

Was Shakespeare an Epicurean?

Post by “Eikadistes” of May 7, 2024 at 4:55 PM

I've been reading more on the subject, and I found a few interesting anecdotes to share:

“Many scholars argue that these speculations were influenced by revived interest in ancient atomism, particularly that of Lucretius, the ancient Roman philosopher-poet. While Lucretius’s didactic poem *On the Nature of Things* was not translated into English until after Shakespeare’s death, his work was available in Latin, and was likely familiar to educated Elizabethans, as was the broader tradition of atomistic thought of which he was a key figure. Scholars also suggest a number of sixteenth-century interpretive intermediaries through whom Shakespeare might have known of Lucretius, including Christopher Marlowe, Michel de Montaigne, and the Italian scientist and poet Girolamo Fracastoro. Crane herself argues that contemporary atomism probably arose **not** out of engagement with the ancients but out of novel recognition of theoretical problems posed by the prevailing Aristotelian theory, which held that matter can be infinitely divided, and which denied the possibility of empty space.” (Elliot, Natalie. “Shakespeare’s Worlds of Science”. *The New Atlantis*, No. 54 (Winter 2018), pp. 39-40)

“Such learned and venturesome Elizabethans as Bacon, Burton, and Milton read Lucretius in Latin editions from the Continent, but the vernacular collections of sayings of the philosophers that were popular throughout the age of Shakespeare pointedly omitted Epicurus and Lucretius, while quoting and praising the Stoics.” (Freehafer, John and Miner, Earl. “Stoicism and Epicureanism in England, 1530-1700”. *PMLA*, Vol. 88, No. 5 (Oct., 1973), pp. 1181)

“Once again it is impossible to determine whether in fact Shakespeare read Lucretius [*If Shakespeare read Lucretius it must have been in Latin...*], but the Lucretian tenor of the Shakespearean passage, if purely coincidental, is extraordinary. We do know that Shakespeare was familiar with much classical literature, and the close association of language, image and idea here seems to indicate a literary connection.” (Catto, Bonnie. “Lucretius, Shakespeare and Dickens”. *The Classical World*, Vol. 80. No. 6 (Jul. - Aug., 1987), pp. 427)

There are a few other source that I’d really like to dig through, *Lucretius and Shakespeare on the Nature of Things* by Richard Allen Shoaf (2014) as well as “Shakespeare, Lucretius, and the Commonplaces” by L. C. Martin, published in the *Review of English Studies* (Vol. 21, No. 83, 1945) **but** both are a tad on the rare and expensive side at the moment (\$51.00 for a 9-page article, and the book is only printed in Hardcover and currently unavailable on Amazon).

As I shared above, I found one stanza in *Othello* that *could* indicate that he had access to a Latin copy of *De Rerum Natura*, because the syntax and imagery of the stanza seems too similar (to me) to be a coincidence, but ... he wrote a lot, and I didn't find that much, and he could very well have been echoing the words of his contemporaries, who, themselves, may have had source documents.