

Battling Ladies of the 19th Century - Fighting Over Epicurus vs Plato - "PHILOTHEA - Or Plato Against Epicurus" - A Response to Frances Wright's "A Few Days In Athens"

Post by "Cassius" of April 4, 2022 at 9:58 AM

I have just come upon this and I hardly know what to make of it other than that we need to investigate! [Joshua](#) this (transcendentalism) is definitely your department, and [Don](#) we need your help too, since the book is clearly out of copyright but I cannot find a full PDF to download.

The title of my post is not mere sensationalism - it appears that this woman decided to directly respond to Frances Wright's "A Few Days in Athens" with a novel taking Plato's side! If so very perceptive to have arrayed Plato against Epicurus rather than the Stoics.

Take a look at this (I can't figure out the etching -- unless "Lydia Maria" is a man! - in which case I will have to revise the title....



PHILOTHEA
OR PLATO AGAINST EPICURUS:
A NOVEL OF THE TRANSCENDENTAL
MOVEMENT IN NEW ENGLAND

BY
LYDIA MARIA CHILD

WITH AN ANALYSIS OF BACKGROUND AND MEANING
FOR THE
COMMUNITY OF EMERSON AND THOREAU

By
KENNETH WALTER CAMERON



TRANSCENDENTAL BOOKS—DRAWER 1080—HARTFORD 06101

Many others, like Mrs. Child, feared that Fanny Wright's fictionalized account of Epicurus, A Few Days in Athens (1822), would lead many astray, especially after the release of four additional chapters in 1827, incorporated in later editions. Why not, then, counteract one view of ancient Greece by one more congenial to New England apologetic? Might not two play the game as easily as one? In her warfare against Epicureanism, Mrs. Child found support in Neo-Platonism, Swedenborgism, and Transcendentalism.

The following two chapters will discuss matters of genre and literary influence. Here I intend to sketch the Transcendental background of Mrs. Child's Philothea, which, Higginson says, took shape in her brother's study in Watertown. The Rev. Convers Francis, lifelong friend of Emerson and sometime professor at the Harvard Divinity School, was a liberal Christian who continued preaching within the Unitarian Church while valuing membership in the Transcendental Club,⁸ which occasionally met in his home. Emerson preached in his Watertown church,⁹ borrowed books from Harvard on his friend's library privilege,¹⁰ and shared his enthusiasm for German literature--especially Biblical Criticism--which Francis imported regularly, thereby building up one of the notable collections in the United States.¹¹ In 1832, before recognizing Mrs. Child as a kindred spirit, Emerson read her The Biographies of Madame de Staël and Madame Roland,¹² and, perhaps, a little later met her in her brother's home. The following letter to Convers Francis, dated Boston, July 27, 1834,¹³ will reveal her enthusiastic Romanticism at this time: "You bow most reverently to Wordsworth, 'that great poet, that confidant of angels,' as Lavater says of Klopstock. Did not your conscience twinge you for throwing Peter Bell and the Idiot Boy in my teeth so often, and for laughing me to scorn when I said Milton's fame was the sure inheritance of Wordsworth? [¶] I was glad for what you said concerning the state of the affections with regard to the perception of elevated truths. [¶] I believe the more you look inward the more you will be convinced of the truth of what you advanced on that point, and that, too, not merely in a general point of view, but as applied to your own mind, and the different states of your own mind. When wishing to defend a truth merely from the love of intellectual power, or for the sake of appearing superior to some other person, I have felt my mind darkened, a thick fog arose, and scarcely one fine edge of light gave token of the glories I had hidden from myself: but while sitting in my own apartment, looking out upon the water or the heavens, or, in childish mood, watching the perpetual motion of the doves opposite my window, unconscious...of the existence of any of the little passions and impure motives which at once blind and harass the intellect, in such a state of feeling, the same truth, that I had before lost in darkness, is written on the mind with the power and certainty of a sunbeam; and to doubt it would appear to me as insane as to require proof that the moon is not an optical delusion."

Emerson recorded her name along with others now important to him under December 28, 1834, in a pocket notebook:¹⁴ "Mrs Child, Mrs Lewis, S[ampson] Reed, Mrs Sampson, Miss Peabody, Dr Jackson, Mrs Barnard...." Early in 1835, Mrs. Child heard with interest Boston gossips affirm that Emerson was about to wed a Swedenborgian lady, who, at one of his lectures--probably in Plymouth--had declared that they were "spiritual partners" and that Emerson was her "pre-destined husband."¹⁵ On October 7 of that year, Emerson wrote Carlyle from Concord:¹⁶ "I received in August your letter of June, and just then hearing that a lady, a little lady with a mighty heart, Mrs. Child, whom I scarcely know but do much respect, was about to visit England (invited thither for work's sake by the African or Abolition Society) and that she begged an introduction to you, I used the occasion to say the godsend was come, and that I would acknowledge it as soon as three then impending tasks were ended. I have now learned that Mrs. Child was detained for weeks in New York and did not sail." Her devotion to Emerson, meanwhile, emerges in her correspondence, notably in a letter dated at Northampton, December 22, 1838, during the furor that followed his Divinity School Address on the preceding July 15:¹⁷ "Something is coming toward us (I know not what), with a glory round its head, and its long, luminous rays are even now glancing on the desert and the rock. The Unitarian, busily at work pulling down old structures, suddenly sees it gild some ancient pillar, or shed its soft light on some moss-grown altar; and he stops with a troubled doubt whether all is to be de-