

BOOK REVIEW

Atomism in the Aeneid: Physics, Politics, and Cosmological Disorder. By MATTHEW M. GOREY. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. 184. Hardback, \$74.00. ISBN: 9780197518748.

The basic argument of Matthew Gorey's new book is that Vergil regularly alludes to Lucretian atomism as something to be confronted and defeated in order to achieve the cosmic and political stability that is the true telos of Aeneas's (and Augustus's) mission. In general, this book succeeds in establishing itself as a useful contribution to the scholarly literature on Vergil's *Aeneid* and the reception of Lucretius in Roman poetry, even though I have some reservations about some of the major conclusions advanced by Gorey (more on this later).

After an introduction that orients the reader to the various analytical approaches scholars have taken to the role of Lucretius in the *Aeneid* and positions the analysis that follows in this wider conversation, Gorey's argument is broken down into four substantial chapters and a brief envoi. Chapter 1 outlines a polemical philosophical tradition of anti-atomism before the *Aeneid* that tended to (mis)characterize atomism as chaotic and disorderly, incapable of producing order by its very nature. Gorey also argues that in Cicero's *philosophica* this tradition is made political, as the chaos of atomism is likened to political chaos. The meatiest parts of Gorey's analysis come in Chapters 2-4, where, in a series of cogent close readings, Gorey focuses on moments in the *Aeneid* where Vergil alludes to Lucretius to represent atomism as a deviant paradigm that is entirely at odds with the providential teleology that Aeneas's conquest establishes. Though Gorey does not adduce many new allusions to Lucretius in the *Aeneid*, he regularly builds upon the work of others to make new arguments. Generally, this is all well done, and Gorey shows himself to be an astute reader of allusion in Latin poetry.

As I have said, this book will be useful for most students of Latin poetry, as the majority of its analysis amounts to compelling close readings that should be fruitfully integrated into future work. On the other hand, for those readers who will

want to build arguments on Gorey's analysis of the anti-atomic tradition of philosophy or on Gorey's overarching conclusions about the way Vergil responds to Lucretian atomism, I offer the following criticisms.

First of all, Gorey's assertion that the philosophical attack on atomism as disorderly carries with it well-established political implications is not convincing, mainly because Gorey lacks a smoking gun for his circumstantial evidence. Taken together, of course, words like *turba*, *incursio*, *temere*, *licentia*, and *regnum* may suggest this idea, but Gorey pieces together too many disparate discussions, when in fact Cicero is the only source he is able to invoke for this conflation. But even if, to use one example that Gorey makes central to his argument, Cicero calls a swarm of atoms a *turba* in one single passage, and other authors who are not interested in atomism use the same noun to describe a mob intent on political violence, this does not constitute adequate evidence for a developed tradition that conflated atomic activity with political disturbances before Vergil wrote the *Aeneid*. Nevertheless, Gorey later invokes the conclusions of this discussion as if they were self-evident (e.g. "Cicero's *practice* of associating atomism with negative...political traits" page 81; my emphasis).

A larger problem is that Gorey often forces his close readings into a dichotomy that cannot contain them. While Gorey updates Hardie's *Cosmos and Imperium* by showing that there are situations where Vergil alludes to Lucretius without alteration to emphasize the deficiency of Lucretian philosophy in the thought-world of the *Aeneid*, he never deviates from Hardie when it comes to the age-old debate over optimism versus pessimism in the *Aeneid* (despite the fact that Hardie's work after 1986 has regularly problematized this dichotomy as he presented it in *C&I*). Of course, for readers who accept Gorey's claims on this front, there should be no issue. But those who do not share an a priori belief in the optimism of Vergil's perspective will find it difficult to share Gorey's major conclusions. It would have been more useful to present Lucretian atomism as a framework within which to understand the interpretive possibilities before the reader rather than as one that entails a monolithic perspective on the whole of the poem. The closest Gorey comes to embracing this kind of nuance is when he allows that Vergil's allusions to Lucretius compel Aeneas and Turnus to resemble one another as practitioners of "atomistic violence" in Book 12. Readers who accept the dichotomy that Gorey argues for may still wonder, however, how secure cosmic/political order can ever be if Aeneas establishes it by using the atomic forces of disorder. Furthermore, how secure can the reader be in the idea that atomism is finally meant to suggest disorder in the world of the *Aeneid*, if the final

institution of cosmic and political order is established via the mechanisms of atomism? In the end, as always, the efficacy of arguments like these will boil down to what one makes of the moments when Aeneas is painted in an unfavorable light. Despite these criticisms, and whatever one makes of Gorey's assumptions about the Vergilian worldview, this book shows conclusively that Lucretius must have a starring role in any discussion of the issue. That makes it a signal contribution to a now latent, yet still unresolved controversy.

The book is well produced. Typos are infrequent and never disrupt the reader's (at least this one's) attention. The bibliography features most significant and relevant contributions, although a notable omission for the topic at hand is Noller's study of Order in Lucretius (*Die Ordnung der Welt*, Heidelberg 2019). Despite the qualifications I have raised here, Gorey has written an important book that should be useful for anyone working on Vergil, the reception of Lucretius or Epicureanism during the Roman period.

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