

**SAA Seminar #16: Lucretian Pleasure and Shakespearean Study**  
**ABSTRACTS**

**Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* and the Ecology of Desire**

Benjamin Bertram, University of Southern Maine

A first attempt to develop the notion of a Lucretian “ecology of desire,” this essay argues that John Webster presents two competing ecologies in *The Duchess of Malfi*. The dominant ecology of court life is defined by enclosed, oppressive spaces and images of pollution and disease, while the other, transgressive ecology—the world of love envisioned by the Duchess—allows for open spaces and a sense of harmony and tranquility. The latter ecology, I argue, contains traces of Lucretius’ commitment to natural pleasure and intellectual curiosity, experiences that can only thrive once humans have come to terms with the fact that they are not at the center of the universe. Once this decentering has taken place, the “ecology of desire” can change as well: we can live a balanced, peaceful life following the “voice” of nature. While Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi* ends with a precise reversal of the pleasurable life Epicureans wanted to obtain, the few scenes depicting the lovers’ pleasure and desire create a utopian, Lucretian ecology on the margins of court life.

**Crossdressing and Lucretian Desire in Sidney's *Arcadia* and Wroth's *Urania***

Simone Chess, Wayne State University

Moments of desire and sexual encounters in early modern texts representing male to female (MTF) crossdressing offer a unique opportunity to explore the overlap and interplay of sex, gender, and desire in the early modern imagination. This paper considers two of the most interesting instances of fictional instances of MTF crossdressing, those depicted in Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* and Lady Mary Wroth's *Urania*, read through the lens of Lucretius and *The Nature of Things*. While many scholars have read these scenes as lesbian or homosexual (two seeming women in an erotic encounter) or “technically” heterosexual (one of the women is, after all, anatomically male), I want to demonstrate that queer heterosexuality is all about the pleasures of confused perception. Whereas Lucretius demonstrates the strangeness of perception as a way of troubling love, desire, and sex, instances of queer heterosexuality offer an opportunity to recuperate Lucretian love: what if Lucretius is right about the impossibility of real perception and the failure of sex, but, nevertheless, that same impossibility and futility are the very sources of erotic feeling?

## **Intertextuality and Lucretian Pleasure: Guillaume du Bartas' *Premiere Semaine* and its English Readers**

Mary Trull, St. Olaf College

Du Bartas' account of the creation of matter in the first and second days of *La Premiere Semaine* bears striking resemblances to Lucretius' description of atomic recombination. While imitating Lucretian descriptions of matter in many ways, du Bartas contrasts his cosmogony with that of Lucretius by depicting the elements as motivated by desire. When Du Bartas anthropomorphizes the elements as desirous beings whose changes are driven by inward yearnings and yield either pleasure or pain, he highlights the difference between a randomly generated world and one in which each part expresses its nature through change or movement. These contrasting accounts of motion are crucial to du Bartas' critique of Epicurean philosophy. I argue that Joshua Sylvester and another anonymous English translator highlighted du Bartas' English readers' characterization of atomism as a philosophy of pleasure-seeking matter, a portrayal that differs radically from Lucretius's Epicurean philosophy of pleasure. Du Bartas and some of his English readers anthropomorphized matter itself; perhaps this influenced later readers of Lucretius who depicted atoms as hedonistic and self-indulgent.

## **Sex, Marriage, and Marital Discord: Lucretius and the Early Modern Stage**

Erin Julian, McMaster University

Although Lucretius's direct influence on early modern drama is difficult to trace, the Jacobean stage does share Lucretius's preoccupations with the problems of desire, the usefulness of marriage as an institution that controls desire, and his scepticism of marriage's ability to entirely control human passions. John Webster's *The White Devil*, Thomas Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, and Webster, William Rowley, and Thomas Heywood's *A Cure for a Cuckold* are particularly focused on the relationship between sexual desire and marriage as Lucretius represents them in his poem. Revenge tragedies like Webster's, however, represent a more pessimistic response to the problem of desire than Middleton's and Webster, Rowley, and Heywood's city comedies do: *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* and *Cure for a Cuckold* suggest that the project of marriage, when approached as a useful tool in building and organising community, can, as Lucretius posits, overcome destructive desires, but only when they also make room for outbursts of human passion.

## **Ophelia with spectator**

Lianne Habinek, Bard College

Perhaps the most curious sort of Lucretian pleasure is that which the spectator, safe on the shore, derives from watching the shipwreck – a moment Lucretius details at the start of book II as a means of highlighting the benefits of Epicurean philosophy. This potent metaphor, probed in detail by Hans Blumenburg, raises questions about

the nature of the relationship between the philosopher and the public, and about the ultimate duty of the learned to the unlearned. As a point of contact with this moment of Lucretian pleasure, this paper considers Gertrude's account of Ophelia's death. In both cases, a spectator on firm dry land observes as another less fortunate soul experiences watery destruction. Naturally, any sort of explicit pleasure is absent from the scene in *Hamlet* – but by considering it alongside the moment in Lucretius, we may derive a similar sort of existential relief, or at least to posit something of that sort for the unnamed observer of Ophelia's death.

### ***Measure for Measure: Shakespeare's Conversation with Lucretius***

Peggy A. Knapp, Carnegie Mellon University

While not a source study, this essay claims that placing Lucretius's *De rerum natura* in dialogue with Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* provides a useful, even eye-opening, perspective on it, whether Shakespeare is imagined as responding to the Roman poem or simply reflecting on sexual love and fear of death and the afterlife. Although not obvious to 17<sup>th</sup>-century English audiences because of the medieval look of Vienna in the play, a setting at odds with *DNR*, our historical distance discloses a multifaceted, contentious conversation. Shakespeare can be seen as revisiting Lucretius's satire of passionate love (*DRN*, Book 4) by dramatizing the distinctive ways Angelo, Isabel, Claudio, and Vincentio have of "loving." Even more striking is the focus given by both works to the fear of death and the afterlife, which Lucretius scorns (Book 3) and which marks the crisis of the play, as the Duke counsels the condemned Claudio to disvalue life, Claudio succumbs to terror of the after-life, Isabel responds to his fear, and the Duke stage-manages. The plot and even the wording of these scenes in *Measure for Measure* confront Lucretius's position directly.

### **The erotic encounter and the love-suicide: the Ovidian reception of Lucretius in Tasso's *Aminta***

Camilla Temple, University of Bristol

This paper examines the reception of Lucretius by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses*, focusing in particular on the story of Pygmalion (10.261-336) and the account of the lovers having sex in Book 4 of *De Rerum Natura* (4.1058-1120). This paper goes on to explore the ways in which the poet and playwright, Torquato Tasso, drew on the receptive relationship between these two classical authors in his pastoral drama, *Aminta* (1573). This renaissance reception takes place in the context of growing awareness of Ovid's reception of Lucretius amongst sixteenth century Italian humanists, exemplified by the importance of Ovid in Giovanni Battista Pio's commentary on *De Rerum Natura* (1511).

In particular, the revival of *Aminta* from his attempted love-suicide at the end of Tasso's play draws specifically on the constructions of desire that are evoked in the dialogue between Ovid's Pygmalion story and Lucretius' erotic narrative. The

reception of these two classical authors is intertwined and this is important for understanding the development of pastoral drama in sixteenth century Italy and in Europe more widely.

### **Loving Lucretius**

Jessie Hock, UC Berkeley

"Loving Lucretius" explores the association of reading and erotic pleasure in the reception of *De rerum natura*. The slanderous Lucretian biography propagated by Jerome, in which Lucretius is driven mad by a love potion, in fact opens onto an important dimension of *DRN* and its reception. Because *DRN* emphasizes the importance of seductions in its composition – the poem is meant to seduce the unwilling Roman audience to Epicureanism – part of Renaissance readers' engagement with the text was to be seduced, or to fight back against, Lucretius's proclaimed effort to entice them. Readers like Lucy Hutchinson and Michel de Montaigne describe how they are seduced – ravished, in Montaigne's words – by the poem; perhaps more spectacularly, they often renounce their passion as a youthful folly or dalliance when they reach literary maturity. In this way, Renaissance readers burned for, but also burned, the dangerous poem by Lucretius. By tracking the Renaissance readers, translators, and writers who describe their engagement with Lucretius in amorous terms, I hope to show that the ravishing descriptions of desire and sex in *DRN* are re-deployed as models of readerly engagement with *DRN*.

### **Neoplatonism, Epicureanism, Love, and Sex in Spenser's "Fowre Hymnes"**

Jason Gleckman, Chinese University of Hong Kong

Recently, there has been a welcome reappraisal of the role played by sexual pleasure in early modern English literature, specifically in terms of Spenser. William A. Oram ("Spenser's Crowd of Cupids and the Language of Pleasure" [2010]) and Jonathan Goldberg (*Seeds of Things: Theorizing Sexuality and Materiality in Renaissance Representation* [2009]) have both written on this topic, concluding that despite Spenser's consistent revulsion at the term "lust," he nonetheless is interested in conceptualizing a larger role for sexuality than has been previously argued.

This seminar paper discusses Spenser's "Four Hymns" in this context, arguing that Neoplatonic readings of the poem fail to accommodate the full range of Spenser's interest in sexuality. Factors such as the Protestant Reformation's efforts to create a larger scope for sexuality within marriage and the Calvinist tendency to denigrate the spirit as being equally corrupt as the flesh are two significant factors in allowing Spenser to re-evaluate the potential morality of sexual pleasure. The influence of Lucretius on Spenser is also relevant, perhaps providing an additional classical precedent for the idea of sexual fertility as a form of beauty. This is seen most notably in the presentation in *The Faerie Queene* of the paradisaical "Garden of Adonis" (FQ 3.6) but also in the "Four Hymnes."