

## *Anti-Lucretius: An Enlightenment Humanist Response to Lucretianism*

Amidst the renewed interest in Lucretian reception studies, one of the most significant works of Neo-Latin reception, the *Anti-Lucretius* (AL) of Cardinal Polignac (1661-1742), is regrettably understudied. The history of the reception of AL alone argues for its significance as a broad window into the early enlightenment. The poem was eagerly anticipated by an international audience, notably by Voltaire himself, and it quickly went through several editions in the major European languages to great acclaim. On its own terms, the poem's ambitions are bold: to manifest God's order in every part of creation. Polignac pulls the greatest modern thinkers—Locke and Hobbes, Leibnitz and Spinoza, Descartes, Newton, Malebranche, et al.—into dialogue with each other and with the ancients in fields ranging from biology and physics to psychology and astronomy. The poem's unique didactic voice reflects a brilliant early enlightenment thinker trying to reconcile the bewildering complexity of his age's intellectual life.

In this paper, I try to understand Polignac's poetic intention more fully than current literature has attempted. After some historical groundwork, I closely compare Polignac's work to the *De Rerum Natura* (DRN) to discover the cardinal's poetic intention in refuting Lucretius.

Research indicates not only that Lucretius was widely circulated in Polignac's day, but also that he was the most cogent and seductive spokesman for a rationalistic cosmology that excluded God and traditional morality, and one that was becoming increasingly pervasive during the scientific revolution. I contend that a savvy Polignac identified Lucretius as a peculiarly potent threat to religion in these times, and attempted to confront the DRN definitively in his poem.

I argue that the form and content of the *Anti-Lucretius* point decisively to the fact that Polignac has attempted a renaissance *imitatio*. Such imitations aim not only to refute but to surpass and supersede those they imitate. To accomplish this, careful attention to the imitated author's conventions is required. Stylistically, Polignac rises to the challenge. He is in a creative dialogue with Lucretius' major motifs and his famous *topoi* that at every turn seeks to undercut the DRN and vindicate by *ratio* the reasonableness of belief in God. Though metrically the work is indebted heavily to Virgil, Polignac's poesy preserves a distinctly Lucretian flavor of archaism, polemic rhetoric, and technical terms. Even on the level of structure, the AL closely competes with DRN to overturn its cosmology of inexorable decay.