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Hock, Jessie. The Erotics of Materialism: Lucretius and Early Modern Poetics

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Hock, Jessie.

The Erotics of Materialism: Lucretius and Early Modern Poetics.

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021. Pp. 234. ISBN 978-0-8122-5272-9 (hardcover) US\$59.95.

Jessie Hock's *The Erotics of Materialism* is a study of the influence of the Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius on the lyric poetry of early modern France and England. Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* (On the nature of things) is a compendium of Epicurean philosophy in verse, written in the first century BCE. Lost for many years, it was rediscovered in the fifteenth century, the only major Epicurean text to survive from classical antiquity. Lucretius's philosophy fundamentally contradicts Christian doctrine, and indeed any system of belief that contends that worldly events are influenced by the will of supernatural beings. Lucretius is a strict materialist; he argues that everything that occurs in the universe is determined by the random movements of invisible microscopic atoms. Because atoms cannot be perceived by the senses, but must be imagined, Lucretius privileges the poetic imagination over other forms of human knowledge. The erotics of *De Rerum Natura* are complex; the poem opens with a hymn to Venus that celebrates natural fertility, but much of the fourth book dwells on the futility of sexual desire. For Lucretius, sex makes sense only as a physical desire for pleasure—any longing for spiritual union is bound to be frustrated because of the fundamental material nature of reality. Bodies can be satisfied; souls cannot.

Hock's study focuses on the ways early modern poets took up the contradictory legacy of Lucretian erotics, epistemology, and poetics. Early modern Christian poets could not embrace Epicureanism completely, but Lucretius's ideas were nonetheless influential and significant. *The Erotics of Materialism* analyzes the different ways the work of Lucretius was adopted and adapted by Pierre de Ronsard and Remy Bellau in sixteenth-century France, and by John Donne, Lucy Hutchinson, and Margaret Cavendish in seventeenth-century England. Hock argues convincingly that these poets constitute "a lyric tradition of Lucretian poetics—a cumulative, adaptive, flexible tradition that is coherent but not restricted" (22). Donne's linkage of Lucretian atomism and Petrarchan fragmentation is based on his reading of Ronsard. Hutchinson and Cavendish each build their own Lucretian poetics based in part on their reading of Donne.

Hock demonstrates how Ronsard and his friend Bellau used Lucretian materialism to critique fashionable Platonic idealism. Ronsard in particular identifies the atomism of Lucretius with the fragmentation of bodies and emotions typical of Petrarchism. Both Ronsard and Bellau adapt Lucretius's praise of Venus to critique contemporary French politics, setting the peaceful and fertile harmony of nature described by Lucretius in contrast to the bitter wars of religion that plagued France in the late sixteenth century.

At the turn of the seventeenth century, John Donne engages with Lucretius in an effort to find a new vocabulary of eroticism to confront the epistemic challenges of what his *First Anniversary* (1611) calls "the new philosophy" of the scientific revolution. Though the influence of Lucretius on Donne "is neither overwhelming nor exclusive" (105), Hock demonstrates the many ways Donne adopts Lucretian atomism and materialism as powerful ways of understanding sexual desire, romantic love, and the nature of fallen humanity.

In the mid-seventeenth century, vernacular translations of *De Rerum Natura* made Lucretius available to those who could not read his famously difficult Latin. In particular, translation gave many female readers access to Lucretius for the first time. The Puritan poet Lucy Hutchinson was herself the author of one of the first English translations of Lucretius, though conformity to feminine decorum prevented her both from publishing her work and from translating the most sexually explicit passages of the poem. Hock explores Hutchinson's ambivalent response to Lucretius; she rejects his poetry as impious and yet uses his analysis of sexual frustration as an indictment of earthly pleasures in her biblical epic *Order and Disorder* (1679). The royalist Margaret Cavendish, on the other hand, enthusiastically embraced Lucretian poetics and epistemology in her collection of atomist verse, *Poems and Fancies* (1653). Hock argues that Cavendish uses the Lucretian notion that the workings of the universe are fundamentally unknowable to critique developing scientific models based on the domination of the natural world by masculine expertise. The volume concludes with a brief discussion of the role of Lucretian erotics in the libertine discourse of Rochester and other Restoration male aristocrats.

The Erotics of Materialism is an excellent study of early modern philosophy and poetics. It explicates the fruitful ways that Lucretius's unorthodox ideas were used by a diverse group of poets—French and English, men and women,

Catholics and Protestants, Royalists and Puritans—in an effort both to valorize poetry as a way of knowing and to find a new vocabulary for erotic passion.

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Holtz, Grégoire, Jean-Claude Laborie et Frank Lestringant, édés.

Voyageurs de la Renaissance.

Collection Folio classique no 6636. Paris : Gallimard, 2019. 576 p. ISBN 978-2-97-042447-4 (broché) €11.50.

Nombreux sont ceux et celles parmi nous qui attendions avec impatience la publication d'une anthologie en format poche des textes les plus importants des voyageurs européens à la Renaissance. Le recueil de morceaux choisis, conçu par Grégoire Holtz, Frank Lestringant et Jean-Claude Laborie, répond magnifiquement à ces attentes, d'autant plus qu'il offre une mise en présence dynamique de textes provenant de tous les horizons culturels. Ces derniers témoignent à la fois du regard ethnographique des voyageurs et des objectifs de colonisation qui accompagnent le plus souvent leur étonnement devant la diversité des sociétés humaines. Le format choisi dans la collection « Folio classique » chez Gallimard facilite un accès permanent à ces écrits fondamentaux, pour qui s'intéresse à cette profonde expérience du déchirement et de la rencontre que représente l'aventure viatique à la Renaissance. Visant un public plus général, l'ouvrage est accompagné de notes explicatives, d'une chronologie et d'illustrations, toutes très utiles.

Dans une étude publiée en 2008, Frank Lestringant évoquait magnifiquement cette tension qui mène le voyageur à s'approprier l'espace, sans pour autant renoncer à la primauté de son lieu d'origine : « Le récit traverse. Il réunit les espaces séparés de la carte ; il unifie dans la même trame le proche et le lointain, le par-deçà et le par-delà. C'est un pont jeté sur les béances de l'atlas » (« Des récits, des cartes, quelle relation? », p. 299). Or c'est cette traversée narrative vers les terres s'étendant au-delà des limites connues qui amène chacun des explorateurs à se pencher sur la diversité des lieux naturels, des cultures et des langues, dans l'espoir de donner forme à une humanité dont