

Ada Palmer's "Reading Lucretius in the Renaissance"

Post by "Cleveland Okie" of July 6, 2023 at 8:22 PM

I just finished reading Ada Palmer's book, "Reading Lucretius in the Renaissance." I figured there might be some interest if I posted about it.

The preface and the first chapter discuss Epicureanism, Lucretius' poem and how many of the poem's concepts challenge Christian thinking. The first sentence of the preface is, "If you were told that reading this book could send you to Hell, would you keep reading?"

Palmer argues that there were essentially two "waves" of how Lucretius was read, from 1417, when an old manuscript was found by Poggio Brocciolini, to 1600, when her study concludes. The first phase was that scholars copied and edited manuscripts by hand. During this phase, most of the emphasis was on correcting the texts and preserving the poem, with little attention to Lucretius' theories on atoms, or what Palmer calls "proto-atheist" views, such as the soul isn't immortal, the gods don't interfere in the affairs of men, etc. The assumption, Palmer says, was that fixing and circulating any prominent work of Latin literature was assumed to be a moral thing to do in reviving civilization.

A second wave of reading occurred when the text had largely been corrected and made much easier to read, and when printing of this corrected Latin text made the poem much easier to find and to read. Along with printing, there came translations of the poem into the local vernacular, which also expanded the readership of the book.

During this second phase, much more attention was paid to the heretical views in the poem, and as science began to arise as an important intellectual current, the science discussions in the poem took on more meaning. Printing of the book stopped in Italy by about 1515 when the Catholic church realized the poem had seriously heretical thoughts, and later editions were printed in France and other countries.

Palmer examined dozens of manuscript copies of "De rerum natura" in libraries in the U.S. and Europe, carefully recording comments and marks written in the margins so that she could track what scholars were interested in, and also studied early printed copies. There are tables that tabulate all of this. Particular attention is paid to the notes made in the margins by figures such as Machiavelli and Montaigne.

I took the time to read the whole book, but you can get most of what she has to say by reading the preface, Chapter One and the conclusion. In comparison to "The Swerve," it is written much more for an academic audience.

Much of the discussion of the tenets of Epicureanism takes place in Chapter One. In general it seemed accurate, although I thought Palmer overcorrected for the prevailing impression that Epicureanism advocates gluttony, lust and other physical forms of hedonism, making Epicurus more of an ascetic than Emily Austin does.

I really know Ada Palmer more as a writer of science fiction and fantasy; I am a fan of her "Terra Ignota" series of four novels. She is appearing at a science fiction convention in Pittsburgh that I plan to attend the weekend of July 21-23. In her day job, Palmer is a history professor in Chicago. She has a blog and website at <http://www.adapalmer.com/>.