

Happy Birthday, Frances Wright!

Post by “Joshua” of September 6, 2021 at 9:23 PM

Quote

Welcome to the gardens of pleasure;

may you find it the abode of peace, of wisdom, and of virtue. [...] See to that luminary! Lovely and glorious in the dawn, he gathers strength and beauty to his meridian, and passes in peace and grandeur to his rest. So do thou, my son. Open your ears and your eyes ; know, and choose what is good ; enter the path of virtue, and thou shalt follow it, for you shall find it sweet. Thorns are not in it, nor is it difficult or steep: like the garden you have now entered, all there is pleasure and repose.

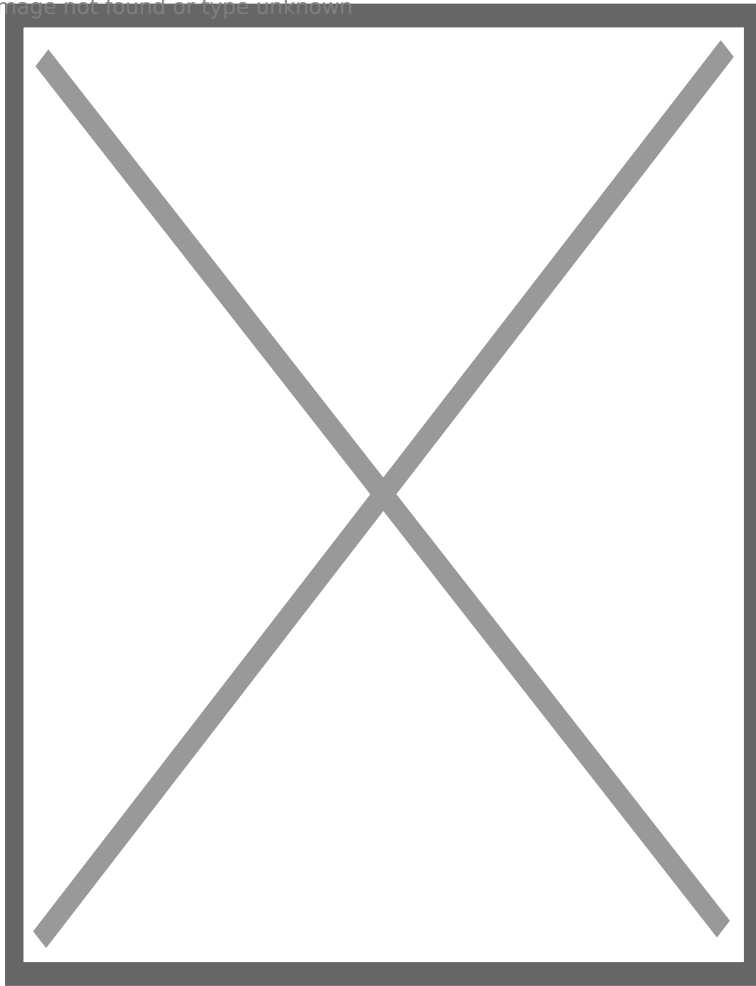
Post by “Cassius” of September 6, 2021 at 9:42 PM

Great catch Joshua!

Post by “Don” of September 7, 2021 at 7:09 AM

She wrote A Few Days in Athens while she was still a teenager? Did not know that!

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[Frances Wright - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org)
en.wikipedia.org

Post by “Paquin” of September 7, 2021 at 8:10 AM

Happy birthday! I'm looking forward to reading A Few Days in Athens after finishing the Lucretius podcast.

Post by “Cassius” of September 7, 2021 at 8:35 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

She wrote *A Few Days in Athens* while she was still a teenager? Did not know that!

That relates to our brief recent podcast discussion that we should learn Epicurean philosophy when we were children.

I've never been able to find any further leads, but apparently several members of her family were philosophically and/or politically active and presumably led her in the right direction from an early age. We can't wait til we're in advanced age (where's my walking stick?) before we start studying Epicurus! 😊

"*A Few Days In Athens*" shows not only a deep understanding (though not always agreement) with Book Ten

Early life and education [edit]

Frances "Fanny" Wright was born at 136 Nethergate in Dundee, Scotland, on September 6, 1795, to Camilla Campbell and her husband James Wright.^{[1][2]} Their house was then a newly built house by the town architect, Samuel Bell on the recently widened Nethergate, close to Dundee harbour.^[3]

Her father was a wealthy linen manufacturer,^[4] a designer of Dundee trade tokens, and a political radical. He corresponded with Adam Smith and was sympathetic to the American patriots and French republicans,^[5] including Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette, and Thomas Paine. Frances, or "Fanny" as she was called since childhood, was the second eldest of family's three children. Her siblings included an older brother, who died when Frances was still young, and a sister named Camilla.^{[6][7][8]} Wright's mother also died young, and her father died in 1798, when Frances was about the age of two. With support from a substantial inheritance, the orphaned Wright sisters were raised in England by members of the Campbell family, who were relatives of their mother.^{[2][9]}

A maternal aunt became Wright's guardian and taught her ideas founded on the philosophy of the French materialists.^[10] In 1813, when Wright was sixteen, she returned to Scotland to live with her great-uncle, James Mylne, a philosophy professor at Glasgow College.^[6] Wright spent the winter months in study and writing and the summer months visiting the Scottish Highlands.^[citation needed] Wright was interested in the works of Greek philosophers, especially Epicurus, who was the subject of her first book, *A Few Days in Athens* (1822), which she had written by the age of eighteen. Wright also studied history and became interested in the United States' democratic form of government.^[2]

First visits to the United States and France [edit]

Post by "Cassius" of September 7, 2021 at 8:58 AM

[Quote from Paquin](#)

Happy birthday! I'm looking forward to reading A Few Days in Athens after finishing the Lucretius podcast.

In many ways it is excellent; in some ways it is disappointing. We have some good commentary in it in our section on Frances Wright, including some pretty blunt (but I think accurate) criticism of it by Elayne. [Problems in Frances Wright's "A Few Days in Athens"](#)

There is much additional good material in that subforum as well.

First, to repeat, there's a lot of good material in it and it is well worth reading, which is why it's on our reading list. However:

In general, the issue is that some people are turned off by the "flowery" writing style of the early chapters. That doesn't strike me as too serious a flaw (I ignore it as an aspect of the style of that time) but there are more serious issues too. Frances Wright doesn't seem to follow Epicurus on "agency," nor does she go by the book on the existence of the "gods." Most interestingly, she hints at (and carries further in some later writing) her view that we need to be so careful of "theories" that we essentially reject all of them. If carried to an extreme (as perhaps she did in her later writing) this can itself turn into a form of skepticism that I think went well beyond what Epicurus taught.

Post by “Cassius” of September 7, 2021 at 8:59 AM

[Don](#) I am thinking that you have not read this one yet? I think [Godfrey](#) has and I am not sure about [Joshua](#) and [Martin](#) and others. This would be a good thread in which we can update our comments on Wright, and we can move it to the Wright section as well.

Post by “Don” of September 7, 2021 at 9:04 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

In many ways it is excellent; in some ways it is disappointing.

As pertains to this idea, I have a whole different perspective on that work now that I know she wrote it when she was a teenager.

Approaching it as "Epicurean fan fiction" written by a teenage fan of Epicurus might allow for some leniency with her writing. With that in mind, too, it's more sophisticated than what I would initially expect from a teenager.

We are, indeed, evidently neither too young nor too old to love and study true philosophy!

Post by "Don" of September 7, 2021 at 9:05 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

[Don](#) I am thinking that you have not read this one yet? I think [Godfrey](#) has and I am not sure about [Joshua](#) and [Martin](#) and others. This would be a good thread in which we can update our comments on Wright, and we can move it to the Wright section as well.

You're correct. I haven't read this yet, but now I'm more curious.

Post by "Cassius" of September 7, 2021 at 9:22 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

Approaching it as "Epicurean fan fiction" written by a teenage fan of Epicurus might allow for some leniency with her writing. With that in mind, too, it's more sophisticated than what I would initially expect from a teenager.

I suspect that you are going to have many of the same questions I did. The book is VERY maturely written, and it indicates a knowledge of details from the other ten books of Diogenes Laertius that one would expect would take years of study.

I haven't focused recently on her age when she wrote it, so I need to verify that aspect of it. Certainly at some point she was capable of writing every bit of it herself, because her later work is written in much the same style and from the same viewpoint.

But the maturity shown in AFDIA is very deep, and the younger it is postulated that she was when she wrote it, the more in my own mind it's almost certain that she had at very least "good coaching." I am not trying to take anything away from FW in these comments because she was clearly a remarkable person, but I don't want you beating yourself up Don that you're a couple

of years older now than she was when this was published and you still haven't written anything comparable. 😊 For sure, neither have I! 😊

One last note is that I think it's probably an indication of something going on that she wrote such a lengthy and detailed introduction about the "anonymous" background of the manuscript.

[Quote from Don](#)

now that I know she wrote it when she was a teenager.

For sure, this is not a work by an average teenager!

Post by “Joshua” of September 7, 2021 at 7:27 PM

Regarding her age, it's not at all historically unusual for British education to produce prodigies.

John Milton:

Quote

Milton's first datable compositions are two psalms done at age 15 at Long Bennington. One contemporary source is the Brief Lives of John Aubrey, an uneven compilation including first-hand reports. In the work, Aubrey quotes Christopher, Milton's younger brother: "When he was young, he studied very hard and sat up very late, commonly till twelve or one o'clock at night". Aubrey adds, "His complexion exceeding faire—he was so faire that they called him the Lady of Christ's College

Alexander Pope:

Quote

Pope's formal education ended at this time, [age 12] and from then on, he mostly educated himself by reading the works of classical writers such as the satirists Horace and Juvenal, the epic poets Homer and Virgil, as well as English authors such as Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare and John Dryden. He studied many languages, reading works by French, Italian, Latin, and Greek poets. After five years of study, [age 17] Pope came into contact with figures from London literary society such as William Congreve, Samuel Garth and William Trumbull.

Thomas De Quincey:

Quote

In 1800, De Quincey, aged 15, was ready for the University of Oxford; his scholarship was far in advance of his years. "That boy could harangue an Athenian mob better than you or I could address an English one", his master at Bath had said.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson:

Quote

Tennyson and two of his elder brothers were writing poetry in their teens and a collection of poems by all three was published locally when Alfred was only 17.

John Keats:

Quote

However, at 13 he began focusing his energy on reading and study, winning his first academic prize in midsummer 1809.

William Wordsworth:

Quote

However, [his father] did encourage William in his reading, and in particular set him to commit large portions of verse to memory, including works by Milton, Shakespeare and Spenser. [...]

Wordsworth made his debut as a writer in 1787 [age 17] when he published a sonnet in The European Magazine.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge:

Quote

In one of a series of autobiographical letters written to Thomas Poole, Coleridge wrote: "At six years old I remember to have read Belisarius, Robinson Crusoe, and Philip Quarll - and then I found the Arabian Nights' Entertainments - one tale of which (the tale of a man who was compelled to seek for a pure virgin) made so deep an impression on me (I had read it in the evening while my mother was mending stockings) that I was haunted by spectres whenever I was in the dark - and I distinctly remember the anxious and fearful eagerness with which I used to watch the window in which the books lay - and whenever the sun lay upon them, I would seize it, carry it by the wall,

and bask, and read.

J.R.R. Tolkien:

Quote

Tolkien could read by the age of four and could write fluently soon afterwards. [...] While in his early teens, Tolkien had his first encounter with a constructed language, Animalic, an invention of his cousins, Mary and Marjorie Incledon. At that time, he was studying Latin and Anglo-Saxon. Their interest in Animalic soon died away, but Mary and others, including Tolkien himself, invented a new and more complex language called Nevbosh. The next constructed language he came to work with, Naffarin, would be his own creation. Tolkien learned Esperanto some time before 1909. [Age 17] Around 10 June 1909 he composed "The Book of the Foxrook", a sixteen-page notebook, where the "earliest example of one of his invented alphabets" appears. Short texts in this notebook are written in Esperanto.

Percy Bysshe Shelley:

Quote

At age six, he was sent to a day school run by the vicar of Warnham church, where he displayed an impressive memory and gift for languages. [...] In 1802 [age 10] he entered the Syon House Academy of Brentford, Middlesex. [...] Shelley developed an interest in science which supplemented his voracious reading of tales of mystery, romance and the supernatural. During his holidays at Field Place, his sisters were often terrified at being subjected to his experiments with gunpowder, acids and electricity. Back at school he blew up a paling fence with gunpowder.

Oscar Wilde:

Quote

Later in life he claimed that his fellow students had regarded him as a "prodigy" for his ability to speed read, claiming that he could read two facing pages simultaneously and consume a three-volume book in half an hour, retaining enough information to give a basic account of the plot. He excelled academically, particularly in the subject of Classics, in which he ranked fourth in the school in 1869. His aptitude for giving oral translations of Greek and Latin texts won him multiple prizes, including the Carpenter Prize for Greek Testament.

John Stuart Mill:

Quote

He was given an extremely rigorous upbringing, and was deliberately shielded from association with children his own age other than his siblings. His father, a follower of Bentham and an adherent of associationism, had as his explicit aim to create a genius intellect that would carry on the cause of utilitarianism and its implementation after he and Bentham had died.

Mill was a notably precocious child. He describes his education in his autobiography. At the age of three he was taught Greek. By the age of eight, he had read Aesop's Fables, Xenophon's Anabasis, and the whole of Herodotus, and was acquainted with Lucian, Diogenes Laërtius, Isocrates and six dialogues of Plato. He had also read a great deal of history in English and had been taught arithmetic, physics and astronomy.

At the age of eight, Mill began studying Latin, the works of Euclid, and algebra, and was appointed schoolmaster to the younger children of the family. His main reading was still history, but he went through all the commonly taught Latin and Greek authors and by the age of ten could read Plato and Demosthenes with ease. His father also thought that it was important for Mill to study and compose poetry. One of his earliest poetic compositions was a continuation of the Iliad. In his spare time he also enjoyed reading about natural sciences and popular novels, such as Don Quixote and Robinson Crusoe.

Post by “Joshua” of September 7, 2021 at 7:38 PM

And as for women, two notable Americans were Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Margaret Fuller, living at the time of Frances Wright or not long after. Both were prodigious, but Margaret Fuller in particular was extraordinary for her time. She had a reading fluency in Latin and German, and also studied Greek and several other European languages. I recall writing a paper on the pair in college.

Post by “Cassius” of September 7, 2021 at 8:41 PM

Wow great research JJ thank you! That helps put things in perspective against today, where I gather such things are "somewhat" less prevalent 😊

Post by “Paquin” of September 12, 2021 at 4:25 AM

There is a long tradition of authors posing as editors of found manuscripts. Robinson Crusoe was originally published with Robinson Crusoe given as the author so original readers thought they were reading a real account.

The pleasure/fun of Wright posing as someone who has received the found manuscript is the conceit of veracity, plus there is the added layer consisting of the reactions of the authorities to the Italian scholar i.e. that this text contains ideas that have frequently been seen as seditious.

To add to the interesting list of precocious young scholars provided by JJElbert, I would also suggest the young Elizabeth Tudor who would become Queen Elizabeth I. She was translating into Latin, French and Italian at the age of 12. She also translated from Greek. Here was a pre-teen able to read Lucretius and Epicurus in the original.

Post by “Don” of September 12, 2021 at 7:46 AM

[Quote from Paquin](#)

There is a long tradition of authors posing as editors of found manuscripts.

JRR Tolkien stands firmly in that tradition. His conceit was that he had discovered The Red Book of Westmarch written in the language of Westron by hobbits named Bilbo and Maura Labingi. Tolkien "translated" this manuscript and published it as The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings originally written by Bilbo and Frodo Baggins.

The reality is even better: Tolkien had created his Elvish languages and wanted to create a world in which they would be spoken. That's the real origin of The Lord of the Rings.

Sorry. I could go on ad nauseam. Big Tolkien nerd here 😊 Tolkien was definitely no Epicurean, but he did talk and write about the pleasure language - both natural and constructed - gave him.

Post by “Paquin” of September 12, 2021 at 4:31 PM

Interesting! I never knew that Tolkein had created such a framing device for his work, but I can see that it makes a lot of sense that he would. LotR is like A Few Days in Athens in that they both seem to have been written to supply a text that the authors wish had existed, but since the texts are in reality absent, Tolkein and Wright step in to supply them. The books are presented as found texts, as that is what both authors would actually have preferred in a way.

Post by “Eikadistes” of April 11, 2022 at 9:29 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

Sorry. I could go on ad nauseam. Big Tolkien nerd here 😊 Tolkien was definitely no Epicurean, but he did talk and write about the pleasure language - both natural and constructed - gave him.

There seems to me to be significant overlap between residents of the Garden and Middle Earth. I have met more genuine Tolkien enthusiasts through Epicurean philosophy than through Lord of the Rings forums.

Post by “Don” of April 11, 2022 at 10:01 AM

Elen síla lúmenn’ omentielvo!

Post by “Eikadistes” of April 11, 2022 at 10:23 AM

This is completely tangential, but [Don](#) have I ever shared my book of lyrical poetry with you?

I transcribed all of my albums' lyrics into a phonetic-alphabetic hybrid English Mode of Tengwar, including an analysis of Tolkien's linguistic devices and their real-world analogues: https://www.academia.edu/37729486/The_Book_of_SH_ZD_R

There's also a transcription on the back of every Tolkien manuscript with any form of Elvish in the appendix. (I am particularly proud of *Tom Bombadil's* song and the *King's Letters*, which

were rather tedious to transcribe).

I've got a couple of Elvish tattoos, one in Quenya written in the Sarati script on my back ("Ilya i na malta ume mirilya..." and so on), and a Sindarin phrase on my chest ("Or 'waith bain nor Anor agiliath an-ui dorthar..." and so on).

Really digging into philosophy requires (in my opinion) a study of language, and most students of the history of English will bump into Tolkien as a scholar at some point, and a portion of us get caught there.