

*The Invention and Gendering of Epicurus*. By Pamela Gordon. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press. 2012. Pp. viii, 222.

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Gordon's successful and often entertaining study focuses on the cultural reception of Epicureanism, especially as shown in hostile sources. It doesn't consider Epicureanism as a philosophical system. Instead, it looks at the literary construction of the figures of Epicurus and the prototypical Epicurean, usually as objects of scorn and revulsion.

As Gordon notes (5-6), hostile misrepresentations of Epicureanism based on its hedonism appeared from the start, as shown by Epicurus' *Letter to Meneoceus* 131-2. For Epicurus, tranquility makes a life pleasant, and you achieve tranquility by living prudently, honorably, and justly. But ignorant or malicious critics said Epicurus advocates the dissipated pleasures of drinking bouts and enjoying boys and women. Epicureanism was reviled not merely because of its hedonism, however. Epicureanism "often met with a particularly Roman abhorrence that was frequently expressed in gendered terms," (13) because it challenged Roman ideals of manliness. One theme running throughout the study is that gender politics play a prominent role in anti-Epicurean polemics, and Gordon deftly details how this occurs.

Gordon ranges broadly, from philosophical critiques, to parodic Epicureans in comedies, to representations of the bodies of Epicureans in prose and in statuary, and she considers "literary allusion, rhetoric, cliché, stereotype, innuendo, the engagement with intertexts, and the repetition of particular catchwords." (9)

The Introduction gives a thumbnail sketch of Epicureanism for novices. Chapter 1, “The First Lampoons of Epicurus,” considers reactions to Epicureanism during or shortly after Epicurus’ life. It opens with Arecesilaus’ jibe: when asked why followers of other philosophers become Epicureans but Epicureans don’t defect to other philosophical school, he snarks, “Because men can become eunuchs, but eunuchs never become men.” (DL 4.43) Gordon follows this with other contemporary or near-contemporary depictions of Epicureans. Gordon considers at length the buffoonish chef, a stock character in the New Comedy often depicted as an Epicurean to lambaste sensual pleasure and lack of self-control. Some interesting nuggets are here, such as how the Stoic Chrysippus claimed that a gourmand cookbook was the supposed source of Epicurus’ philosophy, but Gordon admits the texts from this period are scattered and fragmentary, and this chapter is fairly thin.

The remaining chapters are thematic. Chapter 2, “Odysseus and the *Telos*,” focuses on the comfort-loving Phaeacians of Homer’s *Odyssey*, “the archetypal hedonists of ancient Greek literature.” (38) Naturally enough, the Epicureans were often assimilated to the Phaeacians, and Gordon traces hostile comparisons by authors like Plutarch.

The Phaeacians are ambivalent figures, depending on what part of Homer’s depiction you focus on, and the Epicureans respond to the Phaeacians in differing ways. The Roman Epicurean Philodemus makes a friendly comparison, emphasizing the peace that the Phaeacian king Alcinous provided for his subjects and the tranquil fellowship of the Phaeacians in their banquet. On the other side, Gordon shows that Lucretius’ survey of

unnecessary luxuries in the Proem to Book 2 of *De Rerum Natura* “alludes directly to particular Phaeacian pleasures.” (52)

Chapters 3 and 4 are the book’s heart. In Chapter 3, “A Woman Named ‘Pleasing,’” Gordon meticulously sorts through the depictions of women in Epicurus’ Garden. Gordon notes that personal correspondence was “a hallmark of Epicurean intellectual life.” (81) Invective against Epicurus included quotations from supposedly stolen letters, often to women, revealing the sordid reality of his life: the Garden is full of lascivious hetaerae (courtesans), and Epicurus aches for sex and luxurious food.

Gordon is cautious about the role women actually played in the Garden. She rightly says that past attempts to reconstruct their role are speculative. An openness to women and lower-class students comports with Epicurus’ philosophy, but no Epicurean texts detail their roles. However, it’s reliably attested that at least two women, Themista and Leontion, were prominent in the Garden, and both were probably philosophers. The historicity of other Epicurean women is shakier. Their names (such as Hedeia and Mammarrion, translated by Martha Nussbaum as “Sweety-Pie” and “Tits”) seem like fabrications based upon Epicurus’ hedonism. But Gordon notes that these are genuine Greek names, and Hedeia is common. She suggests that “pleasing” might capture its resonances better than “sweety-pie.”

Philodemus’ treatise *On Frank Criticism* advances stereotypes about women: when correcting women, you must be careful not to be too harsh, because they’re especially vulnerable and prone to crying. So Roman Epicureans were open to women, says Gordon, but perhaps not as equal members, and maybe “Epicureanism became more conservative as it aged.” (109) But generalizing from Philodemus’ remark to Epicurean

communities at the time is dicey; the Epicureans of that era had differing understandings of Epicurus.

Chapter 4, “*Virtus* and *Voluptus*,” explores the opposition between virtue and pleasure posited by Roman critics of Epicureanism. Its main theme is that *virtus* is not just generic “virtue.” Instead, *virtus* is linked, both etymologically and conceptually, to *manliness*. Gordon cites many passages in Cicero associating *virtus* with the endurance of pain for the sake of a man’s country and his people. And for Cicero, identifying pain as the greatest evil is not merely vicious but “emasculating and effeminate.” (111)

Cicero’s and Seneca’s attacks on Epicureanism deploy the *virtus/voluptus* dichotomy, which Gordon labels “an irresistible alliteration,” and she catalogs the ways (usually gendered) that they describe their opposition. Gordon suggests that Cicero’s insistence that *voluptus* is an exact translation of ἡδονή is fundamentally motivated by Cicero’s polemical agenda. She writes, “For Cicero, the Epicurean insistence that “the pleasures of degenerate” are not the Epicurean pleasures is simply a refusal to acknowledge the definition of *voluptus*.” (127) I find this unconvincing. Gordon herself admits that Lucretius uses the term *voluptus* unproblematically as the opposite of *dolor* (110), and that Cicero himself uses the term *voluptus* when describing the pleasure he takes in receiving a letter or in his integrity as consul. (136-137) So Cicero’s construction of the *virtus/voluptus* dichotomy in works like *On Ends* may be tendentious, but not his translation of ἡδονή by *voluptus*.

The fifth chapter, “The Material Epicurean,” focuses on an Epicurean’s physical appearance. It considers statues of Epicurus and other early Epicureans, which comport with Athenian ideals of masculinity, and it looks at how later hostile sources described

Epicurus as sickly and connected this with his dissipation. Gordon also examines Cicero's vehement attacks on Piso the Epicurean, which contrast Piso's outward virile appearance with his inner, well-camouflaged effeminacy. Gordon claims that Cicero's speeches display what "an Epicurean" looks like for him (176), but I'm unsure. Cicero reviled Piso in particular as a political rival and insisted that Piso's vicious devotion to degenerate pleasure falls short of even the Epicurean ideal.

The concluding chapter considers additional examples of anti-Epicurean invective. Gordon convincingly asserts that while they may initially appear as generic insults, with her preceding study in mind we see that they belong to a tradition of specifically anti-Epicurean gendered insults. But this raises the following question: "I have presented many stereotypes of Epicureans... Can a real Epicurean be discovered among these texts?" (188) Gordon would *like* to see the Epicureans deliberately repudiate "manly" values, but she admits that whether they did so is unclear. I share her caution in how much this study teaches us about historical Epicureans. But Gordon's book greatly helps us understand how the prototypical Epicurean was fashioned in the ancient world.

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