Marta podcast

**SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

poem, epicurean, book, present, Epicurus, talking, plague, Lucretius, point, natural history, philosophy, working, episode, speak, atomic theory, ancient texts, people, image, reception, pandemic

00:00

Welcome everybody to the podcast series Ancient World: New Voices, each episode discussing the research of a postgraduate student on an exciting aspect of the engine world. And it's brought to you by Giovanna DiMartino, here speaking, Mateen Arghandehpour and Sofia Bongiovanni. So here we are today with Marta Martín Díaz, who is a UCL alumna, and is now at the University of Salamanca doing her PhD on Lucretius. So, Marta, can you tell us a little bit about what you're working on? And what got you interested in this particular topic?

00:30

—Yes, sure, Giovanna. Thanks for having me. I am actually working with Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*, as you said, and I'm trying to highlight the political dimensions and the implications, past and present, of this poem, given that it is a poem that presents Epicurean philosophy to a Roman audience. So yeah, like the philosophy of Epicurus. But as we know, from the remnants, the fragments of Epicurus’ works himself, Epicurus was opposed to poetry, so and also to his disciples, being in the public eye and having political implications. So I want to highlight those contradictions, to see what they can bring to the contemporary readers. Now, can you tell us a little bit about the poem itself, the architecture of the poem, and what the poem actually talks about, for those of our listeners who don't know, the poem, never read the poem? Yeah, sure. So now a lot of people when I tell them that I am working for my PhD thesis on a poem, they are at first, they are a bit puzzled, you know, because I think that now if you say that you're working on a poem, they may be thinking that it is just a 20–40-line poem or something like that. But the thing is that the *De Rerum Natura* has six books. So it is almost 8000 lines of poem. It is written in dactylic hexameter, which is the verse of the Homeric poems, for example.

Yeah, in it, Lucretius presents Epicurean philosophy, and we can see how… sorry, we can see how 02:48

each book has a theme of its own, but then the books can also be taking in thirds so you can see how the first three books explain the basic principles of atomic theory. And then the three last books a comment on the ethical implications of that atomic theory. We can also divide them sorry, that's why I should start again. Yeah, sorry.

03:25

Yeah. So yeah, rephrase it and then we cut it out Okay, thank you Sorry. Um, yeah, so, we can take its book by its own and discover how it presents different elements from Epicurean philosophy. So for example, in Book One we find Elements, and in Book Two we find Compounds; in Three the Material, in Four Its [Material Soul’s] affects, in Five the World and Six, its Wonders. So, as you can see, we are moving from the tiniest things we can find in the universe to like the bigger themes and actually even though we can take each book separately, we can also conceive it by thirds. So, for example, the first two books are talking about atoms and void, and then the three and four are talking about psychology, and then the fifth and the sixth are talking about Natural History. So also, we can think about the poem as a two great halves. The first half compounded by the three first books, would be talking about the basic principles of atomic theory. And then the three last books would be talking about the ethical implications of that same atomic theory. So it is really a vast syllabus addressed by Lucretius in the poem.

And can you tell us why Epicurus is important in Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*?

—So the thing is that we don't actually know much about Lucretius as a person. But we can guess through the poem that he was really well positioned in the Rome of his time. So we're talking about the first century BCE. And yeah, the fact that Epicurus is important in this poem is because we don't have much of Epicurus’ works. Like the works he actually wrote, although we know that he was really prolific, but then, the Christian reception and stuff has made us lost most of it. So the thing with the *De rerum natura* is that it is a didactic poem that presents Yeah, like from the most little aspects of Epicurean philosophy such as the atoms and void to the more general topics such as Natural History, it presents Epicurean philosophy.

Thank you. So you've picked an image to represent Lucretius’ poem and accompany this podcast with. Can you tell us a little bit about this image and why you think it might be representative for Lucretius’ poem?

—Yeah, sure. So yeah, as I’ve just said, the syllabus addressed by Lucretius in the poem is really vast. But the thing is that, for most of antiquity, the poem itself was lost. And it wasn't until the Renaissance basically, when Poggio Bracciolini, that was an avid book Hunter, rediscovered the manuscript. So once the manuscript was rediscovered in 1417, all of the things that Lucretius tells in his poem, started to influence not just philosophy itself or written works, such as other poetry works, but also as the image I have chosen shows, big pictorial arts. So, I have chosen a really common, and I guess that well-known image, Sandro Botticelli’s “Spring”, because it is actually drawn from a description that Lucretius does in the fifth book of his poem, in which he tells how spring comes, yeah, he's talking about the passing of the seasons. And if we read Lucretius’ description, we can find how that description and all those elements are present in Botticelli’s picture.

And if I can ask, what is that in Lucretius’ poem that attracts you the most?

—Yeah, I actually think that it is a poem that has something for everybody, you know, like, like a lot of people and actually the, the story of the reception of the poem throughout. Yeah, it's rediscovery in the Renaissance, up until our days can prove that, you know, because there's a lot of people from really different backgrounds, and different perspectives and fields that have been drawn to the poem.

And I know that Lucretius’ poem has actually been brought up lately by a number of classic scholars, as it has been felt to resonate, particularly with the situation that we have been dealing with in the past year and a half with the pandemic outburst and, and all that. As I know you want to talk a little bit about that.

—So, actually that's also been like a really debated point in the academia for a lot of years, you know, because Lucretius ends his poem *in toto* with an image of total death,and is an episode in which he recalls the plague in Athens [430 BCE, during the second year of the Peloponnesian War]. And for that episode he draws, like all of his episode is based in Thucydides’ own account of the Plague. And actually, we know that Thucydides was a survivor, he did survive that plague. But Lucretius chooses to kill everybody.

And it's been a really controversial point of the poem because, as I had already mentioned, it is the end of the poem in general. So, a lot of people considered it a really abrupt end. So they think that Lucretius didn't actually want to end his poem like that, but maybe he died and couldn't finish, or he just left it there.

But yeah, nowadays, like the common opinion in academia is that he did actually want to end his poem in that way. And also, if we follow the works of academics, such as Monica Gale, or in more recent years, there’s this scholar called [Hunter H.] Gardner, and she has focused on how Lucretius, amongst other Roman authors, has used plagues, in their writings with a political purpose, you know, to speak metaphorically, and stuff. So if we do follow these scholars, we find that it is a suitable topic to end the poem, because actually, all of Book Six is dedicated to speak about a Natural History, you know, and in it Lucretius talks about some phenomena, some nature phenomena that can be also dangerous, you know, like, for example, a volcanoes or, yeah, like, heavy storms and stuff like that. So, it's like, the plague is just another phase of, of how nature can work and how evil it can be an although at first it can seem a really bad end and yeah, like, not full of hope, throughout the poem Lucretius has tried to tell us, as the Epicurean he himself is, and also bearing in mind that he wants to convert his audience to Epicureanism, that that shouldn't be a concern for us. Because once you're dead, you can't, you're dead, so you don't have to worry about that. So, I think, yeah, like, the whole point can be a preparation to arrive to that tale of the Plague. And it can work both ways, like, sorry, in two ways, like saying, you have to really know the *nature of things* and pay attention to Nature, because it is a almighty, but also do not have to be worried about the fact that someday you are gonna die, because that is the end that is awaiting us all. So yeah, like, researching this passage in a pandemic time, I think that sometimes it can be, I mean, I don't know if hopeful, but yeah, you can. It's really interesting to also study it in our days.

And I know that you've been working on the relationship between Lucretius, Lucretius’ Plague and British filmmaker, writer, artist, activist and gardener, Derek Jarman's life-writing, so do you want to talk about that project? I'm sure our listeners would be very excited to hear about it.

—Yeah, sure. So um, yeah, the thing with this is that I am of course I am interested in Lucretius’ treatment of the Plague in itself, but I am also interested in how other people have used it. And so, for

example, we have Michel Foucault talking about it in various works of him. And also, yeah, like he, he uses the Plague episode. And this is all in our pre-HIV time. So, then he's considerations are going to change throughout time. And also, for example, Susan Sontag in *AIDS and its Metaphors* [originally published in 1989] is going to come back to Lucretius too. So, with a really good friend of mine, called Quique, we started to read some of the entries of Jarman’s diaries, alongside his script for *Blue* [1993], which was his last film, alongside this description of Lucretius Plague episode. And, yeah, it has been really interesting because Jarman was a really well-educated person. So, he was really aware of the [Graeco-Roman] Classics, but also like looking, putting these texts together, I think that it can also be really revealing to find how the ancient texts can speak about present, and not so past as the AIDS plague was, situations. And also, I think it's really interesting, because it's been a process in which we didn't have like, direct reception, you know, like, can be in the case of Foucault or Sontag.

But here, although Jarman really drops names, yeah, he even talks, for example, in one diary entry about the fact that in school, they didn't tell him anything about the Queen of Bithynia. So, how Julius Caesar, like was doing drag in his camps or stuff. Or yeah, like he also, for example, quotes Ovid in lengthy. Like, there's no mention about Lucretius or the *De Rerum Natura* or Epicurus, but it makes sense. So, I think that it's been also a really interesting process about seeing these indirect receptions, you know, and being able to think, through the ancient texts in other ways.

And I know you actually ended up doing a film together with your friend Quique, didn't you?

—So yeah, my friend Quique and me, we're working all these things out. And then we had the opportunity to present a short film titled “EpiQUEERean bodies in revolt: An Audiovisual Rendering of Lucretius’ & Jarman’s Work”, that we presented at the “Queer and The Classical: Critical Futures, Critical Feelings” Conference. And yeah, it was really amazing to have that kind of feedback. Yeah, and being able to present that work, even though everything was online. And even though a kick me haven't seen each other since September. So that meant that everything we did was online. So yeah, but we are really happy and really grateful to the organizers of this conference, because it was really an amazing place, that gave us a lot of energy to keep working.

Thank you. Thank you, Marta, for sharing this with us is very fascinating project, which you can catch up on by listening to the recording available on the Queer and the Classical website, amongst their recordings of Day 2 [<https://queerandtheclassical.org/recordings-day-2>]. So thank you very much, again for being with us today and for talking to us about your fascinating PhD project on Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*. And thanks to our listeners for listening to this episode of Ancient World: New Voices. You can drop your comments in the feedback form on the podcast web page, and we look forward to welcoming you back for the next episode in a month's time. You can find more information about this podcast, guest speakers, hosts and materials, on UCL’s Department of Greek and Latin website at <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/classics/outreach/public-engagement/ancient-world-new-voices>