless be studied because its account of Epicurean philosophy was written in such elegant and learned Latin.⁸ In the new dedicatory letter to Alberto Pio—by now imperial ambassador to the papacy—which introduced his second edition of 1515, however, Aldus reverted to the argument that a study of the false beliefs of Lucretius would reveal the truth of Christianity even more clearly. He referred to Lucretius directly as 'full of lies', pointing in particular to the very different beliefs about God and the creation that he held as a member of the 'Epicurean sect'. And he insisted that any reader of Lucretius who was not already aware of the poet's 'lunacies' should learn of them from Aldus's own words.⁹

Not all aspects of the *De rerum natura* were seen as dangerous, of course. Lucretius's austere approach to physical pleasure and his hostility to self-indulgence (as in 4.1061–1146) could be reconciled quite easily with Christian teaching.¹⁰ It is nonetheless sometimes suggested that the distancing tactics adopted by his early Venetian editors—warning readers against his errors while urging them to read his poem, or focusing more on its literary merits than its philosophical

⁷ Lucretius (1486) m vii. Palmer (2009) 315–16, (2014) 197–9 prints the verse and helpfully identifies the Lucretian origins of each borrowed line.

⁸ *... non quod vera scripserit, et credenda nobis, nam ab academicis etiam, et peripateticis, nedum a theologis nostris multum dissentit, sed quia epicureae sectae dogmata eleganter et docte mandavit carminibus*: Lucretius (1500) 1^v. For the relationship of Aldus and Alberto Pio, see Lowry (1979) 52–9, 75, 111.

⁹ Lucretius (1515) 1^v–2^f.

¹⁰ Cf. e.g. S. Campbell (2003) 326–7, Palmer (2009) 236–7.

content—were little more than attempts to protect themselves from the unwelcome attention of the authorities while still ensuring that his ideas were put into wider circulation.¹¹ But it can also be argued that editors, publishers, and readers were in reality quite capable of distinguishing between the different arguments in the text, refuting some and approving others. In order to identify which approach students of Lucretius might have adopted, however, we need to look more closely, where we can, at their other statements and activities.

Take those two Venetian patricians who owned—in one case, copied—the manuscripts of the *De rerum natura* now in the Biblioteca Capitolare at Padua. Jacopo Zeno and Pietro Barozzi were both bishops. Zeno was appointed to Belluno in 1447, and moved in 1460 to Padua, where he remained until his death twenty-one years later; Barozzi followed the same path from Belluno, where he was bishop from 1471 to 1487, to Padua, remaining in post there until his death in 1507. Both men were known as defenders of Catholic teaching, conscientious pastors, and reformers in their dioceses. They also amassed significant private libraries—361 manuscript and printed volumes, in Zeno's case—and had extensive scholarly interests. Zeno wrote biographies of popes and other men of the Church,¹² while Barozzi produced saints' lives and a verse life of Christ, as well as work on canon law, devotional texts, and a book on the art of dying well, which was published with a selection of his other titles in 1531.¹³ Barozzi's exemplary life and career in fact served as a model for Gasparo Contarini's influential description of the ideal bishop in his *De officio episcopi*, written in 1517.¹⁴ It is not easy to characterize either Zeno or Barozzi as a closet Lucretian.

Or consider Battista Egnazio, who lectured on Lucretius in Venice in the early 1500s. He was ordained in 1502, and despite the early success of his career as a secular priest, he seriously considered joining the austere Camaldoli branch of the Benedictine order towards the end of that decade. He remained a good friend of devout

¹¹ See e.g. Prosperi (2007a) 214–16. ¹² King (1986) 7, 447–9.

¹³ Barozzi (1531). The Bodleian Library in Oxford owns a decorated MS of Barozzi's *De ratione bene moriendi*—probably the dedication copy presented to Cardinal Marco Barbo, patriarch of Aquileia: Bodleian MS Lyell 81. On Barozzi, see also Gaeta (1964), Gasparini (1980), King (1986) 7, 32, 235, 333–5, who emphasizes his piety and theological orthodoxy, Reeve (2007) 210, and Nante et al. (2012).

¹⁴ A modern edition and translation of this text appears in Contarini (2002): for Contarini's praise of Barozzi, see 84, 94, 120–2.

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patricians such as Tommaso Giustinian and Vincenzo Quirini (who did both join the Camaldolesi), and Gasparo Contarini (who was made a cardinal in 1535), as well as of Aldus and his son Paolo, with whom he worked closely on many classical editions.¹⁵ Quirini too had worked on the text of the *De rerum natura*, as Avancio acknowledged in his dedicatory letter in the 1500 Aldine edition of the poem.¹⁶

Figures such as Zeno and Barozzi, Egnazio and Quirini, who studied, edited, or published the *De rerum natura* but retained a strong commitment to the Christian faith, could be found in other Italian cities too. The Aldine press published the *De principiis rerum* of the Neapolitan humanist Scipione Capece, for instance, in 1546, with a preface by Paolo Manuzio and an endorsement by the Venetian cardinal Pietro Bembo. The poem imitates Lucretius's original, praises his Latin style, and deals with some similar themes. But Capece used his text to reject Lucretius's materialism; and he was in fact a deeply religious man, attracted by aspects of the evangelical preaching of the Capuchin Bernardino Ochino and by the teaching of the Spanish theologian Juan de Valdès, who had lived in Naples for the last few years of his life until his death in 1541.¹⁷

And while some devout Christians were undoubtedly concerned by the risk posed to orthodox belief by the arguments of pagan classical authors,¹⁸ it should be remembered that the Catholic Church did not in the sixteenth century add Lucretius's name to the Index of Prohibited Books. Indeed, during the preparatory work on the first Roman Index, issued by Pope Paul IV, the fearsomely orthodox Cardinal Michele Ghislieri—who was elected Pope in 1565 and canonized in 1712—argued forcefully that books such as the *De rerum natura* should not be placed on the Index. Writing to the inquisitor at Genoa on 27 June 1557, he claimed that 'If we were to prohibit the *Orlando innamorato* and the *Orlando furioso*, . . . the *Decameron* and similar books, we would immediately be laughed at; . . . nobody reads such books as texts in which we have to believe, but as stories (*fabule*),

¹⁵ On Egnazio, see Ross (1976), Mioni (1981); on his circle of devout friends, Bowd (2002), and Tabacchi (2002).

¹⁶ Lucretius (1500) 2^v.

¹⁷ Capece (1546): see e.g. i. 238–42. Information from Capece's 1553 Inquisition trial in Naples was sent to the Venetian Inquisition tribunal in 1555: Venice, Archivio di Stato (hereafter ASVen), Savi all'eresia (Santo Uffizio) (hereafter SU), b. 13, 'Giulio Basalù'. For more information on Capece, see Parenti (1975); Bacchelli (1990a).

¹⁸ See the examples cited by Brown (2010a) pp. x, 3, 5, 12.

in the same way that we still read many pagan authors such as . . . Lucretius and the like'.¹⁹

It is true, of course, that the Florentine provincial council had in 1517 ordered local school teachers not to discuss *opera lasciva et impia* in their classes, naming Lucretius's poem as an example. But the decree refers only to the *De rerum natura*'s teaching on the mortality of the soul; and the prohibition could have had no force outside the jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Florence.²⁰ Philosophical debates about the soul had in fact become very heated in the later fifteenth century, not least at the University of Padua—so much so that Bishop Pietro Barozzi had had to intervene in 1489, issuing a decree prohibiting public discussion of the doctrine of the unity of intellect.²¹ And in December 1513, the Fifth Lateran Council had also condemned 'all those who assert that the intellective soul is mortal, or only one among all human beings'.²² It is possible that that either or both of these decrees might subsequently have been used against anyone seeking to challenge the traditional doctrine of immortality in the Venetian Republic. But it is clear from their wording that they were targeted mainly against existing trends in Aristotelian philosophy, rather than against any new materialist ideas borrowed from Lucretius.

It seems, therefore, that it was possible to read and study Lucretius without compromising Christian belief; and that the ecclesiastical authorities—outside the jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Florence, at least—were not especially concerned by the circulation of the *De rerum natura*. But another way to assess the impact of the poem in north-east Italy is to examine the trial records of individuals who were reported or examined for ideas of the kind that Lucretius had hoped to promote.

¹⁹ Quoted by Frajese (2006) 77–8. Alessandro Marchetti's Italian translation of the *De rerum natura* was placed on the Index, but only in 1718, after its first publication in London and three years after his death. It is interesting to note in this context that, in 1534, the Venetian Council of Ten authorized the publication of the *Zodiacus vitae*, which was almost certainly influenced by the *De rerum natura* and is now attributed to the south Italian humanist Marcello Stellato. The author died in Forlì in 1538; his body was subsequently exhumed and burned, along with heretical books found in his house. The *Zodiacus* was placed on the first papal Index in 1559. But Stellato was not atheist, and the ecclesiastical authorities were probably more concerned by his interest in such un-Lucretian subjects as astrology, alchemy, and magic than his knowledge of Epicureanism: see Vasoli (1996).

²⁰ Mansi (1900–27) xxxv, col. 270: *De magistris*, 2.

²¹ See Blum (2007); for Barozzi's decree, 218.

²² Anon. (1521) 107^r: Session 8, 19 Dec. 1513.

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In March 1534, for instance, while on visitation in the western part of his diocese, Gian Matteo Giberti, the Bishop of Verona, received reports about Antonio Piviano, a tavern-keeper in Desenzano on the southern shore of Lake Garda. After questioning witnesses, the bishop concluded that Antonio was ‘a blasphemer against God, the Virgin Mary, and the saints’. He had, claimed Giberti, mocked the faith and the sacraments, and denied the immortality of the soul; and ‘as one who does not believe that either Paradise or Hell exist, he says publicly that there is no life after death; and that when he dies, his body can be thrown into the lake to feed the fish’.²³ Later in the century, Girolamo di Ferrari was alleged to have held some similar beliefs. Ferrari was a lawyer and poet who lived in Monselice, to the south of Padua. The Venetian Inquisition was told in 1570 that ‘he believed nothing’: in particular, he denied the existence of hell, purgatory, and paradise, he mocked the sacraments and the crucifix, and he rejected the providence of God, holding instead that everything was subject to chance.²⁴ And a few years after that, in 1577, Costantino Tessera, a Venetian gold-beater in his seventies, was interrogated after claims by witnesses that he denied the existence of the after-life, arguing that ‘once the body is dead, the soul dies also’, for according to Tessera, the soul ‘is nothing other than our blood’.²⁵

These are just a few examples from many that could be cited; and it is not of course easy to prove that the suspects in trials such as these did in fact hold the beliefs for which they were investigated. But whether they did or not, the surviving records undoubtedly indicate that beliefs of the kind present in the *De rerum natura* were by the sixteenth century familiar in north-east Italy: materialism, the rejection of providence, the denial of an after-life.²⁶ But as far as I have been able to discover, the extensive records of ecclesiastical jurisdiction from this period contain no investigations for atomism. Nor did there seem to be any interest at the time on the part of inquisitors and other clerical judges in the influence of Lucretius. None of the suspects I have mentioned, or the others I could discuss in this context, were asked whether they had read the *De rerum natura*, or even

²³ ASVen, SU, b. 160, letter of Gian Mateo Giberti, Bishop of Verona, to the Capi del Consiglio dei Dieci in Venice, 15 Mar. 1534; Prosperi (2010) i. 101.

²⁴ SU, b. 28, ‘C. Girolamo di Ferrari, Dottore’; for Ferrari’s written works, see Vedova (1832) i. 393–4.

²⁵ SU, b. 41, ‘Tessera Costantino’. Tessera was a Greek; he was born in Trebizond.

²⁶ Cf. also Davidson (1992).

whether they owned a copy. The only reference to Lucretius that I am aware of in the archives of the Venetian Inquisition before 1600 appears in the trial of Giordano Bruno. And in that case, Lucretius's name was brought up not by the tribunal, but by Bruno himself. On 3 June 1592, during his fifth interrogation, he was asked whether he had 'ever said, held or believed that men were created in corruption like other animals', to which Bruno replied 'I believe that that is Lucretius's opinion, and I have read it and heard it discussed; but I am not aware that I have ever referred to it as my own, let alone held it or believed it . . . such an opinion is neither consistent with, not derivable from, the principles and conclusions of my philosophy—as anyone who reads [my books] will easily discover'.²⁷

In north-east Italy, therefore, suspects investigated for materialism and those who rejected providence and the after-life were not asked whether they had read the *De rerum natura*. Nobody was investigated for atomism. And in the Venetian trial of Giordano Bruno, who certainly had read Lucretius and who did adopt an atomist conception of matter, the suspect was the only person to mention the poet's name.²⁸ These findings suggest that the ecclesiastical authorities within the Venetian Republic were—at least before 1600—untroubled by the circulation of the *De rerum natura*. There was no local equivalent of the Florentine decree of 1517 against its use in schools, and no campaign against those who owned or read manuscript or printed copies of the text. And the evidence also indicates that, insofar as contemporaries did adopt beliefs that seemed consistent with those proposed by Lucretius, they found them in other sources or developed them independently.

In the summer of 1598, for instance, the inquisitor in Venice wrote to the bishop and the inquisitor in Padua asking them to prevent Cesare Cremonini, who had taught philosophy at the University of Padua since 1590, discussing in his lectures the opinion of Alexander of Aphrodisias that the soul is mortal.²⁹ Alexander, an Aristotelian

²⁷ Firpo (1993) 187. It is usually not possible to identify which member of the tribunal asked each question. When recording this question, the scribe initially used the word *anime* ('souls'), and only later replaced it with *huomini* ('men'). Cf. also p. 285.

²⁸ For Bruno's understanding of atomism, see Gatti (2011), esp. 70–90.

²⁹ Vatican City, Archivio Segreto Vaticano (hereafter ASVat) Vat. Lat. 10945 fol. 115^v; cf. Vatican City, Archivio della Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede (hereafter ACDF) Decreta, 37 fol. 188^r: a reference to Cremonini, 'qui legit de anima

philosopher of the late second and early third centuries, had rejected the notion of personal immortality; his views were kept in circulation in early modern Italy in a Latin translation of his work titled *Enarratio de anima ex Aristotelis institutione* by the Venetian patrician, Girolamo Donato (1457–1511), first published in Brescia in 1495 and republished in at least eight further Venetian editions by 1560.³⁰ There seems little doubt that Cremonini did hold unorthodox views. But Donato was no religious subversive: among his many other publications was a defence of papal primacy, published posthumously in 1525.³¹

And when the homes of suspects investigated for unorthodox beliefs were searched, the religious authorities invariably focused their interest on books by authors who had been prohibited rather than those who had not. Alvise Capuano was sentenced by the Venetian Inquisition in May 1580 for holding a wide range of errors, including the beliefs that the universe had neither beginning nor end, but was eternal; that God did not exist, nor any spiritual beings; that the only true law was the law of nature; that the world had been created by chance; and that the soul was mortal. Capuano had had an unusually complex religious pilgrimage. He was born on the Venetian island of Lesina in the Adriatic (modern Hvar); he had travelled widely in Italy, Spain, and France, and had also spent time in Geneva, before he settled in Venice. In its sentence, the tribunal labelled him an ‘atheista’. But in the report of the inquisitor’s raid on his house, submitted to the tribunal after his arrest, only his copies of the *Colloquies* of Erasmus, the *Chronica* of Carion, and the works of Machiavelli were recorded. The complete works of these three named authors had been included on the Index of 1559.³²

ad mentem Alexandri Afrodisei’. For Cremonini, see also Poppi (1993), Nonis (1995), Spruit (2000).

³⁰ On the survival of Alexander’s works to the 16th cent., see Kessler (2011).

³¹ Donato (1525). Donato also had a very successful political career, serving as the Republic’s Ambassador to many rulers between 1483 and 1511, including Popes Alexander VI and Julius II: King (1986) 366–7. For more on Donato and his translation, Barnes (2009).

³² SU, b. 47, ‘Capuano Alvise’. The inquisitor also found in his house a French book, which was never identified. Johann Carion was a Protestant historian and astrologer; his *Chronica* had been published in Venice in 1543 in an Italian translation by Pietro Lauro, and then reprinted in 1548. Lauro was a prolific translator, and certainly associated with Reformation sympathizers in the city: see Dini (2005). For a later claim that Erasmus’s *Colloquies* had prompted atheist beliefs, see ACDF, St st.,

The Venetian tribunal did not, however, always assume that suspects had acquired their beliefs from books. Among other beliefs alleged against him at his trial in 1512, Guido Donà held that God had not created humankind; that the universe was eternal; that the soul was mortal, and that there were therefore no rewards in the after-life for the good, nor punishments for the evil; and that all religions were deceptions. By the date of his trial, Donà was in his seventies, and according to his neighbours, his views were longstanding and well known. But it would have served no purpose for the tribunal to ask him which books he had read: Donà was illiterate.³³

Between the mid-fifteenth century and 1600, humanists in the Venetian Republic made significant contributions to the study of Lucretius, not least through the publication of five of the earliest seven printed editions of the text. But the scholars and publishers involved were fully aware that the *De rerum natura* brought together a number of related beliefs that were incompatible with the teaching of the Catholic Church, and either warned their readers that they should separate out and reject the false elements in the text, or urged them to focus on the poem's literary merits. Such distancing tactics certainly served to enhance their own reputations for orthodoxy. But as far as we can see, these men were and remained devout Christians; many in fact were priests. And the Church authorities never condemned the text in its Latin form, despite their more general hostility—in both the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries—to philosophical discussion about the immortality of the soul.

So the Church seemed not to be concerned about the religious implications of the *De rerum natura*. On the other hand, ecclesiastical tribunals in north-east Italy did prosecute individuals suspected of materialist beliefs about the creation of the world, divine providence, and the after-life. But at no point did clerical judges express any interest in the possible influence of Lucretius on these suspects; and in many cases, their opinions seem to have been prompted by other sources, or developed independently of written texts. Beliefs of the kind expressed by Lucretius had, after all, been available well before 1417 in the works of other ancient authors, such as Aristotle and

O 3 L, fol. 296^{r-v}, letter of Giovanni Battista Agucchi, papal nunzio in Venice, 11 Apr. 1626.

³³ Venice, Archivio storico del Patriarcato di Venezia, Criminalia Sanctae Inquisitionis, 1461–1558, b. 1, fols. 174^r–9^v.

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Cicero. The subversive implications of Aristotelianism had been apparent as early as the thirteenth century;³⁴ yet there was a strong Aristotelian tradition at the University of Padua, one that was influenced especially by the thinking of Alexander of Aphrodisias.³⁵ And it is abundantly clear from the trial records that views of this kind were not debated only within educated and scholarly circles.

The response to Lucretius within the Venetian Republic therefore raises some important questions about the role of books—in manuscript or in print—in the process of intellectual and cultural change. Do new ideas need to be made available in written form before they can be adopted more widely? Or can individuals and groups generate innovative thinking, or thinking that is in conflict with the dominant culture, without the stimulus of written sources? Indeed, are books likely to have a greater impact if their contents resonate in some way with, or even reinforce, ideas that are already in circulation? The Venetian evidence seems to suggest that thinking that questioned or rejected the core beliefs of Christianity was more widespread in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy than we might expect; and that the written word may have played a smaller part in shaping the beliefs of the majority than we sometimes assume.

³⁴ See e.g. (1979).

³⁵ See e.g. Kessler (1988). Pomponazzi was an influential contributor to this tradition; he left Padua in 1510.

