

Norbrook (D.), Harrison (S.), Hardie (P.) (eds.) *Lucretius and the Early Modern*. pp. xvi + 313, ill. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Cased, £65, US\$100. ISBN: 978-0-19-871384-5.

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‘Lucretius and (early) modernity’ is not an entirely novel combination or juxtaposition. This reviewer participated in a conference in Milan almost ten years ago that bore the name ... *Lucrezio e la modernità*; Catherine Wilson, a contributor to the volume under review, published a book around the same time entitled *Epicureanism at the origins of modernity*.¹ Several important edited volumes on the reception of Epicureanism have appeared since then, some with a more exclusively scholarly focus,² some more receptive to the inflections of ‘Theory’. The latter trend is not monolithic either, since some projects bear the mark of the late Althusser’s idiosyncratic re-imagining of a Lucretian ‘aleatory materialism’,³ while others locate themselves in the territory of Deleuze’s or Michel Serres’s revival of Lucretius,⁴ the latter being perhaps the first of a series of studies fixated on the *clinamen*, culminating with S. Greenblatt’s *The Swerve*.⁵ These interpretive trends are touched on in David Norbrook’s elegant introduction to this volume.

The present volume is less concerned with subterranean, counter-histories of philosophy (or politics, or literature); it focuses on *De rerum natura* (hereafter DRN)’s ‘language and material circulation, as a means of refining generalizations about Epicurean philosophy’ (2), on ‘the specific material and cultural contexts in which the DRN was interpreted’ in early modern culture (12). Norbrook notes that ‘recent scholarship on medieval and early modern manuscripts has urged a renewed attention to their material properties, a movement often linked with a postmodern celebration of plurality rather than a search for a fixed authorial original’ (4). But methodologically it is more conservative, deliberately targeting volumes like Greenblatt’s *Swerve* and voicing suspicion (notably in Hardy’s chapter) as to the fashion of ‘contingency’ in Lucretian readings.⁶

¹ G. Mormino, V. Morfino & F. del Lucchese (eds.), *Lucrezio e la modernità* (Naples, 2010); C. Wilson, *Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity* (Oxford, 2008). Wilson’s book is distinctive in that she seeks to re-read early modern thought through Epicurean lenses.

² P.-F. Moreau, A. Deneys-Tunney (eds.), *L’Épicurisme des Lumières*, special issue of *Dix-huitième siècle*, volume 35 (2003); G. Paganini, E. Tortarolo (eds.), *Der Garten und die Moderne. Epikureische Moral und Politik vom Humanismus bis zur Aufklärung* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, 2004); N. Leddy, A.S. Lifschitz (eds.), *Epicurus in the Enlightenment* (Oxford, 2009); F. Lestringant, E. Naya (eds.) *La Renaissance de Lucrèce* (Paris, 2010).

³ See L. Althusser, “Le courant souterrain du matérialisme de la rencontre,” in *Écrits philosophiques et politiques*, vol. I, ed. F. Matheron (Paris, 1994) and “Du matérialisme aléatoire,” *Multitudes* 21 (2005): 179-194. Marx himself took notes on the DRN and identified Lucretius with the figure of Venus in the poem (Norbrook, Introduction, 26). Althusser’s joint emphasis on Lucretius and Machiavelli finds an echo in Chapter 3 here, by Alison Brown, which studies their relation. A question I cannot go into here, which is manifest both in Althusser and in Mormino et al.’s edited volume, is the extent to which ‘Lucretius’ and ‘Spinoza’ become almost interchangeable figures in a certain kind of revision of the history of philosophy in a ‘materialist’ direction, whether this is more speculative (Deleuze’s counter-history) or more historicist (Jonathan Israel’s ‘radical Enlightenment’, which has indeed been criticized as a concept for leaving out Epicureanism). For an interesting variant on this kind of ‘Theory’-related reading of Lucretius’ reception, see the recent work of Amanda Jo Goldstein, including “Growing Old Together. Lucretian Materialism in Shelley’s ‘Poetry of Life’,” *Representations*, Vol. 128 No. 1 (2014): 60-92.

⁴ B. Holmes, W. H. Shearin (eds.), *Dynamic Reading: Studies in the Reception of Epicureanism*, Classical Presences series (Oxford, 2012); J. Lezra, L. Blake (eds.) *Lucretius and Modernity. Epicurean Encounters Across Time and Disciplines* (New York, 2016). The latter volume contains a chapter (by Holmes) specifically on Serres’ interpretation of Lucretius’ physics.

⁵ Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (New York, 2011).

⁶ A partial exception is Williams’s chapter on Montaigne – chock-full of careful study of the textual layers of Montaigne’s embedded and encrypted reading of DRN – with its nod to distributed cognition.

We learn a great deal here about the influence Cicero and Virgil had on early modern (and our) readings of Lucretius, bearing in mind the great prestige of the *Aeneid* in medieval and early modern times. Norbrook notes in his introduction that ‘early modern humanists were excited to recover a poem which Virgil had valued so highly, and indeed against which he had been prompted to react in such complex ways’ (6). Montaigne read Lucretius and Virgil together, also noting the former’s influence on the latter. Seneca, too, valued Lucretius highly – even if he warned against falling into the ‘boundless chaos’ of Epicurus⁷ – but the negative views of Epicureanism found in Cicero’s *De natura deorum* and Plutarch’s *In Colotem* were influential. Thus Hardy notes that Post-Aristotelian natural philosophers often combined a theological argument about the providential ordering of the world with an ‘abhorrence of Epicureanism as the negation of natural and moral orders’, drawing on Cicero and Lactantius’s critiques. As in the English literary tradition, however, this hostile treatment of Epicureanism seems not to have involved close engagement with Lucretius’s poem, which might have served as an accomplice for natural theology rather than a foil (Hardy, 216). Early moderns used Cicero et al.’s anti-atomism, and portrayed Lucretius in those terms, so that many instances cited as early modern responses to Lucretius or Epicureanism are closer to Roman parodies such as Cicero’s than to the Epicurean sources themselves (Hardy, 208); this includes Bacon, whose critique of atomism conspicuously leaves out Lucretius and relies more on the occasionally caricatural presentations in Cicero and the Church Fathers (210).

In addition, historians of philosophy will be curious to learn that in Roman antiquity there is little evidence that the poem achieved philosophical success; instead, its main influence, evidenced most notably by the Augustan poets Virgil and Horace, was literary (Butterfield, 45). I did not know until reading this volume that Lucretius was *not read* in the Middle Ages (5, discussed in Butterfield’s chapter 2). Butterfield states in his chapter that there is no convincing evidence ‘that anyone in Europe between the tenth century and the second decade of the fifteenth century read Lucretius directly’ (47). Curiously, ‘not only was Lucretius not placed on the Index, but the Jesuits developed strategies for teaching parts of the DRN, recognizing its importance for any understanding of classical poetry and thought’ (Norbrook, 17).

We also learn a vast amount of non-trivial information about Lucretius’s early modern translations and indeed the translators themselves (first Michel de Marolles in French, then John Evelyn, Lucy Hutchinson and Thomas Creech in English, discussed in particular in Cottagnies’ and Butterfield’s chapters). Aphra Behn praised Creech’s translation of DRN as a contribution to the cause of women’s rights (Norbrook, 22), although Hutchinson, a woman translator of the DRN, ended up fiercely attacking Lucretius, in reaction to libertine Restoration Epicureans, and refused to publish her translation, although she discreetly had copies made (24, 25; see also Butterfield’s chapter for suggestions on Hutchinson’s motivations, e.g. Evelyn’s aborted publication: Butterfield, 62).⁸ Indeed, all early modern English translators of DRN omitted or euphemized the portions dealing with sexual desire (as ‘fit for a midwife’, *pace* Lucy Hutchinson), until Dryden’s version (Poole, 191-192); Marolles’s French translation is less dainty than Evelyn or Creech’s (Cottagnies, 176). Marolles’ translation was considered to be lacking in grace by some observers of the period yet... even Molière allegedly admired Marolles’s translation so much that he started a verse adaptation, early in the 1650s (171); no manuscript of this has been found but several contemporaries, including Marolles himself, refer to Molière’s version, and as Cottagnies notes, the dramatist does include obvious references to DRN in “Le Misanthrope.” Evelyn’s commentary on the DRN is an

⁷ *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales* 72.9, cit. Hardy, 207.

⁸ Her translation has now been published: *The Works of Lucy Hutchinson*, 2 vols: *I. The Translation of Lucretius*, eds. R. Barbour and D. Norbrook; Latin text by M. C. Zerbino (Oxford, 2012).

impressive line-by-line explanation and refutation of book 1, which owes much to Gassendi and Charleton's adaptation of the latter. Evelyn compares Lucretius's positions with those of 'a whole array of thinkers from the Church Fathers to modern philosophers such as Gassendi and Charleton, but also Descartes and Digby' (Cottegnies, 180). The result, Cottegnies emphasizes, is almost schizophrenic, however; 'Evelyn offers here a vivid testimony of the conflicted reception of Lucretius in those years', aiming to dissociate himself from "'the empty and impatient Epicures of our age'" (cit. 180); the stupid fans, as it were. Yet 'even in Evelyn's pious, often extremely moralizing, commentary his discomfort surfaces, especially in the instances where he seems, almost in spite of himself, to sympathize with his author on a number of points' (ibid.), as in the case of the infinity of worlds. Similarly, Hutchinson prefaced her manuscript translation with a dedicatory address in which she repents of the work as one of 'youthful curiositie' that expounded 'such vaine Philosophy' of 'this dog' (Butterfield, 62).

I turn now to specific chapters, before briefly concluding.

Harrison's chapter is an exception in that it does not deal with the early modern period, but rather with the problem of DRN as a Roman reception of Greek philosophical elements. He provides an impressive close reading of sections of the first proem of DRN (1.1–148), emphasising how Lucretius, by presenting Epicurean doctrines in a 1st-century BCE Roman context, 'negotiates some fundamental tensions between that radical Greek philosophy and traditional Roman culture' (29), by appropriating and undermining key Roman concepts and institutions such as war, imperialism, and certain kinds of religious practice. The first proem is rich with allusions to war and disorder, and makes, Harrison suggests, a kind of 'countercultural' move in relation to dominant, patriotic Roman culture, by promoting peace against war. That is, DRN 'uses superficially conventional Roman elements to argue for an Epicurean philosophy which is fundamentally subversive in Roman terms, and which presents contemporary Roman readers with deeply countercultural ideas' (42).

Butterfield gives a rich paleographic account of the manuscripts and private editions of DRN in early modern Europe (including an anonymous, still-unattributed ms. translation done in the late seventeenth century, now in the Bodleian Library). We learn a great deal about the Ur-manuscript that has survived since the 9th century (at Leiden since the 17th century); ironically, given the 'necessarily unfavourable environment towards Lucretius and Epicureanism through the Middle Ages' (49), it survived only through transcriptions in Christian monasteries (46), including at the court of Charlemagne. It was a copy of this manuscript which Poggio Bracciolini discovered in 1417, while acting as papal secretary for the Council of Konstanz (1414–1418). It is surprising, Butterfield emphasizes, that 'the DRN avoided irrevocable loss and joining the miserable catalogue of classical works known only by their titles and the occasional quotation' (49). Out of the welter of minor and major editions, commentaries and such, two stand out: Denys Lambin's commentary (published in Paris, 1563-1564) and Thomas Creech's edition and translation (1682 for the translation and 1685 for the Latin edition, at Oxford). With these, Lucretius, 'although battered and bruised from his turbulent transmission, was at last ready to be read more carefully and more attentively than at any point since antiquity itself' (68).

Butterfield notes Lambin's effort to refute the claim that the 'undoubtedly impious writings of Epicurus and Lucretius could actually render their readers impious too' (57); after all, the Church Fathers read pagan poetry ... Conversely, Creech maintained that his textual efforts with Lucretius were to be understood as critical, in the strongest sense: "I have heard that the best Method to overthrow the Epicurean Hypothesis (I mean as it stands opposite to Religion) is to expose a full system of it to publick view" (cit. Butterfield, 64); but – schizophrenically or at least

polyphonically – in a later, Latin edition of DRN he produced, Creech drops the attacks on Lucretius almost completely and presents himself as a continuator of Gassendi.

Brown studies the influence of the DRN on Machiavelli, who does not cite the text directly but made a transcription of DRN, now in the Vatican Library: ‘By the middle of the fifteenth century, Lucretius’s *De rerum natura* and Diogenes Laertius’s newly translated *Life of Epicurus* were circulating in Florence and they both encouraged new, transgressive thinking there, especially by Machiavelli’ (69). Specifically, Brown discusses how Lucretius’ ‘primitivism’, but also his atomistic cosmology, influenced Machiavelli, who, just like Lucretius, has a peculiar combination of freedom and determinism. In addition to other shared elements such as the critique of ambition (79) or the rejection of a strong boundary between humans and animals (82f.), the two thinkers share this idiosyncratic, ‘special’ determinism (70), particularly visible in Machiavelli’s contributions to Guicciardini’s ‘draft dialogue’ on free will, *Del Libero Arbitrio del Uomo* (82); the leitmotif here is the idea that the world has always been the same, including the behaviour and constitutions of human beings (71-72). Ultimately, ‘in insisting on the freedom of all living creatures to act independently, despite the constraints of necessity and chance, Machiavelli was adopting the Epicurean balance of forces that ran counter to Christian providentialism and Aristotelian teleology’ (86). Brown also notes in closing the influence of Lucretius on Hobbes (88).

Haskell discusses Latin Lucretian poems published in 16th-century Italy (including Bruno), in a chapter rich with detail but difficult to summarize argumentatively. She notes that contrary to what we might expect, these poems are not necessarily ‘vehicles for heresy’ (92), nor do they form a coherent tradition, being instead quite miscellaneous: ‘The philosophical flights of the Cinquecento Lucretian poets range from cautious Christian raptures through to bold spiritual and cosmological thought experiments’ (119), the latter including Giordano Bruno. It is true that Bruno’s attraction to atomist ideas was raised at his trial for heresy, but not, so far as we know, his having imitated Lucretius in the Frankfurt poems (95).

Davidson discusses the dissemination of manuscript copies of the DRN: Florence was known as the center (Poggio Bracciolini was a Tuscan), but there were copies in Rome, Naples, Venice, etc. As several contributors note, it was possible to read and study Lucretius without compromising Christian belief. Davidson explains that the ecclesiastical authorities—outside the jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Florence, at least – were not especially concerned by the circulation of DRN (128). The only reference to Lucretius in the archives of the Venetian Inquisition before 1600 was, Davidson stresses, in the trial of Bruno, where it was brought up, not by the tribunal, but by Bruno himself, who raised the question of the shared origin of humans and animals in order to attribute it to Lucretius and to reject it (130). In the Venetian Republic, 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 (130). So the Church seemed not to be concerned about the religious implications of DRN. 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 (132).

Williams contributes a beautiful and powerful chapter (all contributions are elegantly written and impeccably edited, which bears mentioning...), on Montaigne’s typically complex, layered and concealed reading of DRN (his notes on his copy of the DRN are described here as distinguished into philological, literary-critical, thematic notes, and so on; his extensive cross-referencing and

page number notation also served to compensate for the absence of an index in Lambin's French edition). Clearly, DRN holds 'a distinctive place in the *Essais*, with some 150 extracts, totalling 454 lines quoted, and more than a sixth of the poem either directly cited or paraphrased' (144). If Montaigne's first reading of the poem in 1564 'seems to have been instrumental in his coming to terms with the premature death of his friend La Boétie, then the addition of close to a hundred new Lucretian passages in the later editions of the *Essais* bears witness to new and distinct lines of thinking' (*ibid.*). In these later readings, Montaigne reconceives not only his relation to the DRN but his overall understanding of what it means to be an author. Williams is one of the contributors who most strongly rejects a distinction between sense and style, content and form. While the bulk of Montaigne's citations of DRN are in the 'Apologie de Raimond Sebond' (76 quotations in all), in the essay on Virgil, Lucretius is somehow the hidden topic (here, quotations from DRN are longer than any quotations from Virgil). Montaigne's reading of Lucretius is one of those cases where one is obliged to suspend the usual restrictions against 'Straussianism' as a method. After all, in the essay 'Des livres' Montaigne says, as Williams notes, that he deliberately avoids naming his Latin interlocutors, so that we listen more carefully to what they have to say (and not who they are). When Montaigne finally starts to annotate Lucretius in French, he uses what Williams calls a 'recurrent tag line': 'contre la religion' (149).

Cottegnies's chapter examines the context of the English reception of Lucretius, with an eye to Marolles's possible influence on Evelyn and his contemporaries. This reception significantly involves the milieu of English exiles in Paris, which included intellectuals such as Walter Charleton and Kenelm Digby, among others, and points to hitherto overlooked links between France and England (162). Thus Charleton, for one, wrote a philosophical dialogue entitled *The Immortality of the Human Soul, Demonstrated by the Light of Nature* (1657), which includes a character called Lucretius who ... defends the immortality of the soul. Cottegnies observes that 'This very convoluted piece of propaganda seems to me to reflect Charleton's uneasy reception of Evelyn's schizophrenic edition of book 1 of DRN, with its Janus-like paratexts, the epideictic preface and the damning commentary' (188). Similarly, Evelyn thought he had to add a refutation to his translation 'as a means of toning down what can be described as his initial enthusiasm for Lucretius' (Cottegnies, 186). In the end, though, even if Marolles had 'blazed a trail, by treating Lucretius as just another classical author worth reading and treating with respect', his influence was ultimately limited in England by the 'peculiar anti-Hobbesian climate of the 1660s': at which point, 'this Epicurean moment was over' (189). Contrary to previous scholars, Cottegnies detects a real influence of Marolles' translation on Evelyn's (182). She finds that Marolles is less timid in addressing literal meanings of philosophical or religious content, and to some extent also sexual implications; Evelyn 'tried to mitigate the forceful explicitness of some of the most heterodox arguments by toning the text down' (186).

Poole discusses the impact of DRN as a 'theory of human origins' – evolutionary or not? He notes that Charleton left out book V of DRN (on 'evolution') from his study on Lucretius, as did many translators (194). For instance, Thomas Creech, the only early modern English translator of Lucretius to publish a complete version – in 'rhyming heroic couplets' no less (Butterfield, 64), 'defensively sneered in his notes about "men springing out of the Earth, as from the teeth of Cadmus his Dragon"' (cit. Poole, 195), although Creech owned a copy of La Peyrère's polygenecist treatise *Prae-Adamitae*. Poole emphasizes how La Peyrère's ideas, and Epicuro-Lucretian theories of human origins and the 'Mother Earth', impacted otherwise hostile authors, such as Milton.

Hardy is the one contributor who speaks out most clearly against the fashionable 'swerve' readings of DRN: "Order" and "reason" are not the dominant buzzwords in recent studies of the reception of

the *De rerum natura*. Flux, contingency, instability, and materialism tend to have the upper hand' (201).⁹ In contrast, he notes, all three early modern English translators of DRN (Creech, Hutchinson, and Evelyn) 'share an interest in the poem's vision of nature's law-like regularity and intelligibility' (201). And Hardy finds this to be an approach to DRN worth pursuing, in this case reading it as a work of natural theology, reflecting continuities he sees between DRN and 'non-Epicurean traditions of writing about nature' (202), and dwelling on the admittedly challenging interpretation history of the *foedera naturae* (203-204). On his reading, the operations of nature as described in the DRN 'make very little room for contingency' (204), even if ultimately he seems to admit it is a 'natural theology *manqué[e]*' (220). Of course one can take Hardy's philosophical presuppositions with a grain of salt, as when he states that 'Lucretius's account of the relationship between human reason, natural phenomena, and atoms is one of comforting synergy rather than alienating materialism' (205 – using a rather unargued-for definition of materialism), but he notes a similar prejudice (in this case scholars taking anti-Lucretian reactions at face value) with the image of the universe as a jumble of letters (208). Hardy also emphasizes how early modern translators found it congenial to read Lucretius' cosmos in a more Ciceronian, law-bound and intelligible fashion (213), with a fascinating discussion of the rendering of the *foedera naturae* as *leges naturales* (214). Another dimension of this reading of Lucretius, in England, was that natural theology 'eventually came to provide an explicit, public justification for the study of nature as an enterprise outside the universities, and Epicureanism played a part in this process' (217).

Norbrook seeks to present revolutionary England as not just a 'Machiavellian moment', in Pocock's celebrated phrase, but perhaps also an Epicurean moment. He begins by observing the apparently anomalous fact that Lucy Hutchinson, who composed the first complete translation of DRN in the revolutionary period, was also noted as the biographer of her husband, Colonel John Hutchinson (223). Indeed, the reception of Lucretius in mid-seventeenth century English political and religious thought 'indicates a very complex dialectic in which within a strongly religious framework the most radically secular narrative of human history in existence could play a key role in political debates' (223-224). Being primarily a historian of philosophy, I was intrigued to learn that the 'paradigms' for this reception of Lucretius were derived especially from Gassendi and Hobbes', although they offered very different constructions of Lucretius to readers (225-226): 'Broadly speaking, Gassendian readings were more faithful to the content of Lucretius' thought, but Hobbesian readings might pick up provocations in tone that could go with a harder-edged interpretation' (228). Further, Gassendian readings of Lucretius could be appealing as they linked him to political moderation and free will, while Hobbesian readings could appeal in the direction of intellectual radicalism (226). As a side note, we also learn that the classically Epicurean insistence on 'an underlying sense of kinship with all creatures' became an influence on the growing interest in vegetarianism in the period (229).

Wilson discusses the presence of Epicureanism in early modern political philosophy, in contrast to the more obvious presence of Stoicism. She finds three elements of the Epicurean heritage to be 'central to post-Machiavellian political theory': the thesis of the 'mind-dependence or "conventional" nature of values and political status'; second, the thesis that the justice of a law 'depends on its utility in the circumstances of its application and that laws are legitimized by agreement or contract'; and finally, the notion that 'the history of humanity consists of a succession

⁹ I cannot resist citing one of Hardy's sometimes endearing anti-postmodern assertions, addressing the above issue: 'This is a simpler explanation of the patchiness of the early English 'reception' of Lucretius than that of Rzepka (2012) 116, that "the poem's dynamic treatment of atomism and mutability seems to generate heterodoxy and turbulence in the history of its own reception"' (210n.).

of stages, driven by technological and social innovation, that implies either continuing progress or degeneration, or both' (259). Wilson notes that authors such as Grotius, despite their professed anti-Epicureanism, made considerable use of the account of human cultural evolution in Book V of DRN. Atomistic ontology disturbs social order by showing social, moral, political entities to be 'fictions' dependent on human desire, interests and projections – a doctrine with real resonance to Locke and Pufendorf's thought (264). Epicureanism could also be further radicalised, as it was in Hobbes (270). She also reflects on the influence of DRN on Rousseau (276-277), presenting a useful overlap with Norbrook's chapter (for instance on the possible status of a social contract idea in Lucretius, 229n. 17).¹⁰

Lucretius and the Early Modern is an excellent volume, with uniformly good contributions, clearly and elegantly written, as I've noted. One striking motif that emerges is how intellectually fruitful the 'schizophrenic' attempts at omissions and critiques of Lucretius could be in the successive translations of and commentaries on DRN (the term 'schizophrenia' is used explicitly in Cottagnies' chapter). Further, Lucretian reception history is also a history of annotation and marginalia (Williams, 138; he discusses how important the discovery was of Montaigne's copy of DRN at a book auction in 1989), and of the materiality of manuscripts (Butterfield). Another, almost as schizophrenic but perhaps better-known, is that even when Lucretius was named as the target of critiques, the theoretical content often matched ancient atomism instead. In addition, in a situation familiar to students of 'Spinozism', 'atheism' and 'materialism' (the single quotes designating here the sense in which these were often constructs), critical portrayals of the DRN's doctrines, as in Cicero, often served as a basis for the formation of interpretations of that work. Specialists of early modern Europe, historians of philosophy, *hellénisants*, paleographers and others have much to learn from this volume.

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¹⁰ Curiously, Wilson (274n.) seems to think Nicolas Fréret's *Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe* is by d'Holbach, scholarship including Landucci's has shown otherwise since the Eighties.