The didactic poem is one of the earliest and most enduring forms of “information technology”. Didactic poems in Western literature date back to archaic Greece, to the poet Hesiod, whose *Works and Days* relays mundane precepts on home economics to the poet’s refractory younger brother, Perses. Many centuries, and many didactic poems later, a Roman poet, Lucretius, assuming the mantle of the Pre-Socratic philosopher-bard, Empedocles, rendered the physics of a very different philosopher, Epicurus, into hexameter verse. Lucretius’ *On the nature of things* influenced no less a poet than Virgil, whose *Georgics* – a poem on farming in four books – was destined to become the most imitated didactic poem ever. Other Roman poets jumped on the didactic bandwagon, too, including Horace (*Ars poetica*), Ovid (*Ars amoris; Remedia amoris*), and Manilius (*Astronomica*). Indeed, the Romans seem to have had a natural flare for the genre, as Hegel once tartly observed.¹

Didactic poems were legion in the Middle Ages, covering all the arts and sciences.² They were not necessarily based on Greek or Latin poems – the influence of Islamic models would repay further investigation – and their pedagogic modalities are relatively transparent vis-à-vis some of the more self-consciously literary products of the Roman Empire (influenced by Virgil and Alexandrian traditions of learned poetry). In the Renaissance, the Roman scientific poets Lucretius and Manilius were rediscovered, fuelling a new surge in didactic-poetic productivity. The imitation of Lucretius by modern poets ranged from the local and literary, for example, Giovanni Pontano’s *Urania*, five books on the heavens,³ to

---

