

A Ciceronian Witticism Referencing Epicurus

Post by "Cassius" of May 18, 2024 at 10:57 AM

This reference from Cicero's "On Divination" seems fairly funny, and it might not even be demeaning to Epicurus, as Cicero can often be. But I bet there is more to the reference of "corn rising on the market" than is immediately obvious to me, so I thought I would post and maybe over time we can consult the Latin and track down a more precise meaning. As it is, this translation reference to corn (I think by Yonge) seems a little broad, so probably there's some or references to Epicurus and for himself, or someone else

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ON DIVINATION.

contagion of earth very like blood, and some moisture may have fallen on the statues from without, resembling perspiration, as we see sometimes in plaster during the prevalence of a south wind; and in time of war such phenomena appear more numerous and more important than usual, as men are then in a state of alarm, while they are not noticed in peace. Besides, in such periods of fear and peril, such stories are more easily believed, and invented with more impunity.

We are, however, so silly and inconsiderate, that if mice, which are always at that work, happen to gnaw anything, we immediately regard it as a prodigy. So because, a little before the Marsian war, the mice gnawed the shields at Lanuvium, the soothsayers declared it to be a most important prodigy; as if it could make any difference whether mice, who day and night are gnawing something, had gnawed bucklers or sieves. For if we are to be guided by such things, I ought to tremble for the safety of the commonwealth, because the mice lately gnawed Plato's Republic in my library; and if they had eaten the book of Epicurus on Pleasure, I ought to have expected that corn would rise in the market.

Post by "Don" of May 18, 2024 at 11:52 AM

I take it as:

- The mice eat Epicurus's work on Pleasure.

- The mice become obsessed with the pleasure of the belly.
 - The mice eat up all the grain in the market.
 - Grain is scarce.
 - The price goes up.
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Post by “Cassius” of May 18, 2024 at 12:04 PM

That sounds reasonable. The mice eating Plato's Republic reflects "negatively" on the state of the commonwealth, so the mice eating "On Pleasure" reflects negatively on pleasure - and the price of grain going up might account for the pleasure of people being affected negatively.

But is it clear that "the mice becoming obsessed with the pleasure of the belly" is a clear connection? Did the mice become obsessed with politics by eating the Republic, or is just an "indication" sent by the gods or something?

Anyone else see any different possibilities? Otherwise I think Don's probably makes the most sense.

Post by “Bryan” of May 18, 2024 at 1:44 PM

Yes this is not quite at Epicurus' expense, as Cicero is of course primarily attacking divination here.

Cicero, On Divination, 2.27.59: But are we simple and thoughtless enough to think it a portent for mice to gnaw something, when gnawing is their one business in life?... if my book by Epicurus *On Pleasure* had been eaten - should I have thought that the yearly produce in the market will be more expensive?

Nos autem ita leues atque inconsiderati sumus, ut si mures corroserint aliquid, quorum est opus hoc unum, monstrum putemus?... si Epicuri *De Voluptate* liber rosus esset - putarem annonam in macello cariorem fore?

Post by “Cassius” of May 18, 2024 at 3:08 PM

What does it tell us, if anything, that Cicero equates gnawing on De Voluptate as analgous to the cost of yearly produce in the market?

Post by “Don” of May 18, 2024 at 3:59 PM

The mice are "ingesting" that malicious philosophy of pleasure! Time to clutch your pearls!

Post by “Little Rocker” of May 18, 2024 at 6:11 PM

Maybe a non-charitable take would go something like:

Plato knows a lot about laws, so if the mice eat Plato, then there will be no laws.

Epicurus knows a lot about delicacies, so if the mice eat Epicurus, there will be no delicacies (only a bunch of people desperate for corn). As in, something like scarcity.

The idea being, I suppose, that a mouse's dietary choices are an omen presaging a social decline of sort.