

Didac-tech? Prolegomena
to the Early Modern Poetry
of Information

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

1 G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford, 1975 [Berlin, 1835]), 2 vols., vol. 1, p. 515.

2 See T. Haye, *Das lateinische Lebrgedicht im Mittelalter. Analyse einer Gattung* (Leiden, New York and Cologne: Brill, 1997).

3 See C. Goddard, Pontano’s use of the didactic genre: Rhetoric, irony and the manipulation of Lucretius. *Renaissance Studies* 5/3 (1991): 250–262; Y. Haskell, Renaissance Latin didactic poetry on the stars: Wonder, myth and science. *Renaissance Studies* 12/4 (1998): 495–522.