

What Evidence Do We Have That Frances Wright Personally Was An Epicurean?

Post by “Joshua” of September 23, 2020 at 1:11 PM

This would be a subject worthy of a monograph; in lieu of such at present, I will take the thesis in defense of her authorship here.

I haven't read any of her other works at full length, but the evidence I've seen so far fairly convinced me.

Like Diogenes of Oenoanda, Wright was cosmopolitan. Born in Scotland and orphaned, she lived throughout her life in England and America, and for brief interludes in France. She traveled even more widely; through Europe, through the United States and the frontier, south as far as Haiti, north into Canada. It might properly be said that she lived on the road.

In this capacity she was both writer and orator, and was the first woman in the country to lecture mixed company in public on subjects of morality and politics. She was in this respect a new Leontion, and suffered similar calumnies. She was also the first woman in America to edit a published journal.

She befriended Lafayette and Jefferson, Bentham and Mill. She attempted a utopian community for the betterment of African slaves, which failed. Even so, she supported other communities throughout her life. On her career she had this to say, in a letter to Lafayette:

Quote

Trust me, my beloved friend, the mind has no sex but what habit and education give it, and I who was thrown in infancy upon the world like a wreck upon the waters have learned, as well to struggle with the elements as any male child of Adam.

The biblical reference is superficial; more subtle is the allusion to Lucretius, whom she surely read. From Cyril Bailey's translation;

Quote

Then again, the child, like a sailor tossed ashore by the cruel waves, lies naked on the ground, dumb, lacking all help for life, when first nature has cast him forth by travail from his mother's womb into the coasts of light, and he fills the place with woful wailing, as is but right for one for whom it remains in life to pass through so much trouble.

Her allusion to this passage precedes Alfred Tennyson's (*In Memoriam*) by over twenty years.

Like Epicurus she was critical of superstition, critical of priests and clergy, and critical of the institution of marriage—and yet like Metrodorus she did marry, and bore a child.

It might rightly be said that she wrote out her Epicurean philosophy once (and rather completely), and gave the rest of her life to living it.

I agree with Cassius' concluding thoughts—more reading of her other works is in order!