playful aspects of fiction that come with childhood, imagination, and a deep exploration of language.

Leplatre’s investigation is thus comprehensive and dense. It offers its reader both an extensive overview on the topics that are related to the motive of power, and a rich stylistic reading of many relevant fables. He renews formerly recognized analyses by condensing and completing them with original and unpublished ones, but also with historical considerations. Not only does Leplatre offer generous, convincing, and thorough studies of these texts, he deepens them sporadically by considering fables into their relationship with some famous illustrations (especially Chauveau’s works), which has been somewhat neglected after Bassy’s enormous study on this topic.

However, as is often the case with such extensive research, following Leplatre’s reasoning might be sometimes arduous. We, for instance, regret the fact that there is no other entry into his work than its complete reading. The titles of the different sections and chapters of the book often lack clarity as to their content. The addition of an index of the fables the study refers to is helpful, nevertheless insufficient for a researcher who needs to find their way into one topic in particular. Fortunately for such a reader, the reading process is pleasant and certainly enriching. Especially for those whose curiosities might be aroused by a demonstration of La Fontaine’s ability to transform the motive of power into a—once again—playful exploration of the language’s infinite strengths.


Jessie Hock traces how Lucretius’s poetics—not just his natural philosophy—shaped the work of five early modern poets: Pierre de Ronsard, Remy Belleau, John Donne, Lucy Hutchinson, and Margaret Cavendish. Hock’s larger project is to deepen our understanding of Lucretius’s recovery and reception in early modern Europe: surfacing in 1417, Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura* failed to gain philosophical traction until Pierre Gassendi (1592–1655). What happened in the
interim? And why (for instance) did the devout Lucy Hutchinson feel comfortable translating Lucretius in the 1650s and then profoundly uncomfortable being associated with him in the 1670s? The answer, Hock explains, lies in the way early modern poets leveraged Lucretius’s erotics and poetics, which are tied to each other. Lucretius realized that beautiful poetry can have an effect analogous to erotic seduction; early modern poets tuned in to this aspect of his thought and imported it into their own lyrics while flatly rejecting the anti-religious content of his philosophy for a century or more. Hock’s argument is tight and clean, and the book is clearly written; readers will come away more knowledgeable about Lucretius’s poetic influence in the early modern period and the stages by which De Rerum Natura was reintroduced. (A final step, discussed in the epilogue, is seen in the full-throated endorsement of Lucretius by libertines such as Rochester.) This book will thus be worthwhile reading for anyone interested in secularization narratives as well as early modern poetry and the erotic.

The introduction lays out the relevant aspects of Lucretius’s De Rerum Natura (c. 60 B.C.E.), focusing on the connection between Lucretian poetics—which function as a “supple snare” that entrap readers in Epicurean philosophy—and erotics. Hock pays special attention to a few key passages to which she will recur frequently throughout the book: the hymn to Venus at the beginning of book 1, the teachings on erotic love at the end of book 4 (which warn against falling in love with simulacra), and Lucretius’s insistence that his poetry functions as honey on the edge of a cup, enticing readers to swallow the otherwise too-bitter medicine of his philosophy. The connection between the erotic and poetic, material and verbal, is made explicit in Lucretius’s famous analogy between atoms and letters of the alphabet: just as the elementary units of letters can form an infinite number of texts, so too can atoms form infinite worlds. Hock sees Lucretius as putting words on a uniquely high footing relative to Platonist and Christian thinkers, who view human poetics as derivative and inferior to material and spiritual reality; this aspect of Lucretius’s thought was especially appealing to early modern poets.

Hock’s first two chapters explore how the French poets Pierre de Ronsard (1524–85) and Remy Belleau (1528–77) work Lucretian themes into their lyric poetry. In his 1552 Premier livre des Amours,
Ronsard “draws connections between the scattered atoms of Lucretian cosmology and Petrarch’s scattered rhymes” (30) and paints his Petrarchan speaker as suffering from the thwarted desire Lucretius describes in DRN 4. Ronsard’s engagement of Lucretius here is playful, and there is no sense that he has bought in to Epicurean natural philosophy. Ronsard clearly appreciated the higher status Lucretius (not Epicurus) afforded poetry relative to Platonic idealism, however, and with these sonnets he effectively inserts “Lucretius back into the literary traditions that flourished while DRN languished, unread, in monastery libraries” (41). Besides discussing relevant passages from the Amours, Chapter 1 draws on commentaries to survey how Ronsard and his circle (which includes Belleau) read Lucretius and traces a tradition associating of Lucretius with Ovid as authorities on erotic love. Hock then shows how Lucretius’s two Venuses—the positive life-force of the epic’s opening hymn and the destructive seductress of book 4—are worked into Ronsard’s 1563 seasonal hymns, respectively, as the life-giving Nature and disease-laden Autumn.

Chapter 2 turns to how Ronsard and Belleau “exploit the simulacrum to think about the stakes of poetic production in a time of war” (57)—specifically, the French Wars of Religion (1562–98). Like Lucretius, both poets ask Venus to keep Mars from his destructive raging, evincing a belief that poetry can promote real political stability. The most productive example in this vein is Belleau’s Prometheus, who provides a “positive model of image-making as human creativity and creation” (68). With his theft of fire, Prometheus injected breath and spirit into humans, who remain resolutely material (unlike the deceptive, ephemeral Juno of his earlier Ixion poem). Belleau’s final collection of poetry, the 1576 Les amours et nouveaux eschanges des pierres précieuses continues to develop a vision of artistic productivity begun in the Prometheus poems: ancient knowledge of stones is here translated into Christian terms, “construing the powers of stones as derived from their origin myths” rather than the stars (80). Belleau’s treatment of magnets in particular imitates Lucretius’s description of magnets in DRN 6: the magnet subdues bellicose iron, bringing about amity; humans should take a lesson from this. Beyond political stability, Belleau also uses poetry to promote a productive economy in his Bergerie and Les petites Inventions, the former of which imitates
Lucretius’s hymn to Venus in its call for peace and bounty.

Hock’s third chapter, on John Donne (1572–1631), functions as a “clasp” to connect her first two chapters with the last two, on English authors writing during the civil war and restoration. Hock sees Donne as looking backward toward the (now tired) linking of Lucretian atomism with Petrarchan poetry as well as forward toward the fuller engagement with Epicurean philosophy of the latter half of the seventeenth century. Lucretius’s influence is a “background hum” in Donne’s poetry, evident in his repeated turns from spiritual to material in the poems of Songs and Sonets: she discusses in particular “Air and Angels,” “The Ecstasy,” and “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning.” In his praise poems, Donne foregoes the “Lucretianizing strain of Petrarchan poetry” (110) epitomized in Ronsard in favor of a kind of love in which “there is no emptiness,” to quote a line from Donne’s verse letter to the Countess of Huntingdon. In these poems, in sum, Donne fills the “vacant center of atomist cosmology” with the object of praise, whether God or a patron (113).

Lucy Hutchinson (1620–81), discussed in chapter 4, produced the first complete extant translation of DRN into English. In this chapter Hock considers Hutchinson’s performative renunciation of her earlier “wanton dalliance” with Lucretius, both in the dedication appended to her translation and in the preface to her biblical epic, Order and Disorder. Hutchinson is attuned to Lucretius’s longstanding association with erotic seduction as well as his negative description of sex in DRN 4 (which she vociferously refused to translate) and describes her earlier interest in DRN in this light, disavowing the epic and warning young readers against such a dangerous dalliance. Still, she makes poetic use of Lucretius’s negative example of seduction in her descriptions of reprobate biblical characters in Order and Disorder and of her own inappropriate desire for her late husband in her elegies. This chapter also takes up the topic of Lucretius and early modern women. Efforts to translate DRN were viewed as dangerous because they made this “rough” text available to women, and in any case, the task of translating DRN certainly belonged to a man and not, Sir Aston Cokain wrote, to the lady who had been attempting it (130). In turn, Hutchinson unshrinkingly criticizes male contemporaries such as John Evelyn and Edmund Waller for the self-importance and
obsequiousness, respectively, of their Lucretius translations.

In her final chapter, Hock turns to Margaret Cavendish (1623?–73) arguing that “Cavendish learns from DRN not only a theory of matter but also an argument about the connection between poetry and philosophy” (145). While ultimately rejecting Lucretian materialism for vitalism, throughout her writing career Cavendish finds in Lucretius’s poetics a foil for the misguided enterprise of male scientists trying to “crack nature’s structures to find its hidden truths”; Cavendish instead replicates and participates in nature’s creativity through poetry and fancy (165). Even more than DRN itself, Cavendish’s Poems and Fancies (1653) bodies forth Lucretian epistemology with its decentering cacophony of voices, underscoring the limitations of human knowledge while insisting on the existence of invisible atoms. As in DRN, Nature is a central, generative figure in Cavendish’s poetry, sometimes figured as a housewife; sometimes, as a wanton bawd (here Hock acknowledges a debt to Lara Dodds). Like a woman, Cavendish’s Nature is fanciful and unpredictable, not subject to Baconian investigation but at work whenever the poet creates.

Hock closes the book with the case of John Wilmot, second earl of Rochester (1647–80) in order to illustrate how the foregoing five poets do not receive DRN: “They do not tilt back their heads, expose their creamy throats, and invite the poet and his goddess to do their worst” (178). Rochester, by contrast, was one of a school of English and French libertines who “embraced Lucretius’s critique of religion as well as his erotic articulation of philosophical issues” (174): they took to heart Lucretius’s advice to spurn love and settle for the temporary pleasure of sex with numerous partners. Writing before the Enlightenment, when “the radical potential of Lucretian thought is given free rein,” Hock’s five poets only partially fell prey to Lucretius’s seduction, leveraging his erotic poetics in the service of their own various ends (176).

The drawback with a tightly focused book tends to be what it leaves out, and Erotics of Materialism does occasionally leave out material in ways that either weakens claims or risks misleading readers. A few minor claims are under-evidenced: no concrete evidence is given that Ronsard is invoking simulacra in his Sonnets pour Helene in the pages-long discussion of the importance of simulacra in these poems,
for instance (58–62). Similarly, critics who work on Lucretius may be surprised to learn that they follow “their early modern objects of study by implying that readers of DRN—both early modern and contemporary—must either be ‘all in’ or all out, either fully committed to or utterly indifferent to Epicurean philosophy” (125). The only example given of this whole-hog attitude toward Epicureanism among contemporary critics is Stephen Greenblatt. Any scholars doing more tempered work—David Norbrook’s analysis of affinities between Epicureanism and Reformed theology leaps to mind—are lost in such a generalization.

And while Hock describes Lucretian philosophy with great clarity, other schools of thought are painted with a broad brush: Christianity in particular is not treated with much precision despite at least four of her five authors being Christian. Hock reads Ronsard’s “ungenerous Heaven” who “blinkers” humans, for instance, as obviously being the “jealous, interventionist God of the Bible” (34–35) without giving any reason for this identification. In several places Hock also effectively lumps Christianity in with Platonism and pits this conglomerate against materialism. For instance, in discussing materialism in Donne’s Songs and Sonets, she passes over any resources within the Christian tradition that might have brought Donne to value material reality; this omission is particularly eyebrow-raising because Felecia Wright McDuffie has written a book showing how Donne’s turn to the body was informed by his renunciation of gnostic heresy and recovery of a more robust theology of incarnation from Jewish and Christian thought. Indeed, to my mind the Donne chapter was the most tenuous (to use a Lucretian term): Hock’s Donne is Jack Donne, always looking to “smuggle the body, and sex, into the conversation” and who obscures the lustiest aspects of his poetry, “papering them over with religious language” (102–3). She leaves the Donne who might really be interested in theology to other critics.

But a single book can’t tell every story, so these are small quibbles. Erotics of Materialism is a highly compelling and informative read, and a welcome addition to the scholarly discussion of early modern “dalliance” with the notorious Roman poet.