

TRANSLATING IMPIETY: GIROLAMO FRACHETTA AND THE FIRST VERNACULAR COMMENTARY ON LUCRETIVS

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Summary: This essay sheds light on an important but largely overlooked chapter in the story of the early modern reception of Lucretius' *De rerum natura*: the publication, in 1589, of Girolamo Frachetta's *Breve spositione di tutta l'opera di Lucretio*, the first publication to systematically explicate the philosophical content of Lucretius' poem in a vernacular language. Published more than half a century before the first vernacular translation of the poem, Frachetta's commentary was a groundbreaking effort to make Lucretius' version of Epicurean philosophy accessible not only to the Latin-educated elite, but to a broader vernacular readership – a potentially dangerous enterprise at a time when professing belief in the more controversial tenets of Epicurean philosophy could provoke investigation for heresy by the Inquisition. This essay shows how Frachetta crafted a commentary capable of effectively explicating Lucretius' philosophy to a vernacular readership, while taking measures to proactively defend himself from possible accusations of heresy and his text from the threat of suppression.

Among the heretical beliefs that earned Giordano Bruno execution at the hands of the Roman Inquisition, one conviction stands out as his boldest transgression of orthodoxy: his unshakeable belief that our universe contains an infinite number of worlds. This vision was irreconcilable with the geocentric cosmology authorized by the church and the scholastic intellectual establishment, and far more radical even than the heliocentric cosmology that was to earn Galileo condemnation for heresy by the Inquisition thirty-three years after Bruno's execution.¹ But whereas Galileo

¹ As Ingrid Rowland has noted, the summary of the Inquisition proceedings against Giordano Bruno drafted in March of 1598 identifies four categories of heretical beliefs from which Bruno refused to back down even under duress – including “that there are multiple worlds” (the other categories being “on the Trinity, divinity, and incarnation,” “on the souls of men and beasts,” and “on the art of divination”). *Giordano Bruno: Philosopher/Heretic*, 258. For the full text, see Mercati, ed., *Il sommario del processo di Giordano Bruno*, 55-119.

developed his heretical cosmology through empirical observation and mathematics, Bruno came to his belief in an infinite universe by reading an ancient text: Lucretius' *De rerum natura*, arguably the most dangerous and subversive text to survive from classical antiquity, at least from the perspective of an inquisitor striving to preserve and enforce Catholic orthodoxy in a Europe riven by religious strife.² The express purpose behind Lucretius' poem is to shatter his readers' conventional worldview – to convince his readers that, contrary to what they have been told, there is no god who cares about human affairs or judges human actions, that there is no afterlife, and that pleasure is the highest good.

The philosophy that Lucretius' poem expounds is that of Epicurus, the great Athenian philosopher who lived between the fourth and third centuries BCE. Lucretius was the first Roman to explicate Epicurean philosophy in his native Latin language, and did so in hauntingly beautiful verses that constitute one of the great masterpieces of Latin literature. Among Lucretius' Roman contemporaries in the first century BCE, only the highly educated elite acquired Greek literacy, while Latin literacy was far more widespread. By writing in Latin, Lucretius sought to popularize Epicurean thought. Sixteen centuries later, in Giordano Bruno's lifetime, an analogous situation of two-tiered literacy prevailed in Italy, as in much of Europe: Latin literacy had become the domain of the intellectual elite, while vernacular literacy was increasingly widespread. Lucretius' great poem, written to enlighten the masses, could be read directly only by a minority of educated elites. The first complete vernacular translations of the *De rerum natura* did not appear until the middle of the 17th century: Michel de Marolles published his French prose translation in 1650, and Alessandro Marchetti completed his Italian verse translation shortly thereafter.³ The first publication to present the content of the *De rerum natura* in a vernacular language, however, predates these celebrated translations by more than half a century, yet has been overlooked by most scholarship on the early modern reception of Lucretius: Girolamo Frachetta's 1589 Italian paraphrase of and commentary on Lucretius' poem, the *Breve sposizione di*

² On Bruno's intellectual debts to Lucretius, see Gatti, *Essays on Giordano Bruno*, 70-90.

³ The fate of Marchetti's work demonstrates that would-be translators of Lucretius had good reason to fear suppression by the church: ecclesiastical authorities successfully prevented his translation from being printed for decades, during which time it circulated only in illicit manuscript copies. It was finally printed only in 1717, in England. See Saccenti, *Lucrezio in Toscana. Studio su Alessandro Marchetti*.

tutta l'opera di Lucretio. This article aims to shed light on this little-known chapter in the story of Lucretius' return to early modern Europe, showing how Frachetta succeeded in creating a commentary that would effectively elucidate Lucretius' Epicurean thought to a vernacular readership while avoiding the very real threat of suppression by ecclesiastical censors.

Lucretius' Epicurean poem had an electrifying effect on European intellectual life, beginning with Poggio Bracciolini's 1417 rediscovery of a manuscript of the poem in a German monastery, following centuries in which the text had risked complete oblivion. The relative intellectual freedom from ecclesiastical interference that fifteenth-century humanists enjoyed, and their hunger for all things ancient, meant that conditions were ripe for Lucretius finally to receive due recognition as a serious thinker and a gifted poet. Recent scholarship has revealed with increasing clarity the decisive influence that the rediscovery of Lucretius exerted on some of the greatest authors and artists of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, among them Poliziano, Machiavelli, Botticelli, and Giorgione.⁴ The mid-seventeenth century saw a new flowering of interest in Lucretius and Epicurus, with a decisive role being played by Pierre Gassendi, who published several major works seeking to reconcile Epicurean atomism with Christianity. Lucretius' poem and Epicurean thought—especially the theory of atomism—became crucial influences on major thinkers of early modern Europe, including Hobbes, Newton, Voltaire, Diderot and Hume.

Between the lifetimes of Machiavelli and Gassendi, however, the rebirth of Lucretius and Epicurean thought was jeopardized by the intense policing of religious orthodoxy that the Catholic Church implemented in response to the growth of the Protestant movements. To adhere openly to any of the Epicurean doctrines that contradicted Catholic orthodoxy—such as the existence of infinite worlds—was to invite the attention of the Inquisition.⁵

While some excellent scholarship, particularly in recent years, has increased our understanding of the momentous first century of Lucretius'

⁴ Some of the most important recent contributions include Brown, *The Return of Lucretius to Renaissance Florence*; Passannante, *The Lucretian Renaissance: Philology and the Afterlife of Tradition*; Campbell, "Giorgione's *Tempest*, Studiolo Culture and the Renaissance Lucretius;" and Dempsey, *The Portrayal of Love: Botticelli's "Primavera" and Humanist Culture at the Time of Lorenzo the Magnificent*.

⁵ The case of Sperone Speroni illustrates the risks that incautious admirers of Lucretius could face in the later decades of the Cinquecento. In the 1540s Speroni had included quotations from the conclusion of *De rerum natura* 4 in his *Dialogo d'amore*; in 1575 he was anonymously denounced to the Inquisition for his imitation of Lucretius. See Prosperi, "Lucretius in the Italian Renaissance," 216.

rebirth and renewed influence on European culture—from Poggio’s discovery through the first part of the sixteenth century—the subsequent phase of the reception of Lucretius, during the years that in Italy correspond to the height of the Counter-Reformation, has been studied by relatively few scholars.⁶ Tracing Lucretius’ influence in this period is indeed more difficult than in the case of the fifteenth century, since very few authors writing during this age dare to profess openly their intellectual debts to the Epicurean poet. While Frachetta is exceptional as the first author to expound Lucretius in the vernacular, he is, like the vast majority of his contemporaries, very cautious in the way he handles the dangerous doctrines of the impious Lucretius. Precisely because Frachetta endeavors to explicate the *De rerum natura* without appearing to transgress the boundaries of orthodoxy, his commentary provides a valuable window into the predominant attitudes in this period toward Lucretius, Epicurus, and the various controversial issues raised in the *De rerum natura*: materialism, atomism, the afterlife, the proper goal of human life, divine providence, the efficacy of prayer, etc.

Prior to the 1589 publication of Frachetta’s *Breve spositione di tutta l’opera di Lucretio* only a small number of Lucretius commentaries had been published, all in Latin: Raphael Francus’ 1504 *Paraphrasis in Lucretium* was followed in 1511 by Giovan Battista Pio’s *In Carum Lucretium Poetam Commentarii*, the first comprehensive Lucretius commentary. Dionysius Lambinus published his commentary on the *De rerum natura* in 1564, followed just two years later by Obertus Gifanius.⁷ Preceding these early published Lucretius commentaries was the unpublished work of Marsilio Ficino, who in the late 1450s began writing the first post-classical Lucretius commentary but quickly abandoned work on the manuscript, which he later

⁶ The reception of Lucretius in Counter-Reformation Italy has been recently examined by Valentina Prosperi in *Di soavi licor gli orli del vaso: la fortuna di Lucrezio dall’Umanesimo alla Controriforma*. Prosperi’s book mentions only briefly Girolamo Frachetta’s *Breve spositione di tutta l’opera di Lucretio*. Only one article has been published dealing at length with Frachetta’s commentary: Gambino Longo, “La *Spositione* de Lucrece par Girolamo Frachetta et les théories poétiques de la fin du XVII^e siècle en Italie.” Gambino Longo’s contribution focuses on the final seven sections of Frachetta’s work, which present a detailed commentary on the poem’s opening invocation to Venus.

⁷ On early Lucretius commentaries, see Fleischmann’s entry on Lucretius in the *Catalogus translationum et commentariorum*, as well as Gordon, *A Bibliography of Lucretius*, and Reeve, “Lucretius in the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance: Transmission and Scholarship.”

claimed to have burned.⁸ Ficino came to view Lucretius as a dangerously misguided thinker and dedicated his *magnum opus*, the *Platonic Theology*, in large part to refuting the Epicurean doctrine of the soul's mortality—hence the subtitle of the work, *On the Immortality of the Soul*.⁹

The published Latin commentaries on the *De rerum natura* contributed to heightening awareness and understanding of Lucretius' work among Europe's Latin-educated elite. In the absence of any translation or vernacular commentary, though, Lucretius' poetry, and the substance of his Epicurean thought, remained largely inaccessible to those who could not read Latin.¹⁰ The dangerous content of Lucretius' poem caused grave concern among religious authorities and other guardians of conventional piety, giving rise to various institutionalized efforts to limit the poem's circulation and influence—for example, a 1516 decree forbidding teaching the text in Florentine schools.¹¹ Perhaps surprisingly, the *De rerum natura* was not placed on the Index of Forbidden Books. Indeed, the fact that Lucretius' poem was not more vigorously suppressed is probably due at least in part to the fact that, since only the Latin-educated elite could read it, its ability to corrupt the piety of the masses was considered to be limited.

Frachetta's commentary on Lucretius is important as a groundbreaking effort to expand knowledge and discussion of Lucretius beyond the intellectual elite of Latin readers and speakers. In this sense it was a project that could have exposed its author to real dangers. In fact, Frachetta's imprudent enthusiasm for controversial ancient philosophical doctrines had already provoked the Church to censor one of Frachetta's earlier works, his 1583 *De universo assertiones octingentae*. A brief review of the salient events of Frachetta's life up to the publication of his Lucretius commentary, including this first encounter with ecclesiastical censorship, will help to establish the context for his surprising decision to publish a vernacular

⁸ Ficino recounts burning his Lucretius commentary in a letter that he wrote later in his life to Martin Prenninger, which can be read in his 1576 *Opera omnia*, 933.

⁹ The claim that the soul is mortal which Ficino seeks to refute is, of course, not unique to Epicurean thinkers. Ficino also intends to combat ideas about the soul's mortality associated with Averroes and his followers. On Ficino's complex engagement with Lucretius, see Hankins, "Ficino's Critique of Lucretius."

¹⁰ The biography of Epicurus contained in Diogenes Laertius' collection of biographies of ancient philosophers, which was translated into Italian, was one of the few sources from which early modern Italian readers who did not know Latin could learn about Epicurean thought.

¹¹ See Brown, *The Return of Lucretius to Renaissance Florence*, 14.

commentary on a dangerous author like Lucretius.

Girolamo Frachetta was born in 1558 in Rovigo. As a young man he studied the liberal arts under Antonio Riccoboni in the public school of Rovigo. He later enrolled as a student in the arts faculty of the University of Padua. Frachetta's university education at the most prestigious center of Renaissance Aristotelianism unquestionably provided him with a strong training in Aristotelian thought. Yet within this Peripatetic citadel, Frachetta found a teacher—Francesco Piccolomini—who encouraged students to study a broader array of ancient philosophical schools, combining the study of Aristotelian thought with Platonism and Neoplatonism.¹²

Frachetta completed his doctoral degree in 1581, and shortly thereafter left Padua for Rome, where in 1582 he entered the service of Cardinal Luigi d'Este. In 1583 he published an encyclopedic work on the nature of the physical and incorporeal world entitled *De universo assertiones octingentae*, which he defended in a public disputation held in the church of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva. With this publication and the associated disputation, Frachetta likely hoped to establish his reputation in Rome as a philosophical authority. New to the Roman milieu, Frachetta seems to have overestimated the degree of intellectual freedom available to authors in Counter-Reformation Rome. He drew material for his theses not only from Christian theologians and from Aristotle, but also from more controversial Neoplatonic, Cabalistic, and Hermetic sources. Frachetta's bold philosophical eclecticism aroused suspicions of heresy, and Church authorities ultimately forbade the publication of 112 of Frachetta's 800 theses—in particular, those concerning the immortality of the intellective soul, the Cabala, and the names of God.¹³

In the wake of the suppression of his controversial theses, Frachetta could not have remained blind to the precariousness of his situation in Rome, where an indiscreet free thinker who attracted the attention of the Inquisition could quickly find himself in serious trouble. This brush with Church censorship did not lead Frachetta to abandon his program of publishing on controversial philosophical concepts; within a few years he would begin his commentary on the notoriously impious Lucretius. In his new work on Lucretius, though, Frachetta prudently deploys strategies evi-

¹² Baldini, "Girolamo Frachetta: vicissitudini e percorsi culturali di un pensatore politico nell'Italia della Controriforma," 243. See also Baldini's entry on Frachetta in the *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*. Baldini provides a fuller biographical treatment of Piccolomini in "Per la biografia di Francesco Piccolomini," 389-420.

¹³ Baldini, "Girolamo Frachetta: vicissitudini e percorsi culturali," 244.

dently designed to safeguard him against suspicions of heresy.

Frachetta's 1589 *Sposizione* consists of thirteen sections. The first six sections correspond to the six books of the *De rerum natura*. Proceeding through Lucretius' text in order, Frachetta summarizes the main points of the poem and offers his own critiques of its doctrines. The final seven sections consist of a detailed commentary on the opening verses of the *De rerum natura*. While the first six sections deal primarily with the philosophical content of Lucretius' text, the detailed commentary in the final seven books concerns itself more with matters of literary style. The present article will focus on the first six sections of Frachetta's work, examining how Frachetta presents the dangerous doctrines contained within this great Epicurean poem. As will become clear, Frachetta seeks at once to emphasize Lucretius' importance as a serious thinker and as the Latin language's primary exponent of Epicurean philosophy (thereby elevating Frachetta's own status as the first vernacular commentator on Lucretius) while simultaneously protecting himself from possible accusations of heretical Epicurean sympathies by vociferously condemning those of Lucretius' views that the Church regarded as the most impious.

The commentary format that Frachetta chose for his work on Lucretius, and his choice to write in the vernacular rather than Latin, were shaped by his participation, during the 1580s, in a Roman literary society, called the Accademia degli Incitati, of which he appears to have been a founding member. Beyond Frachetta's own remarks, little is known about this group. In the preface to his commentary, by way of defending his choice of the vernacular, Frachetta offers a brief account of the meetings of the academy where, as was common in sixteenth-century Italian literary societies, vernacular and classical literature was discussed in Italian:

[I]nstituimmo certa Academia, ove di molti nobili ingegni del continuo concorrevano. Et vi fu chi prese a leggere Museo, chi Dante, chi il Petrarca, et chi altro Scrittore di grido. Et ciascuno in volgare favella, come pare che si costumi hoggidi di fare in tutti e ridotti, dove si tengono ragionamenti di belle et polite lettere. Dalla quale usanza non volendo ne anco noi dipartirci, sì come quegli, che pensammo di volerli valere bene spesso delle autorità di Scrittori volgari, havendo tolto per impresa di legger Lucretio, ci demmo a far ciò pure in lingua volgare. Di che non pensiamo di esserne per dovere ripartare biasimo, quando non ci sono mancati di quegli, li quali tuttavia sono lodati, et tenuti per di soprano giudicio, che hanno commentato in questa favella etiandio Greci scrittori; et in ispetiale Aristotile, che scrisse di philosophia, come ha fatto altresì Lucretio (Frachetta, iv).

Preemptively responding to those who might object that only Latin possesses the linguistic sophistication necessary for serious discussion of classical philosophy, Frachetta invokes the precedent set by the many sixteenth-century authors of vernacular commentaries on Aristotle.¹⁴ The rapid rise, particularly from the 1540s on, in the use of the vernacular for philosophical texts in the Aristotelian tradition is a phenomenon that has only recently become the object of sustained scholarly attention.¹⁵ Frachetta deliberately situates his work within the context of a broader contemporary shift in linguistic norms through which Italian authors, even those trained in Latin, increasingly turned to the vernacular not only for literary compositions, but also for philosophical prose.

The career of Frachetta's teacher Francesco Piccolomini is emblematic of this trend: having published prolifically in Latin throughout his long life, in 1602 (at the age of 81) he shifted to the vernacular for two philosophical works, his *Istituzione del principe* and *Compendio della scienza civile*. The latter, dedicated to the Grand Duchess of Tuscany Cristina di Lorena, is an abbreviated vernacular paraphrase of Piccolomini's own 1589 Latin treatise *Univerſa philoſophia de moribus*, and is expressly intended to reach readers untrained in Latin.¹⁶

Among the members of the Accademia degli Incitati for whom Frachetta originally composed his Lucretius commentary, many no doubt had the Latin proficiency needed to read Lucretius in the original language; for others, perhaps, Frachetta's vernacular paraphrase served to elucidate the content of an otherwise difficult or inaccessible text. The subsequent printing of Frachetta's work offered a point of access to the content of Lucretius' Epicurean poem to a far broader public: any literate Italian with the means to acquire a printed book.

In the dedication of the work to Scipione Gonzaga, Frachetta justifies his choice to compose a commentary on Lucretius. Frachetta declares that

¹⁴ For a literary representation (from the 1530s) of this type of debate over the role of the vernacular, see Sperone, *Dialogo delle lingue*, discussed in Gilson "Aristotele fatto volgare" and Dante as 'Peripatetico' in Sixteenth-Century Dante Commentary," 33-34, and in Vasoli, "Sperone Speroni: la filosofia e la lingua. L' 'ombra' del Pomponazzi e un programma di 'volgarizzamento' del sapere."

¹⁵ See especially Bianchi, "Per una storia dell'aristotelismo 'volgare' nel Rinascimento: problemi e prospettive di ricerca," and Lines, "Rethinking Renaissance Aristotelianism: Bernardo Segni's *Ethica*, the Florentine Academy, and the Vernacular."

¹⁶ See Baldini, "Per la biografia di Francesco Piccolomini," 411-413.

the *De rerum natura* contains many wicked doctrines, and that his work will therefore accomplish the necessary task of refuting these impious falsehoods. He also asserts, though, that the poem contains much that is of value, which others have misinterpreted or even lied about:

La presente fatica sopra Lucretio...se non dovesse esser cara al mondo per altro, si dovrebbe per esser sola, o presso che sola intorno così grave scrittore. Il quale non doveva a partito niuno rimanere senza spositione; imperoche oltre l'essere oscuro, e contenere molte cose buone, che sono state frantese, ne contiene anco molte di ree, le quali sa di mestiero, accioche altri non vi s'inganni, in iscambio togliendole, rifiutare. Et è uno rattivatore della dottrina di già per poco dimenticata, del grande Epicuro, a cui sono apposte a torto molte bugie¹⁷.

As these opening remarks suggest, and as the text as a whole confirms, Frachetta's work on Lucretius is animated by admiration for this great Roman poet and thinker, as well as for Lucretius' hero and source, Epicurus. Frachetta aims to dispel the widely held misconception that Epicurus and his followers were morally bankrupt sensualists, hopelessly given over to the blind pursuit of bodily pleasures. He insists that Epicurus' brand of hedonism in fact advocates the pursuit of a much loftier ideal: human happiness defined as the well-being that the soul enjoys when it frees itself from suffering—particularly from unnecessary mental anxieties:

...è da attendere alla scienza, di cui se non sarà frutto il levamento de' dolori del corpo, sarà almeno il discacciamento del terrore dell'animo, et delle tenebre dell'ignoranza. Et qui pon fine al proemio. Intorno al quale io non lascierò di annotare, che egli si conosce in esso, l'opinion de gli Epicurei esser stata che la felicità humana fosse posta non nelle delitie et lautezze (le quali biasima Lucretio, et prova non esser giovevoli, il che fa anco altrove) ma nel godimento dell'animo non impedito ne da dolori del corpo, ne da perturbationi, o da cure (Frachetta, 23).

Part of the popular misconception of the hedonism of Epicurus involved the notion that Epicureans were gluttons devoted to overindulging in the pleasures of the palate. Frachetta alerts his readers that

¹⁷ Frachetta, *Breve spositione di Girolamo Frachetta sopra l'opera di Lucretio, distesa in sei lettioni, nella qual si disanima la dottrina di Epicuro, et si mostra in che sia conforme col vero, et con gl'insegnamenti d'Aristotile et in che differente*, ii. I have expanded abbreviations within the text and have modernized punctuation and capitalization where necessary to facilitate comprehension.

this vision of Epicureanism is grossly mistaken, and that Lucretius in fact condemns gluttony and indulgence in expensive cuisine:

[Lucretius] aggiugne anco che, poiche il diletto de' cibi non si comprende che con la lingua et col palato, di modo che trangugiati che sono, più non si sentono, non dobbiamo curarci che sieno più o meno delicati o preciosi. Solo dobbiamo avvertire che sieno buoni a nutrirci. Onde vene a biasimare i golosi, et comprendiamo da ciò che gli Epicurei non erano avidi di mangiare et di bere, come vulgarmente si dice (Frachetta, 96-97).

Another facet of this same popular distortion of Epicurean hedonism was the idea that the Epicureans, including Lucretius, had been particularly given over to love, lust, and carnal pleasures. This misconception was reinforced by a persistent story—reported and perhaps even invented by Saint Jerome—that Lucretius had gone mad after drinking a love potion, had composed the *De rerum natura* amid bouts of insanity, and had ultimately committed suicide. Of course, those who actually read the *De rerum natura* found that Lucretius was anything but indulgent toward the pleasures and temptations of Eros. He in fact authored, in *De rerum natura* IV.1030 - 1287, a stunning call to arms against sexual desire, instructing his readers how to free themselves from the debilitating clutches of lust. Frachetta highlights this Lucretian passage in his commentary, and expresses strong approval for Lucretius' attack on erotic passion:

Quindi conferma quello che ha detto, che egli sia da guardarsi di non incappare ne' lacci amorosi...Le quali cose sono tutte ben dette, et degne di esser scritte nella memoria d'ogniuno (Frachetta, 106).

Later in his commentary Frachetta again insists that the notion that the Epicureans were given over to sexual excesses is completely false. Commenting on the opening verses of book five, which exalt Epicurus as a greater hero than Hercules, for having liberated men from destructive passions, including lust, Frachetta notes that Lucretius praises

la sapienza Epicurea. per cui sono netti et purgati da gli affetti, mostri più fieri, et più horribili de gli uccisi da Hercole, et resi tranquilli gli animi nostri. Ove fra gli altri affetti, annovera anco la lussuria. Dal qual luogo pur si conosce gli Epicurei non haver dato opera a gli atti libidinosi (Frachetta, 110)

Frachetta recognizes that Lucretius' poem is founded on a moral philosophy of moderation and self-control. The *De rerum natura* gives eloquent expression to the importance of eliminating desires for superfluous or false goods—like extreme wealth and political power—, which can only

hinder the individual in pursuit of inner tranquility. As Frachetta puts it in his commentary on Book II, verses 37-39:

Et come non sono di bisogno, ne giovano, o le ricchezze, o la nobiltà, o le signorie, per levare i dolori et i patimenti del corpo, così non fanno di mestiero, ne sono di pro, per scacciare le cure et le passioni dell'animo...(Frachetta, 22).

Frachetta again acknowledges the high value placed on self-control within Epicurean philosophy in his commentary on Book V, verses 1130-35, and does not hide his admiration for these Epicurean virtues:

Intorno al quale discorso, non mi pare di dovere annotare altro, salvo che vi si scorge il dispregio che facevano gli Epicurei delle ricchezze et grandigie, et l'apprezzamento del viver parco (Frachetta, 133).

Frachetta's efforts to clear Lucretius and Epicurus from unjustified accusations of moral turpitude reveal both Frachetta's respect for the Epicureans and the persistence of these misperceptions, which had dogged the Epicurean school already in antiquity and were still prevalent in the late sixteenth century. While Frachetta's sympathetic remarks about Epicurus' personal character and aspects of his moral teachings run counter to the hostility toward and ignorance about Epicureanism that was widespread among his contemporaries, they are not reckless: Frachetta singles out for praise precisely those aspects of Epicurean moral philosophy that are most consonant with Catholic teachings. In commenting on the doctrinal passages of *De rerum natura* that are most flagrantly at odds with core tenets of Christian faith, Frachetta vociferously condemns the errors of Lucretius and Epicurus. Lucretius' belief that the human soul and spirit (*anima* and *animus*) are mortal, dying along with the body, Frachetta declares to be a false and impious doctrine:

[Lucretius] studia di dimostrare che l'anima et l'animo, che secondo lui nascono insieme col corpo, sieno mortali. La qual conclusione è non solo falsa, ma empia, per le conseguenze che ne vengono... (Frachetta, 65).

Frachetta also flatly condemns Lucretius' denial of divine Providence, which he rightly observes amounts to an outright attack on religion:

[Lucretius] dice essere errati coloro che stimano essi Dei tramettersi nella cura del mondo. Onde viene a negare la provvidenza divina. Della quale empia opinione noi favelleremo distintamente altra volta. Ma percioche la provvidenza et la religione vanno di brigata, conciosiacosa che il culto

divino dipenda dal credere, che Dio habbia cura di noi, et ci premii, et punisca, perciò Lucretio, havendo levata la providenza, toglie etiandio la religione; et commenda Epicuro di esser stato il primiero a levarsi di sotto così grave peso... (Frachetta, 4).

Perhaps the most notorious of Lucretius' verses, in the eyes of religious authorities, are verses 84-101 of the first book, in which Lucretius decries the killing of Iphigeneia, sacrificed to appease Artemis and thereby enable the Greek fleet to sail against Troy. For Lucretius the innocent girl's death is an emblematic example of the destructive effects of conventional religious beliefs. Frachetta rejects Lucretius' argument that religious belief is broadly implicated in Iphigeneia's sad fate, which he blames on the personal failings of Agamemnon, who must have been insane to agree to sacrifice his own daughter:

Ma è questo argomento Lucretiano assai debole, et da huom che ha poca ragione dal canto suo. Percioche non fu la religione cagion di cotal sceleragine, ma la pazzia, o l'impietà di Agamennone, il quale non doveva a partito niuno, per essecutione dell'incosiderato voto che fatto haveva, sacrificar la figliuola. Così San Girolamo riprende Iephthe di haver sacrificato altresì a Dio la figliuola; et appellalo stolto nel far il voto, et empio nell'essequirlo (Frachetta, 4).

Throughout his commentary, Frachetta compares and contrasts Lucretius' Epicurean doctrines not only with Christian truth, but also with the views of Aristotle. For example, Frachetta reports Lucretius' views on the infinite size of the universe, commenting on *De rerum natura* I. 1021 and following, but he goes on to reject Lucretius' claims, citing Aristotle's authoritative view that nothing in our world is infinite:

Onde appare Lucretio ne anco in questo esser caminato senza ordine. Ma perche vedeva alcuno potersi opporre a detta seconda ragione, ricorrendo alla providenza e al consiglio divino, nega il mondo esser costituito nella guisa, che è per consiglio o per cura d'alcuno, volendo tutto dipendere dal caso al concorso degli atomi. Ma erra Lucretio, percioche, come mostra Aristotile, nel terzo libro della Phisica, et nel primo libro del Cielo, la natura non ammette infinito d'alcuna guisa, se non in potenza. Ne è vero, o puo essere, che fuor del mondo vi sia spatium veruno, ne anco finito, non che infinito (Frachetta, 19).

Frachetta's extensive discussion of Lucretius' version of atomic theory similarly concludes with his declaration that Aristotle's theory of matter is superior. However, he suggests that the two theories are not entirely at odds

with one another, in that Lucretius' atoms have many of the properties that Aristotle assigns to his prime matter (Frachetta, 8).

The text's frequent recourse to Aristotelian philosophy as a counterpoint to Epicureanism is indicative of the strong grounding in Peripatetic thought that Frachetta had received in the course of his Paduan education. It also serves a defensive function, providing Frachetta with a means of fleshing out Lucretius' philosophical positions in detail while avoiding creating the potentially dangerous impression that his own perspective corresponds to that of Lucretius. Through these constant references to Aristotle, the commentator's voice emerges implicitly as that of a well-trained and committed Peripatetic who critically assesses Lucretius' views as those of a worthy but misguided rival.

Having advertised in the preface of his work his intention to cite frequently the authority of vernacular authors, Frachetta peppers his commentary with references to major and minor authors of the Italian literary canon, including Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Ariosto, and Tasso. Since the connections that Frachetta draws between Lucretius' Latin poem and these vernacular authors are, with a few exceptions, rather tenuous, it is likely that Frachetta was motivated to include these references primarily by a desire to increase his text's appeal to readers steeped in the vernacular canon.

In a handful of cases, though, Frachetta's commentary does identify echoes of Lucretius' verses in vernacular works which could have escaped readers, particularly those unable to read Lucretius' Latin. Commenting on Lucretius' famous metaphor comparing his poetry to a honeyed cup containing the bitter yet salutary medicine of Epicurean philosophy, Frachetta draws attention to the echo of these Lucretian verses that Tasso famously included in the invocation that opens his *Gerusalemme liberata*: "Della qual comperatione, et del qual luoco Lucretiano, s'è servito a' di nostri Torquato Tasso nell'invocatione della sua *Gersalemme liberata* (Frachetta, 18). Tasso's masterpiece had been published in 1581, just a few years before Frachetta's Lucretius commentary. Thus by highlighting Tasso's most prominent allusion to the *De rerum natura*, Frachetta succeeds in demonstrating Lucretius' ongoing influence on the latest Italian vernacular literature.

The publication of the *Gerusalemme liberata* gave rise to intense debates in the world of Italian letters between critics who declared that Tasso's work had definitively outdone its major immediate predecessor, Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, and those who remained devoted partisans of

Ariosto. Those who argued for the superiority of Tasso often did so on the basis of the claim that the *Gerusalemme liberata* embodies various formal precepts derived from Aristotle's *Poetics* which Ariosto's romance energetically violates. Frachetta, who joined the ranks of those who favored Tasso over Ariosto, found even in his Lucretius commentary an occasion to decry Ariosto's transgressions of literary decorum. Noting that Lucretius begins each book of his poem with a new invocation, Frachetta declares that this approach is suitable in the case of a philosophical poem like the *De rerum natura*, but that Ariosto erred in deploying the same sort of multiple invocations in his narrative poem:

Ciascun de' suoi libri da cominciamento Lucretio con nuovo proemio. Il che fa per significare il compartimento della dottrina sua. Perciò i poeti, che hanno scritto attione continuata et indivisibile, a ragione si sono rimasi di fare altri proemii, che quello del principio, nelle loro opere. Dal qual costume si partì Lodovico Ariosto nel suo Orlando Furioso. Ma se egli si possa difendere di haver ciò fatto, o no, si considerera forse da noi con occasione (Frachetta, 53).

In addition to connecting Lucretius to the vernacular literature of his own century, Frachetta is also eager to establish connections between the *De rerum natura* and the *tre corone* of Trecento Italian literature. In the pursuit of such connections he posits direct allusions to Lucretius in vernacular works where current scholarship now recognizes only Lucretius' mediated influence. Most significantly, Frachetta argues that Boccaccio's description of the plague in the *Decameron* is a direct imitation of the verses on the Athenian plague that close the *De rerum natura*. Frachetta devotes several pages of his commentary to this argument, which he supports by citing numerous specific passages of Boccaccio's prose that he claims derive directly from specific Lucretian verses. The following excerpt illustrates Frachetta's approach:

Detto delle cagioni delle infermità, quindi prende occasione, per fine dell'opera, di descrivere certa pestilenza d'Athene, imitando Thucidide, che avanti l'havea descritta. Ma percioche il Boccaccio in descrivendo quella che a' suoi di fu in Firenze, mostra di haver imitati o presi non pochi luoghi da Lucretio, noi pensiamo che non sarà opera affatto discara, l'avertirgli ad uno ad uno. Dice adunque Lucretio, che questa mortifera qualità scemò il contado Atheniese, et la città, d'animali, et d'huomini. Percioche venendo da' confini d'Egitto, portata per l'aria, ne si restando pel viaggio d'infettar l'acque, ivi si fermò, et vi prese piede. Il qual luogo par che imiti il Boccaccio, dicendo,

Alquanti anni davanti nelle parti orientali incominciata, quelle d'in-

numerabile quantità di viventi havendo private, senza restare, d'un luogo in un altro continuandosi, verso l'occidente miserabilmente s'era ampliata.

Et soggiugne Lucretio, che in cotal luogo prese tanto di forza, che vi s'infermavano et morivano gli huomini a stuoli.

Il che pur imitò il Boccaccio, dicendo, *A migliaia per giorno infermavano, & c.* (Frachetta, 169).

Frachetta is mistaken in his assumption that Boccaccio read and directly imitated the *De rerum natura*. The real explanation behind the striking similarities between Boccaccio's plague description and Lucretius' is rather more complicated: Boccaccio was in fact alluding to and adapting works by other ancient authors who in turn imitated Lucretius and Lucretius' principal model, the plague description found in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*. The most important of these intermediate sources linking Boccaccio to Lucretius and Thucydides were Seneca, Ovid, and Livy.¹⁸

Frachetta's project was daring in its conception, careful in its execution. Frachetta set out to do what no previous author had dared: to make the doctrinal content of Lucretius' controversial Epicurean poem accessible to a broad vernacular readership. By tracing an extensive network of connections between the *De rerum natura* and the greatest works of Italian literature, Frachetta aimed to render Lucretius (and his own commentary) more attractive to the same vernacular reading public that had made the *Decameron*, *Orlando furioso*, and *Gerusalemme liberata* into perennial best-sellers.

While Frachetta did not achieve runaway editorial success with his *Spositione* (nor, perhaps, would his limited talent as an Italian prose stylist have allowed for this), he broke an important barrier by systematically divulging Lucretius' philosophy in the vernacular, setting the stage for future authors like Marchetti who with greater eloquence would bring Lucretius to a popular readership. Frachetta's risky project, if handled inexpertly, could have brought about repercussions far more dire than the suppression of Frachetta's book and the prosecution of its author by the Inquisition: a reckless publication of this sort could have provoked church authorities into adding the *De rerum natura* itself to the Index of Forbidden Books. Frachetta's careful handling of the text allowed the guarded but vital conversation about Lucretius's Epicurean philosophy to continue undisrupted, while opening this conversation to a new group of vernacular interlocutors.

¹⁸See Getto, "La peste del 'Decameron' e il problema della fonte lucreziana," 505 - 523.

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