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Bruno Roche, *Lumières épicuriennes au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle: La Mothe Le Vayer, Molière et La Fontaine, lecteurs et continuateurs de Lucrèce*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2020. 446 pp. Bibliography, index, works cited list. €61.60 (pb/pdf). ISBN: 9782745352521.

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Bruno Roche's study comes in the wake of interest in the reception of Lucretius in early modern Europe. Unlike recent scholarship that has tended, understandably, to focus on translation, commentary, and book history to track the reception of the ancient philosopher-poet—including studies by Stephen Greenblatt, Phillip Hardie, and Philippe Chométy and Michèle Rosellini—Roche's original and richly detailed study proposes a new approach.<sup>[1]</sup> Roche draws on this scholarship and historical context but directs his focus to studying three authors, La Mothe Le Vayer, Molière, and La Fontaine, as “continuateurs” and “lecteurs” of Lucretius. In particular, he traces what he calls Epicurean “philosophèmes” (p. 39)—that is, key concepts of Epicurean philosophy relayed by Lucretius in his *De rerum natura*, as well as found in Epicurus's extant work—as they occur in these three authors' works. These key concepts sometimes appear as direct and overt references, sometimes as more subtle engagements. This methodology opens up the scope of his study: he brings more clearly into intellectual history authors and genres whose place therein has traditionally been somewhat dismissed; and by tracing the influence of Lucretius on these “fictions pensantes,” he expands our understanding of Lucretius's place in early modern French thought. Roche's study also brings a novel perspective to these three authors by comparing them: while La Mothe Le Vayer's influence on Molière has been considered, the line from La Mothe Le Vayer to La Fontaine has been traced in far less detail.

Roche examines these “réceptions-recréations” (p. 29) of Lucretius's poem and its Epicurean thought in such a way so as to avoid the polarised readings, split between privileging the “poetic” or the “philosophical,” which have often characterized approaches to Lucretius's work and its legacy. Instead, he proposes a way out of this “aporia” (p. 22) by considering these works as hybrids of literature and philosophy. This hybridity, for Molière and La Fontaine in particular, also maps onto their interweaving of “l'esthétique galante” and “libertinage érudit” (p. 29)—that is, of *galant* culture in which learning was kept discreet, but erudite references nevertheless abound, and which navigates a complex line between the polite, patriotic, and orthodox and all that challenges this: the libertine. Lucretius's work (its paganism, its materialist approach, the denial of an interventionist divinity) was controversial in the “siècle des Saints.” Roche is sensitive to the complexities entailed by the ancient philosopher's reception, particularly in terms of the methodological challenges posed by reading “libertine” texts where heterodoxy is often

only ever implicit or “between the lines,” for which he draws on scholarship by Jean-Pierre Cavaillé, Anthony Mckenna, Isabel Moreau, and Leo Strauss.[2]

The study is structured by an examination of key Epicurean “philosophèmes” and their reception by La Mothe Le Vayer, Molière, and La Fontaine: the search for happiness; the body; consolations for passions and death; religion; and the denial of divine providence. The first section, “La Recherche du bonheur: Source de polémique au ‘siècle des Saints,’” is divided into a study of the Lucretian “suave mari magno...” (that is, the opening of Book II of *De Rerum Natura*: “that it is pleasant, while the great sea rages, to watch another struggling from the safety of land”), and the concept of withdrawal from society in the works of the three authors in question; and a section on the ethics of pleasure in their work. Roche explores La Mothe Le Vayer’s skeptical use of the Lucretian commonplace in “Dialogue sur le sujet de la vie privée,” his *L’Hexaméron rustique*, and his Lettre XCIV, “De la retraite de la Cour”;[3] Molière’s reconfiguration of it into a trope of *l’honnêteté*; and La Fontaine’s nostalgic representation of solitude in fables such as “Le rat qui s’est retiré du monde” (*Fables* VII, 3) and “Démocrite et les Abdéritains” (*Fables* VIII, 26), which directly references Lucretius Book II.[4] He traces the influence of La Mothe Le Vayer’s “Dialogue sur la vie privée” on La Fontaine’s last fable, “Le Juge arbitre, l’Hospitalier et le Solitaire” (*Fables*, XII, 25), in which he praises solitude and retirement from society (pp. 69-71). Roche argues that such withdrawal also provides a space for “esprits libres” whose views might clash with those of the multitude, and that therefore “le retrait épicurien se révèle en effet particulièrement subversif au ‘siècle des saints’” (p. 71). Roche then identifies how these three authors configure Epicurean pleasure differently, considering La Mothe Le Vayer’s exploration of eros and licentious libertinage, La Fontaine’s nostalgia and Molière’s depiction of the relationship between pleasure and virtue. He argues that these works not only contribute to debates about pleasure of this period but also do so through their literary forms, in which pleasure is taken in the act of reading or spectating.

The second part, “Pour une pensée du corps,” comprises a study of Epicurean phenomenology of perception and an account of its place in Molière’s and La Fontaine’s positions against Descartes. Roche first traces the influence of Epicurus’s Letter to Herodotus on Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura* Book IV, in which Lucretius argues that sensation is a primary form of judgment, and examines its reception in La Mothe Le Vayer’s Lettre LXV “D’un aveugle-né” and its echoes in Molière’s *Sganarelle, ou le Cocu imaginaire*. [5] Roche then traces the conflicted reception of this idea by presenting Descartes’s opposition to it before arguing that Molière’s *Les précieuses ridicules* and *Les femmes savantes* can be read as both anti-Platonic and anti-Cartesian, evident, for instance, from the way “préciosité” is ridiculed for being a product of the erroneous doctrine of dualism.[6] Roche then analyses how La Fontaine uses Lucretian ideas to counter Descartes’s theory of the animal-machine in his much studied “Discours à Mme de la Sablière,” in which he uses exact expressions from Lucretius and casts Descartes as “le rival d’Épicure” (*Fables* IX, 19, v. 138), his “Les deux Rats, le Renard et l’œuf” (*Fables* IX, 20), and also his “Discours à M. le Duc de La Rochefoucauld” (*Fables* X, 14).

In part three, “Les remèdes aux maux de l’esprit,” Roche traces the place of Lucretian writing on love and death across his chosen corpus. Across the three French authors’ works, Roche argues that we find as much the influence of Montaigne’s writing on love (particularly “Sur des vers de Virgile” [III, 5], which is also about Lucretius) and death as we do that of Epicurus.[7] La Mothe Le Vayer, Molière, and La Fontaine seem in different ways to distance themselves from the solutions to these “maux de l’esprit” offered by Lucretius and Epicurus; yet they show sympathy

with the spirit of this philosophy, enacting a sort of “clinamen” of interpretation. By promoting pleasure, they in fact offer different sorts of remedies to moral suffering as depicted by Lucretius (p. 275). La Mothe Le Vayer’s treatment of death in his early dialogues, particularly his “Dialogue sur le sujet de la divinité,” constitutes, according to Roche, a model of libertine writing and its strategies of evasion: by quoting Lucretius, he not only valorizes the philosopher’s praise of Epicurus’s rebellion against “religio,” but also displaces responsibility for this claim by couching it as a quotation from “vers [...] philosophiques” (p. 238).<sup>[8]</sup> “Libertine strategies” are also traced in La Fontaine’s writing on death, in his erudite and richly intertextual fables such as “La Mort et le Malheureux” (*Fables* I, 15), “La Mort et le Bûcheron” (*Fables* I, 15) and “La Mort et le Mourant” (*Fables* VIII, 1).

On the question of religion, in the section entitled “Variations sur le sacrifice d’Iphigénie,” Roche includes elucidating readings of Lucretius’s condemnation of *religio* that opens his poem, and traces La Mothe le Vayer’s exploration of atheism in his “Dialogue sur le sujet de la divinité.” Roche then turns to Molière’s denouncing of the language of devotion, and the *querelle du Tartuffe*, during which La Fontaine’s anticlerical tales, “L’Ermite,” “Le Muet,” and “Les Cordeliers de Catalogne,” were published in an unauthorized, probably clandestine edition.<sup>[9]</sup> Roche also analyses La Fontaine’s *conte* “Féronde et le Purgatoire,” which contains “un discours libertin” against religious institutions (p. 329).<sup>[10]</sup> In the final section, “L’Expression d’une pensée antifinaliste,” Roche examines first the rejection of the idea of divine providence in Epicurean thought, evident particularly in *De rerum natura* II; and then its reception by the three authors in question by focusing on their representations of Jupiter. Depictions of this ancient god become a way for these French authors to disguise from their contemporary readers their critical analysis of Christian divine providence (p. 363).

Although occasionally the grouping of these three authors means that differences of genre and readership are somewhat flattened, this grouping also contributes to the book’s strength in bringing together writers who are not usually studied comparatively. The subtle and detailed exploration of Lucretius’s influence—an influence that is shown to be both direct and more tenuous—enriches our understanding of the role of *De rerum natura* and Epicurean thought in this period. This is a wide-ranging study that combines fine analysis and erudition with a lightness of touch. Highly readable, it will be a vital resource for those interested not only in these three authors, “libertinage,” Lucretius’s reception in this period, and early modern philosophy, but also, for its methodology in particular, students and scholars of early modern classical reception and comparative literature.

## NOTES

[1] Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (New York: Norton, 2011); Philip Hardie, *Lucretian Receptions: History, the Sublime, Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Philippe Chométy and Michèle Rosellini, eds., *Traduire Lucrèce: Pour une histoire de la réception française du De rerum natura (XVI-XVIII siècle)* (Paris: Champion, 2017).

[2] For instance, Jean-Pierre Cavaillé, *Dis/simulations: Jules César Vanini, François de La Mothe Le Vayer, Gabriel Naudé, Louis Machon et Torquetto Accetto: Religion, morale et politique au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Champion, 2002); Anthony Mckenna, *Molière, dramaturge libertin* (Paris: Champion, 2005); Isabelle Moreau, “Guérir du sot”: *Les stratégies d’écriture des libertins à l’âge classique* (Paris:

Champion, 2007); and Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1952).

[3] François de La Mothe Le Vayer, “Dialogue sur le sujet de la vie privée,” in *Dialogues faits à l’imitation des anciens*, ed. Bruno Roche (Paris: Champion, 2015), pp. 167–200; *L’Hexaméron rustique*, ed. Gabriel Los d’Urizen (Paris: Zanzibar, 1997) and “De la retraite de la Cour,” *Petits traités en forme de lettres*, in *Œuvres, nouvelle édition*, 7 vols. (Dresden: Groell, 1756), vol. 6, pp. 1–14.

[4] Jean de La Fontaine, “Fables, Contes et Nouvelles,” in *Œuvres Complètes*, 2 vols, ed. Jean-Pierre Collinet (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), I.

[5] La Mothe Le Vayer, “D’un aveugle-né,” *Petits traités en forme de lettres*, in *Œuvres*, VI, pp. 123–39; Molière, *Sganarelle, ou le Cocu imaginaire*, in *Œuvres Complètes*, ed. Georges Forestier and Claude Bourqui (Paris: Gallimard, 2010).

[6] Molière, *Les précieuses ridicules* and *Les femmes savantes*, in *Œuvres Complètes*.

[7] Montaigne, *Essais*, ed. Jean Céard (Paris: Livre de Poche, 2002).

[8] La Mothe Le Vayer, “Dialogue sur le sujet de la divinité,” in *Dialogues faits à l’imitation des anciens*, pp. 396–420.

[9] *Recueil contenant plusieurs discours libres et moraux et quelques nouvelles non encore imprimées* (Cologne: À La Sphère, 1667).

[10] La Fontaine, “Féronde et le Purgatoire,” in *Nouveaux contes* (Mons: Migeon, 1674), pp. 833–34.

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