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Di soavi licor gli orli del vaso: La fortuna di Lucrezio
dall'Umanesimo alla Controriforma (review)

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rational and secular orientation, Florentine civic humanism provided the impulse and the method for the scientific investigation of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Likewise, De Caro disputes the common assumption that civic humanism was predominantly a literary movement. The tenets of the humanistic culture of Florence significantly influenced the great artists of this venerable city. They were certainly fundamental in the birth of the opera, as attested to by the conceptualization and staging of the *Euridice*. Much of De Caro's work addresses the humanistic and historical facets of this opera, such as the humanism of its *dramatis personae*, the sociopolitical milieu in which it was conceived, and its political symbolism. The assessment of the political symbolism is elucidated by references to Rinuccini's political poems, which De Caro includes in an appendix to the work.

De Caro tends to privilege the civic humanism of Florence *vis-à-vis* other humanistic centers of Italy. The rationalism and the critical inquiry together with the rejection of the Gothic and the impulse for scientific investigation that he attributes entirely to Florentine humanists actually were common to other Italian humanists as well (Valla, Biondo, and Ermolao Barbaro, for example). At times he tends to read too much into the imagery of the *Euridice*. Nevertheless, his work is, on the whole, illuminating and thought-provoking. He gives a fresh interpretation of Florentine civic humanism, which sheds much light on the culture of Quattrocento as well as Cinquecento Florence and which demonstrates successfully that the humanistic ideals of the former persisted in the latter. His assessment of the *Euridice* and of the origin of the opera in general is equally novel and engaging. He argues, for example, that the origin of the opera was due not to the debates of the Camerata dei Bardi but to a rethinking of Aristotle's *Poetics* among the members of the Accademia degli Alterati. His argument is deduced from a close reading of primary sources, and it is collated with numerous and varied secondary sources. The result is a work of broad scope and appeal that is of value to the student of humanism, the musicologist, as well as the Renaissance scholar in general.

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Valentina Prosperi. *Di soavi licor gli orli del vaso: La fortuna di Lucrezio dall'Umanesimo alla Controriforma*.

Turin: Nino Aragno Editore, 2004. vii + 274 pp. index. €14. ISBN: 88-8419-196-3.

Scholars working independently across several disciplines continue to bring to light new indications of the considerable impact of Lucretius's work, both as a poetic model and as a body of philosophical doctrine, in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy. Recent work demonstrates that it is no longer possible to assert that the fortune of the poem, since its discovery by Poggio Bracciolini, was largely underground, or that, after an intense campaign of publication around 1500, the

momentum of transmission was halted following its condemnation in 1517 by the papal synod of Florence.

The circulation of Lucretius raises interesting questions about how we undertake the history of ideas. Clearly, the text's reception does not belong solely, or even substantially, in a history of Renaissance Epicureanism: since it was read, cited, and imitated by individuals who would never have aligned themselves with that philosophical school. Many literary adaptations of Lucretius are emulations of the sublime quality of his verse, often — despite the poem's materialism and denial of the soul's immortality — in the service of explicitly Christian ends. Lucretius can sometimes appear as a quarry for sober commonplaces about the fragility of the human condition, the pernicious effects of sexual desire, the philosophical imperative of liberating the mind from fear of death, and the unknown. Yet this can be said equally of the reception of Plato and other ancient philosophers, references to whom are still made to serve modern preconceptions that coherent bodies of philosophical doctrines — Platonism, Pythagoreanism — were revived in the Renaissance. Between the options of systematic philosophy on one hand, or the mere gleaning of *topoi* on the other, the impact of ideas imported under the name of a classical author has to be seen in terms of local objectives, and in accordance with a synchronic understanding of an often highly politicized intellectual field in which a Renaissance author operates. Thus, Charlotte Goddard has emphasized the orthodoxy of the Neapolitan poets in their Christianizing adaptations of *De rerum natura*, while Alison Brown, surveying the Florentine fortunes of Lucretius from Bartolomeo Scala beginning in the 1460s to Machiavelli in the 1520s, shows how the text served an anti-idealizing view of human nature: grounded in Lucretius's account of the primitive origins of mankind and his kinship with animals, itself deployed as an revolutionary alternative to Medicean myths of the Golden Age.

Neither Goddard nor Brown are mentioned in Prosperi's study, which for the most part is diachronic in scope. While its subtitle promises that this will be a comprehensive account of the Renaissance *fortuna* of Lucretius, its focus is — by the author's own admission — considerably narrower. It is largely a study of the *topos* of poetry as a sweetening of bitter philosophical medicine, employed by Lucretius — and other ancient writers — to characterize his own poem. In her first chapter, Prosperi provides a rich catalogue of instances of the *topos* between antiquity and the Counter-Reformation, observing that by the 1500s it was invariably attributed to Lucretius. This circumstance may have contributed to a reversal of its normal sense at the hands of orthodox Catholic writers in the later sixteenth century, who insisted that the honey of poetry could just as likely be sweetening the poison of dangerous and corrupting ideas. Ultimately, the book becomes a study of Tasso, to whom about one third of it is devoted, and from whose use of the Lucretian *topos* the title derives. Prosperi argues that the *topos* becomes the key to Tasso's embattled Counter-Reformation poetics. It was a crucial means of defending the enterprise of poet, while, at the same time, a

network of allusions to *De rerum natura* in *Gerusalemme Liberata* signaled a larger bid for poetic and intellectual autonomy.

Readers who are not Tasso scholars might find the second chapter more useful as a program for further work. Here the author explores the Lucretian adaptations of writers such as Lorenzo Bonincontri, Gian Gioviano Pontano, Michele Marullo, Jacopo Sannazaro, Mario Equicola, Pietro Vettori, Bernardo Tasso, and Sperone Speroni. Although Prosperi addresses the deep Lucretian sympathies of Vettori and Speroni, her emphasis falls heavily on the increasingly urgent need to justify the poetic enterprise and on the efforts to normalize and Christianize Lucretius. Unlike the Tasso chapters that follow, which deal with philosophical and theological matters, the scope here is more limited to questions of poetic imitation. Scientific and medical thought is briefly touched on in the person of Girolamo Mercuriale.

Against the *a priori* view that the coercive orthodoxy of the Counter-Reformation would have inhibited the reading of Lucretius and the impact of his ideas, Prosperi amply demonstrates the continued resonance of his text. Not only was it not placed on the Index, but — as a correspondent of Benedetto Varchi noted in 1549 — Cardinal Marcello Cervini intervened to prevent its inclusion. Prosperi suggests that once an author adopted certain ritual protocols — a repudiation of Lucretian materialism and the doctrine of the soul's mortality — he was free to draw upon the Lucretian model. Authors who drew too liberally on the more controversial parts of the text, like Speroni, were apt to be censured. The chief virtue of the book is its useful array of primary sources, although the selection tends to be limited by Prosperi's focus on a limited number of *topoi* and on the question of poetics. It evidently remains to other scholars to complement her study by tracing the impact of other famous and notorious passages in the poem: the pathology of love material in book 4 and its impact on sixteenth-century, anti-erotic literature and anti-Petrarchism, the ideal of philosophical poetry itself, which influenced the sober Carmelite Baptista Mantuanus along with Pontano and Fracastoro, and, finally, the Lucretian polemic against *religio* (superstition) and its impact on anticlerical thought.

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Saverio Campanini. *The Book of Bahir: Flavius Mithridates' Latin Translation, the Hebrew Text, and an English Variation.*

The Kabbalistic Library of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola 2. Turin: Nino Aragno Editore, 2005. 394 pp. index. €60. ISBN: 88-8419-239-0.

Although Flavius Mithridates (1450–83) may not be part of the working vocabulary of Renaissance scholars in general, he is important for the study of the Renaissance because he was one of the teachers of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. Mithridates was a humanist and Orientalist whose name was Shmuel ben Nissim ben Shabbatai Abu al Faraj before his conversion to Christianity around 1470.