

# Was Shakespeare an Epicurean?

Post by “Eikadistes” of May 5, 2024 at 11:29 PM

I came across an interesting stanza in the *Tragedy of Julius Caesar* evident of Shakespeare's fluency in the philosophical positions of figures from the late Roman Republic: “**CASSIUS: Be thou my witness that against my will, | As Pompey was, am I compell'd to set | Upon one battle all our liberties. | You know that I held Epicurus strong | And his opinion: now I change my mind, | And partly credit things that do presage.**” (*Julius Caesar* 5.1.2430-2435; c. 1599-1600)

Of course, Shakespeare was a dramatist, and not a historian. Regardless, from what I can gather (and from what I collected), he was *fascinated* with Roman history, *fluent* in philosophical discourse, *inspired*, to at least some, notable degree by *De Rerum Natura*, *sympathetic* to Lucretius, but **not** a convinced Epicurean who struck a blow for the Sage of the Garden.

“HOSTESS QUICKLY: Thou **atomy**, thou!” (*Henry IV: Part II* 5.4.3584; c. 1592-1592)

“MERCUTIO: “She is the fairies' midwife, and she comes | In shape no bigger than an agate-stone | On the fore-finger of an alderman, | Drawn with a team of little **atomies** | Athwart men's noses as they lie asleep” (*Romeo and Juliet* 1.4.553)

“FORD: What a damned **Epicurean** rascal is this! My heart is ready to crack with impatience. Who says this is improvident jealousy? my wife hath sent to him; the hour is fixed; the match is made. Would any man have thought this? See the hell of having a false woman! My bed shall be abused, my coffers ransacked, my reputation gnawn at; and I shall not only receive this villanous wrong, but stand under the adoption of abominable terms, and by him that does me this wrong. Terms! names! Amaimon sounds well; Lucifer, well; Barbason, well; yet they are devils' additions, the names of fiends: but Cuckold! Wittol!—Cuckold! the devil himself hath not such a name. Page is an ass, a secure ass: he will trust his wife; he will not be jealous. I will rather trust a Fleming with my butter, Parson Hugh the Welshman with my cheese, an Irishman with my aqua-vitae bottle, or a thief to walk my ambling gelding, than my wife with herself; then she plots, then she ruminates, then she devises; and what they think in their hearts they may effect, they will break their hearts but they will effect. God be praised for my jealousy! Eleven o'clock the hour. I will prevent this, detect my wife, be revenged on Falstaff, and laugh at Page. I will about it; better three hours too soon than a minute too late. Fie, fie, fie! cuckold! cuckold! cuckold!” (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*, 2.2.1073)

“OTHELLO: Never, Iago: Like to the **Pontic** sea, | Whose icy current and compulsive course | Ne'er feels retiring ebb, but keeps due on | To the **Propontic** and the Hellespont...” (*Othello*, 3.3.2139; roughly corresponds with *De Rerum Natura* Book 5, Lines 506-508)

"LEAR: Why, no, boy: Nothing can be made out of nothing." (King Lear 1.4.659)

"GONERIL: As you are old and reverend, you should be wise. | Here do you keep a hundred knights and squires; | Men so disorder'd, so debosh'd, and bold | That this our court, infected with their manners, | Shows like a riotous inn. **Epicurism** and lust | Make it more like a tavern or a brothel | Than a grac'd palace. The shame itself doth speak | For instant remedy." (King Lear 1.4.759)

"MACBETH: Bring me no more reports; let them fly all: | Till Birnam wood remove to Dunsinane, | I cannot taint with fear. What's the boy Malcolm? | Was he not born of woman? The spirits that know | All mortal consequences have pronounced me thus: | ' Fear not, Macbeth; no man that's born of woman | Shall e'er have power upon thee.' Then fly, | false thanes, | And mingle with the English **epicures**: | The mind I sway by and the heart I bear | Shall never sag with doubt nor shake with fear. [...] The devil damn thee black, thou cream-faced loon! | Where got'st thou that goose look?" (Macbeth 5.3.2246)

"POMPEY: Tie up the libertine in a field of feasts, | Keep his brain fuming; **Epicurean** cooks | Sharpen with cloyless sauce his appetite; | That sleep and feeding may prorogue his honour | Even till a Lethe'd dulness!" (Antony and Cleopatra 2.1.639)

"ANTONY: With the health that Pompey gives him, else he is a very **epicure**." (Antony and Cleopatra, 2.7.1430)

Shakespeare usually employs words like "epicure" as was already common by his time, as a negative descriptor for an undisciplined glutton, an effeminate wimp, or, as was the case with "Epicurism", the philosophy of an extravagant pervert. While *The Bard* is celebrated for his collection of idioms and metaphors, his employment "epicurean" was regular for the usage of his audience.

I think parts of Shakespeare's last will are worth considering:

"In the name of God, Amen. I, William Shakespeare [...] in perfect health and memory, God be praised, do make and ordain this my last will and testament in manner and form following. That is to say, first, I commend my soul into the hands of God my Creator, hoping and assuredly believing, through the only merits of Jesus Christ my Saviour, to be made partaker of life everlasting, and my body to the earth whereof it is made." (25 March 1616).

#### [Quote from Twentier](#)

Yes, yes, yes, yes, **yes!**

To refine that response, "**Yes**, Shakespeare already published poetry about 'atomies' and a 'damned Epicurean rascal' before Pierre Gassendi ever learned to read, and **yes** he was 'Lucretian' in several of his verses, and 'Classical' in his overall aesthetic, and **yes** he had insight into the history of the Epicurean school, which informed some of our greatest heroes and villains ... but also, **no**, not like Philodemus was an Epicurean, nor Lucretius, nor Lucian. He

probably didn't have a shrine to the Sage of the Garden in his bedroom as much as he was probably just an educated Elizabethan."