

Lucretius and Shakespeare
on the Nature of Things

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By

R. Allen Shoaf

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Lucretius and Shakespeare on the Nature of Things,
by R. Allen Shoaf

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In memoriam

JAMES J. PAXSON

...naturaque daedala rerum.

...and nature, the cunning shaper of things [*literally, the Daedalus of things, Daedalus, who constructed the Labyrinth and also wings of feathers joined by wax for himself and his son Icarus*]

 sic rerum summa novatur
semper, et inter se mortales mutua vivunt.

Thus the sum of things is ever being renewed, and mortal creatures live dependent one upon another.

Hisce tibi in rebus latest alteque videndum
et longe cunctas in partis dispiciendum,
ut reminiscaris summam rerum esse profundam
et videas caelum summai totius unum
quam sit parvula pars et quam multesima constet
nec tota pars, homo terrai quota totius unus.

In considering these matters you must cast your view wide and deep and survey all quarters far abroad, that you may remember how profound is the sum of things and see how very small a part, how infinitesimal a fraction of the whole universe is one sky – not so large a part as one man is of the whole earth.

– Lucretius

...and indeed, it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame the earth seems to me a sterile promontory, this most excellent canopy the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestic roof fretted with golden fire, why it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. What a piece of work is a man – how noble in reason; how infinite in faculties, in form and moving, how express and admirable in action; how like an angel in apprehension; how like a god; the beauty of the world; the paragon of animals. And yet to me what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me – nor women neither.

– Hamlet

The criterion of truth is the risk of error. The only path towards discovery is the absolute willingness to make mistakes, in front of others. All the rest is only power.

– Michel Serres

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword: Format, Editions, and Translations.....	ix
List of Ancient and Pre-modern Works Consulted and Cited	xi
Preface	xv
Acknowledgments.....	xxiii
Introduction.....	1
What do we know about Lucretius?	
A Note to the Reader.....	5
Epicurus and Epicureanism	
Chapter One	9
<i>King Lear</i> “We came crying hither”	
Chapter Two.....	29
<i>Macbeth</i> “A dagger of the mind”	
Chapter Three.....	39
<i>Hamlet</i> “The readiness is all”	
Chapter Four	59
<i>The Merchant of Venice</i> “I crave the law”	
Chapter Five	69
<i>The Tempest</i> “To still my beating mind”	
Chapter Six	85
<i>Midsummer Night’s Dream</i> “If imagination amend them”	

Epilogue	107
“To give away yourself keeps yourself still” Shakespearean Rhetoric and Free Will	
Notes.....	117
Epigraphs Citations.....	135
List of Modern Works Consulted and Cited.....	137
<i>De rerum natura</i> : Index Locorum.....	153
General Index.....	155

FOREWORD

FORMAT, EDITIONS, AND TRANSLATIONS

Throughout I follow convention and refer to *De rerum natura* by the abbreviation *DRN*. I use the generally accepted, customary abbreviations for Shakespeare's works. For abbreviations of other occasionally cited works, I follow scholarly practice.

Generally I favor in-text documentation. But endnotes are always used if they promote disambiguation. On occasions when discursive notes are unavoidable, I try to focus them on information first, then on controversies; I deliberately ignore controversies that I deem tendentious—some, e.g., will never concede that Shakespeare was as competent a Latinist as many now believe he was.

I use the translation of *DRN* in the Loeb Classical Library revision (1975) by Martin Ferguson Smith of W. H. D. Rouse's original edition (1924). When I vary from it, I so note. I also regularly consult the fine translation by Ronald Melville in the Oxford Classical Texts; I use Anthony Esolen's text, as well, especially for his introductory remarks.

For the Latin text, I use the revised Loeb also but consistently check it against Bailey's three-volume Oxford edition of 1922. I often start with the text of *DRN* in "The Latin Library"—<http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/lucretius.html>—but in every instance confirm with the Loeb and Bailey. Given the numerous problems with the text of *DRN*, I strive to remain conservative in my readings; indeed, minor punctuation changes are my only intervention. I ignore orthography when it is clearly a function of convention.

In the matter of ancient and pre-modern texts, I have been guided wherever possible by accessibility. Although digital texts exist in various and numerous cases, I cite only those I find likely to be helpful first and foremost to the non-specialist, assuming that the specialist will know of and have access to many different

sources, print and digital alike. Dates following URLs are dates of my last successful access of the site.

In the matter of digital versions of texts, I should note in particular that my citations of Shakespeare's works always begin with Open Source Shakespeare (hereinafter OSS), <http://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/>. I then annotate or modify or supplement the text as needed from a variety of historical, editorial, and critical sources (especially in punctuation). Throughout I silently modernize EME orthography. For convenience's sake I also include the TLN (Through-Line-Numbers) from OSS, followed (with a semi-colon separator) by act, scene, and line number(s), from a control edition. We do not know and, I think most would agree, probably never will know, "what Shakespeare actually wrote," in many instances. This condition does not license arbitrary alteration of the texts, but it does enjoin the scholar's responsibility for every reading he chooses, and I have accepted that responsibility and acknowledged those who have informed my decisions, which remain in every case my own.

Finally, I provide the complete **List of Ancient and Pre-modern Texts Cited**, here, at the beginning of my book, so that my reader can begin with a survey of these sources, which I strongly recommend. S/he will quickly see that the sources are, perhaps unexpectedly, few in number (19 main entries)—and this observation is important since I am deliberately and concertedly writing a very narrow study of two poets, what the one may have learned from the other at a particular moment in history.

*

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*

PREFACE

Following is a collection of essays each of which is intensively focused on certain historical and textual problems in a play by Shakespeare. The essays are united by a single dominant concern, which amounts to the structure of the collection, or separate but related accounts of Shakespeare's reading of Lucretius, *De rerum natura*. Each essay demonstrates in detail connections between the poetry of Lucretius and Shakespeare as a reader and a writer, and each essay concludes that Shakespeare time and again reveals upon examination close familiarity with the great Latin epic. There is necessarily a certain amount of repetition across the essays. I would like to think that each essay could be, in conjunction with the front matter of my book, approached as a separate unit. But to those who read the essays together as a book, the amount of repetition should not prove tedious, I feel; it is always a minimum, for the sake of the argument.

After years of pursuing my work, I do not believe that Shakespeare was intimate with Lucretius's poetry, as was his great older French contemporary, Michel de Montaigne, or his English contemporary, Christopher Marlowe, but he knew this poetry, I have also come to believe, with a greater familiarity than has hitherto been documented. This knowledge, I propose, contributes significantly to what we think of as distinctively Shakespearean in the writings, especially in the years following 1595, as the unfortunate Marlowe (d. May 30, 1593) recedes (but never disappears) into the background. Generally, the position just sketched will alert professional readers to my agreement with Lukas Erne regarding Shakespeare's literacy; his literacy is an axiom of my book—perhaps not an erudite like Ben Jonson, Shakespeare was still a highly literate man, my work has persuaded me.

The essays individually and collectively are examples of the work I trained to do as a graduate student over 40 years ago now:

very close reading emerging from extensive philological study of original sources. The essays reflect as well my lifelong involvement in the ontology and epistemology of literary interpretation and thus my conviction that literary theory is first and foremost resistance. It is the business of theory to resist all that is allegedly the case by analyzing the politics behind the allegation. But if I believe and acknowledge that all interpretation is subjective, including my own, I also and just so believe that no interpretation that claims for itself the status of “explanation,” on the assumption that explanation is immune to subjectivity, is to be trusted in any privileged way. No matter how seemingly powerful an explanation, there is always evidence, a document perhaps, somewhere, as yet undiscovered, which will expose its vulnerability. Thus, by *counterexample*, were we somehow suddenly to learn that Shakespeare owned a copy of the great 1563/64 edition of Lucretius by Denys Lambin or its later imprints, which we know Montaigne owned, I would not claim for a moment that this discovery made my case somehow immune to debate or controversy. History is simply too dense, and in its density, recalcitrant, for such epiphanic certitude.

*

Nature to be commanded must be obeyed.
—Sir Francis Bacon

The first essay of the collection is not the first I wrote in order of time, but it is first in order of obvious proofs and the implications of the proofs. It enters the storm both poetic, in the play, and critical, in the history and tradition of interpretation of the play, that is *King Lear*. Reading a number of very small but surprisingly revealing clues in the play, I argue that *King Lear* is Shakespeare’s personal version of *De rerum natura*. As such, like the great Latin epic, it focuses on the chaos of human sexuality and its malaise as forces that alienate the human in nature even as the human cries out for some way to accommodate nature and be in turn accommodated by nature. The storm is always the storm of sexuality, desire, from which no human being escapes, not even the King himself: “’twas this flesh begot / Those pelican daughters” (*KL* TLN 1873-74; 3.4.73-

74). If Shakespeare directly evokes Lucretius (*DRN* 5.222-27) most famously in this play (TLN 2783-88; 4.6.174ff.), an evocation long acknowledged by scholarship, it is also true that Shakespeare comes closest in this play to acknowledging Lucretius's point (which is not the same thing as adopting Lucretius's ideology).

The second essay analyzes the shortest play among the tragedies, *Macbeth*, and demonstrates that the obsession with time in the play is a reflex of unnatural affinities sought out and nurtured by the Macbeths. From the perspective afforded by Lucretius's poetry, I argue that *Macbeth* is, as it were, the *Contra naturam rerum*. I demonstrate not only clear evocations of Lucretius in the play, I also show how the obsession with witches and witchcraft, precisely on the eve of the so-called "Scientific Revolution," is Shakespeare's way of demonstrating how unnatural Macbeth and Lady Macbeth truly are. Even as Shakespeare's learned contemporary William Gilbert was hypothesizing that the earth itself is a giant magnet, for example, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, or, as I prefer to call them, the "Macbeth Monster," deliberately and viciously turn backward to an older and ultimately bankrupt ideology of nature rooted in superstition and tuchic affinities. As Shakespeare very clearly understood, however, the affinities his contemporaries were discovering were of an entirely different nature, and they revealed a new structure of temporality in human affairs.

The third essay engages arguably the most important or, at least, most controversial monument in all of English literature. I understand Hamlet first and foremost as a student of the University of Wittenberg, where, around 1600, Lucretius and atomism were emerging to spearhead the so-called "Scientific Revolution" that would culminate scarcely fourscore years later in Sir Isaac Newton. I understand Hamlet as a student influenced by Lucretian materialism to question everything—that is, *every* thing—that presents itself to him. I interpret his infamous delay as nothing more mysterious, if nothing any less mysterious, as well, than an application of the "scientific method"—experimentation—in the effort to find the truth of the situation. No one seriously denies that Hamlet is a seeker. I propose that he is a particular kind of seeker, the kind of seeker who, like the early atomists of the 17th century,

were seeking the “corpuscles” or elementary particles of matter. He and they alike want to get to the smallest part of it, no atom left unturned. I present Hamlet as a private (and privative) investigator, a (mentally unstable) Sherlock of his time (as well as, obviously, an Oedipus [the original PI] of his time).

The fourth essay considers possibly the most notorious of the so-called “problem plays,” *The Merchant of Venice*, in its relationship to *The Jew of Malta* by Shakespeare’s contemporary, Christopher Marlowe. In this essay, I confront the question and nature of materialism in Shakespeare by contrast with materialism in Marlowe. I draw conclusions that will probably be dismissed by critics of both hard-left and hard-right ideologies, but I record the conclusions out of my closely examined conviction that they help us understand why, to the best of our knowledge, Shakespeare effectively quit writing some three years before his death.

In the fifth essay, possibly the most controversial of the six, I propose that Prospero is imagined—invented and characterized—as a man with very little understanding of nature whatsoever, and certainly not the nature Shakespeare and his contemporaries, especially early modern scientists (“natural philosophers,” as they were then called), were discovering in and through Lucretius. Prospero is a magician, which is both his glory and his debasement. He is a humanist in a world becoming more and more alien to humanism; he possesses a *scientia* that is no longer “science”; the “science” that is imminent will be the end of his “knowledge.” My observation is not new, but the consequences I derive from it are: an indictment of Prospero for obsessiveness, compulsiveness, cynicism, arrogance, misogyny, self-exculpation, and unnaturalness, a character very much in need of the prayer and indulgence he begs from his audience at the end.

The final essay is the only one in the collection previously published (Shoaf 2010). I have elected to alter it minimally from its earlier published form. Focusing on a comedy as it does and culminating in a consideration of arguably Shakespeare’s most famous description of human imagination (in act 5 of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*), the essay serves to punctuate the common core of all my findings during the years I have been pursuing this project as part of what I have elsewhere called “Shakespeare’s Theater of

Likeness.”

Simply put, Shakespeare is a materialist, as countless scholars and critics have argued for decades now, but his materialism is always and everywhere *of nature*. Thus, as I argue throughout my book, Shakespeare is *not* an Epicurean or a Lucretian materialist. But he discovers, and articulates, his own, natural materialism, in his continuing engagement with Lucretius’s unforgettable epic (and in reaction to the English Lucretius, as he has been called, Christopher Marlowe). If Shakespeare permanently altered the reproduction of nature in poetry, such that, even at his most fantastic, he feels “natural” to us still, it is because he learned, in part through Lucretius, the unquantifiable power of the nature of reproduction. His erotics of being—“great creating nature,” as he has it in *The Winter’s Tale* (WT TLN 1962; 4.4.88)—is Lucretius’s Venus, as he celebrates her throughout *DRN* (but esp. 1.1ff.), *creating* in the constant flow, endless surprise, and staggering variety of life:

omnibus incutiens blandum per pectora amorem,
 efficis ut cupide generatim saecla propagent.
 quae quoniam rerum naturam sola gubernas
 nec sine te quicquam dias in luminis oras
 exoritur neque fit laetum neque amabile quicquam,
 te sociam studeo scribendis versibus esse
 quos ego de rerum natura pangere conor.

DRN 1.19-25

[Since you, Venus, are] striking alluring love into the breasts of all creatures, you cause them greedily to beget their generations after their kind. Since therefore you alone govern the nature of things, since without you nothing comes forth into the shining borders of light, nothing joyous and lovely is made, you I crave as partner in writing the verses, which I essay to fashion on the Nature of Things.

And to support this case for natural materialism and materialist nature in Shakespeare’s art, I close this preface with the following suggestion of the affinity between Lucretius and Shakespeare:

praeterea pro parte sua, quodcumque alit auget,
 redditur; et quoniam dubio procul esse videtur

omniparens eadem rerum commune sepulcrum,
ergo terra tibi libatur et aucta recrescit.

Besides, whatever the earth nourishes and increases is given back in its due proportion; *and since beyond all doubt the mother of all is seen also to be the universal sepulchre*, therefore you see that the earth is diminished and is increased and grows again.

DRN 5.257-60

*The earth that's nature's mother is her tomb;
What is her burying grave that is her womb,
And from her womb children of divers kind
We sucking on her natural bosom find,
Many for many virtues excellent,
None but for some and yet all different.*

.....

For nought so *vile* that on the earth doth *live*
But to the earth some special good doth give,
Nor aught so good but strained from that fair use
Revolts from true birth, stumbling on abuse.

R&J TLN 1067-72, 1075-78; 2.2.9-14, 17-20 (emphasis added)

We are still very far from fully grasping all that Shakespeare owes to Lucretius in his poetry of the erotics of being—here on this womb that is also a tomb, where, as Lucretius also notes (*DRN* 1.823-27), letters are like atoms: just rearrange their positions (-v-i-l-e- // -l-i-v-e-) and feel the shock (as also might occur with -e-v-i-l-). But in the chapters that follow I will do my part to help map the affinity by demonstrating how and why we should call the language of “Great Shapisphere” (*Finnegans Wake* 295.3-4) “atomic”—in today’s terms, fission and fusion are its supreme, unequalled powers:

Love and constancy is dead; Phoenix and the turtle fled In a mutual flame from hence.	FUSION
---	--------

So they loved, as love in twain Had the essence but in one; Two distincts, division none: Number there in love was slain.	FISSION FISSION FISSION & FUSION FISSION
--	---

.....

.....

Either was the other's mine. **FISSION & FUSION**

Property was thus appalled, **FISSION**
 That the self was not the same; **FUSION**
 Single nature's double name **FISSION & FUSION**
 Neither two nor one was called. **FISSION**

Reason, in itself confounded,
 Saw division grow together **FUSION**
 To themselves yet either neither, **FISSION & FUSION**
 Simple were so well compounded **FUSION**

That it cried how true a twain **FISSION**
 Seemeth this concordant one! **FUSION**
 Love hath reason, reason none
 If what parts can so remain.

.....

Truth may seem, but cannot be.

"Let the Bird of Loudest Lay" /
"The Phoenix and the Turtle"
 Lines 22-28; 36-48; 62 (edits my own)

The last line is the fission that impelled the never before or since equaled drive for fusion. No writer, not even Dante, desires fusion as Shakespeare does. No writer, including Dante, sees more clearly than Shakespeare does the impassable fissure between knowing and being, the psychoactive decay that clocks us half-lives at best.

*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank first my students over the past decade, graduate and undergraduate alike, who have listened to me as I tried to work out the conditions and the extent of the discoveries I was making and to understand the readings that emerged as these discoveries were examined in the texts. Their contributions, in addition to their patience and good will, have helped me immensely. My gratitude is especially owing to my research assistant in academic year 2013-14, Samantha Mikaela Thilén: her diligence and her passion for accuracy have saved me from embarrassment time and again. I also owe special thanks to my then student, now Doctor, James T. Newlin.

I would like next to thank the Provost's office of the University of Florida for a Faculty Enhancement Opportunity Award in 2011 which enabled me to make serious strides in my work, especially during an extended stay at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC.

To the Folger, where I also worked in May, 2014, as I finished my manuscript, I owe an incalculable debt for access to materials I would not have been able otherwise to consult. If the resources of the Library are monumental and indispensable, the staff are equally worthy of praise—I found them always courteous, knowledgeable, and helpful. I wish to record the same sentiments regarding the Library of Congress and its staff, having worked there in May as well.

I am also grateful to the Smathers Library of the University of Florida and its staff for timely aid on more occasions than I can remember.

To Tom Bishop and his fellow editors and the publisher, Ashgate, I am grateful for permission to reprint the essay now chapter six of my book (under a modified title), "If imagination amend them': Lucretius, Marlowe, Shakespeare," in the *Shakespearean International Yearbook* (10 [2010]: 257-80).

To my family, I remain, as always, indebted, so far that I can only continue saying, happily and tirelessly, as long as I live – without you, nothing.

I have dedicated this book to the memory of a man who left us far too soon, James J. Paxson. Had he been here with us as I was finishing it, it would certainly have been a better book. As it is, all its faults and flaws and infelicities are mine and mine alone.

*

INTRODUCTION

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT LUCRETIUS?

...cognomen Cari accessisset, vel propter ingenii magnitudinem et praestantiam, vel propter morum suavitatem et comitatem, vel propter aliquid tale.

Denys Lambin

He might have come by the epithet “Carus” [“dear,” “beloved”] either because of the magnitude and excellence of his genius or because of the smoothness and polish of his style or because of other such characteristics (my translation).

What do we know about Lucretius? Very little, all scholars agree. We are not sure when he was born or where. We are not sure when he died or where. We do not know to what family he belonged. Or to what class. We have no record of his deeds. Moreover, it requires less than one page to “to display the sum total of the purported evidence for Lucretius’ life available outside his poem” (Holford-Strevens 1). Lucretius is just his poem more than a specter.

But the case with that poem, *De rerum natura*, is very different. A fair amount is known about it and even more about its remarkable reception history. In fact, the “biography” of his poem, to put it that way, amounts to quite a story.¹ For the purposes of this book, however, that “biography” only begins in the 1560s, after Denys Lambin published his monumental edition of the epic in Paris and with that publication contributed more than he could have realized to the course of European history, not only the history of European letters but also the history of European science and technology. The story I have to tell, of just one reader of *De rerum natura* (if an indisputably important reader, at least as important as another 16th-century reader, Michel de Montaigne), is a story of very small elements (not unlike atoms, which Lucretius likens to letters of the

alphabet—*DRN* 1.823-27) that (like atoms) alter the landscape permanently when they explode.

Before leaving Lucretius's biography and that of his poem, there is one category of source I wish to include if only because it can be easy to overlook it. If readers of Lucretius are generally aware of his demonization at the instigation of Christians, as part of Christianity's agenda against Epicurus and Epicureanism, still, few are aware of the reactions to *De rerum natura* recorded in his great successors in classical Latin literature.

When, in the *Georgics*, Vergil writes one of his most famous passages, he is also writing, we know, one of his most famous *Lucretian* passages:

Felix, qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas,
atque metus omnis et inexorabile fatum
subiecit pedibus strepitumque Acherontis avari.

Happy is he who can know the causes of things,
and all fear and inexorable fate
hurls beneath his feet and the howls of greedy Acheron.
Georgics 2.490-92 (my translation)

No educated Roman could have failed to hear Lucretius in this passage; indeed, if those who find traces of Lucretius about every 12 lines in the *Aeneid* are right (Esolen 15), nor could they have failed to hear his poetry in their great national epic. Vergil's debt to Lucretius is probably immeasurable.

Statius in his *Silvae* continues the witness: "et docti furor arduus Lucreti" (and the high frenzy of skilled Lucretius [*Silvae* 2.7.76, 163]). But it is perhaps Ovid we should heed most carefully since we know and appreciate how important Ovid was to Shakespeare:

carmina sublimis tunc sunt peritura Lucreti,
exitio terras cum dabit una dies.

Amores 1.15.23-24

The poems of exalted Lucretius will then perish,
When one day will give the land to ruin.

I will deliberately jump forward to conclude this census with Lucretius's great 16th-century editor Denys Lambin (Dionysius Lambinus) for reasons that will be obvious:

Poëma quidem ipsum propter sententias à religione nostra alienas, nihilominus poëma est. tantúmne? immò verò poëma venustum, poëma præclarum, poëma omnibus ingenij luminibus distinctum, insignitū, atque illustratum.

Indeed this poem of his is alien to our religion on account of its beliefs—still, it is a poem. And is that it, is that all? No, indeed, a veritably beautiful poem, shining in clarity, a poem distinguished with all the lights of genius, marked by and illustrious with them.

T. Lucretii Cari de rerum natvra libri VI, Preface, sig. a3^r
(transcription, translation, and punctuation mine)

...non dubitanter affirmabo, nullum in tota lingua Latina scriptorem Lucretio Latinè melius esse locutum: non M. Tullij, nō C. Cæaris orationem esse puriorem. Itaque, si ita commodum est, totā sanè Lucretij, hoc est Leucippi, Democriti, Empedoclis, Aristippi, Epicuri, quos secutus est Lucretius, philosophiam improbemus: at incredibilem verborū nitorem: at singularem sermonis elegantiam: at incorruptam Latinè loquendi facilitatem admiremur, amplectamur, æmulemur.

...without doubt I affirm no writer in all of the Latin language to speak better than Lucretius in his Latinity: not Marcus Tullius, not Caius Caesar, to speak purer discourse. Therefore, if it is thus fitting—sanely—all the philosophy of Lucretius (this includes Leucippus, Democritus, Empedocles, Aristippus, Epicurus, whom Lucretius has followed) we disapprove of and reject: *but the incredible shining of his words, the singular elegance of his discourse, the incorrupt facility of his eloquence in Latin we admire, we embrace, we emulate.*

T. Lucretii Cari de rerum natvra libri VI, Preface, sig. b2^v
(emphasis added)
(transcription, translation, and punctuation mine)²

Here Lucretius's philosophy *is rejected* ("improbemus"). But his poetry shines, and his poem is beautiful, distinguished by genius (Greenblatt [2011] 256). And the shining and the genius are evidence of a master whom we admire, embrace, and emulate.

Shakespeare, I suspect, did not *embrace* Lucretius in the way that Montaigne obviously did, but I think he did *admire* and *emulate* the poetry of Lucretius. We will likely never know his exact mode of access to *DRN*.³ But we can see, in the chapters that follow, how seriously he engaged with this indisputable masterpiece, how profoundly he respected its achievement as poetry, whatever reservations he may have felt about its impulses and claims.

*

A NOTE TO THE READER

EPICURUS AND EPICUREANISM

You do not have to be a philosopher to read this book. I am not a philosopher. But we both need to share a minimal awareness of some (by no means all) basic Epicurean doctrines.

I have therefore provided a brief list, using in every case I could actual words from ancient sources, in translation, adding a comment of my own (in bold italics). (I prepared this schema before I saw Greenblatt's somewhat similar outline of *DRN* itself [(2011) 185-200]). You may also want to consult such websites as

<http://www.epicurus.net/en/principal.html> (07/22/14)

or

http://wiki.epicurus.info/Main_Page (07/22/14)

–the latter with Greek and facing English translation.

This list will serve you as a reminder or refresher as you turn from one Shakespeare play to the next in the chapters of my book. It will also, if you glance over it now, give you a quick and rough but, I think, clear and fair sense of how his doctrines made Epicurus one of the most ardently admired teachers of antiquity and Epicureanism one of the most fiercely debated schools of philosophy not only in antiquity but also to this day.

*

1. *EPICURUS*: “Vain is the word of a philosopher by whom no human suffering is cured. For just as medicine is of no use, if it fails to banish the diseases of the body, so philosophy is of no use, if it fails to banish the suffering of the mind” (Usener, frag. 221). ***We should remember that for his followers Epicurus was also and perhaps principally a healer—it is difficult to exaggerate this point or its implications.***

2. *LUCRETIUS*: “We see in marvelous fashion many things...which all try as it were to break the credit of our senses; but all in vain, since the most part of them deceives because of opinions of the mind which we bring to them ourselves, so that things are held to be seen which have not been seen by our senses. For nothing is more difficult than to distinguish plain things from doubtful things which the mind of itself adds at once.” *For an Epicurean, sense knowledge is the only reliable knowledge. In effect, although greatly simplified, this amounts to the core of the Epicurean “canonic” (τὸ κανονικόν), or epistemology, theory of knowledge. Remember that a “canon” is a rule or measure, which enters into data, organizes them, and retrieves from them intelligible structures. It is important to recognize that Epicureanism, especially as Lucretius represents it, is an epistemology and an ethic, a canon, of demystifying, which is part of its appeal to Early Modern thinkers.*
3. *EPICURUS*: “Death is nothing to us, because a body that has been dispersed into elements experiences no sensations, and the absence of sensation is nothing to us.” *Since all is mortal, all dies, and all returns to atoms—beyond this, nothing.*
4. *LUCRETIUS*: “...[T]he first beginnings of things wander through the void...[T]hey must all be carried on either by their own weight or by a chance blow (“*ictu forte*”) from another atom.” *For Epicurean physics, especially as reported in Lucretius’s De rerum natura, the simplification of existence to the flow of atoms (“primordia” or “semina”) in the void (“inane”) is the foundation of human freedom, understood, negatively, as the absence of compulsion—everywhere only randomness, and the famous swerve (“clinamen”) which accounts for contact among atoms (“ictu forte”).*
5. *LUCRETIUS*: “Nil posse creari de ni(hi)lo.” Nothing is able to be created from nothing. *This corollary of atoms and the void is of inestimable importance to*