

Gordon (Pamela) - The Invention and Gendering Of Epicurus

Post by "Don" of September 1, 2023 at 10:25 PM

Notes from *The Invention and Gendering of Epicurus*; Chapt. 4: Virtus and Voluptas

by Dr. Pamela Gordon (2012)

I just finished reading Dr. Gordon's book and would highly recommend it for an interesting and oft-neglected perspective. It provides wonderful context for the variety of slurs and invectives thrown at the Garden since its very beginning up to the present.

In light of the upcoming discussions on Cicero's Epicurean attacks planned for the Lucretius Today podcast, I wanted to provide some ideas gleaned from Dr. Gordon's chapter specifically looking at Cicero's (and Romans') gendered attacks on the Epicurean school specifically.

The entire chapter looks at the juxtaposition of Greek ἡδονή (hedone), translated into Latin as voluptas, against Roman virtus. Virtus can be slippery, and, as has been pointed out before on the forum, is directly related to Latin vir, the word for "man" (i.e., male human). So, masculinity, manliness, manly virtues, etc., gets at the general idea of virtus. English "virtue" is NOT an easy translation of virtus. Voluptas is presented then as being the opposite of everything it means to be manly! How convenient.

Voluptas is routinely reviled by the Romans! The typical opposite of voluptas for Roman culture was dolor ("pain"). Gordon makes a point that Torquatus often makes the contrast between voluptas/dolor. Lucretius does this as well (e.g., 3.251-55; 2.967-68). Torquatus talks about choosing to endure toil (labor) and pain (dolor) for long-term voluptas. And for the Romans (and Cicero!), the ability to endure pain was a manly man trait! Cicero hits that hard in Tusc. Disp. (2.15, 2.46) where he talks about avoiding pain leads one to an "effeminate and unthinking" (effeminata ac levis) fear of pain. Whereas some (and even Cicero) have lauded Epicurus' bravery on his deathbed when he was facing the pain of his illness, Cicero calls him only forticulum "a little bit brave" in Tusc.Disp.2.45. He can't bring himself to think of Epicurus in a manly virtus light.

The decision to translate Greek ἡδονή (hedone) as voluptas in Latin was not a foregone conclusion. The alliteration between "womanish" voluptas and "manly" virtus was irresistible to Roman writers though. Cicero asserts (because, of course, he does) that there's CLEARLY only one way to translate hedone, and that's voluptas (Fin.2.12-13) and yet he's even willing to leave a word in Greek when necessary (Fin. 3.15). Cicero concedes that voluptas can have two connotations: "gladness of mind" and "pleasing sensations in the body," (Fin. 2:13) and yet he stresses that only the bodily aspects are good usage. Again, how convenient.

To pull out our focus, the hedone/voluptas translation didn't have to be seen as a problem for Latin-speaking Epicureans as long as it wasn't paired with virtus. Lucretius embraced voluptas. Some simply didn't translate it, e.g., Gaius Cassius Longinus leaves hedone untranslated in letters to Cicero (Ad fam.15.19.2). Cassius, in fact, notes and seems to disregard Cicero's juxtaposition of voluptas/virtus in talking about the Epicurean general/politician Pansa (Ad fam.15.19.3). Cassius notably uses *virtutes* (the plural of virtus), which Gordon says sends the message that the Epicureans are not concerned so much with virtus itself (manly masculinity) as they are with upholding a range of "virtues," i.e., wisdom, justice, etc.

Gordon also relates how Seneca was another Latin writer (almost 100 years later than Cicero) who made a big deal out of the voluptas/virtus pair.

Another interesting twist that Gordon highlights is that virtus is seen as particularly Roman and that voluptas is seen as foreign. Virtus is seen as a ROMAN trait of manly Romans being what it means to be Roman men. This is where Gordon also talks about Cicero's diatribes against the Epicurean consul Calpurnius Piso Caesonius, patron of Philodemus. Cicero does NOT like Piso, and has a whole speech against him (<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Cic.+Pis.+1>) and speaks against him in other speeches as well. Gordon goes on for awhile talking about Cicero's attacks on Piso. The takeaway for me is that Cicero can't assail Piso's virtus from a physical, outward sense. The guy exudes Roman uprightness, manliness; he walks right, looks right, talks right. He's big and hairy with stern bushy eyebrows. The model of Roman virtus. But Cicero takes the "looks can be deceiving" tack.

Gordon finishes the chapter noting how Cicero's hostility against voluptas and his use of the charged meanings of voluptas/virtus falls away in his letters to friends. He can use the formula "I took great pleasure in your letter" without any irony or apology. "Manly virtue" and "pleasure" can sit side by side with no animosity. When writing to his Epicurean friends, he talks about taking pleasure in his integrity as consul and his taking pleasure in his virtue. He talks about missing the pleasure of his daughter Tullia's goodness. And even the virtus of his wife and daughter. The rhetorical cudgel of voluptas/virtus seems to be reserved for attacks on Epicurus and his school, and this evaporates when Cicero is out of the limelight and speaking about or with family and friends.

I truly dislike Cicero.

(CORRECTION: Cicero's attacks on Calpurnius Piso Caesonius also encompass a large chunk of Chapter 5, which is where the eyebrow comments come in. I appear to have conflated Chaps. 4 & 5, which just leads me to recommend reading the whole book 😊)