

# **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,<sup>8</sup> which occasionally met in his home. Emerson preached in his Watertown church,<sup>9</sup> borrowed books from Harvard on his friend's library privilege,<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> In 1832, before recognizing Mrs. Child as a kindred spirit, Emerson read her The Biographies of Madame de Staël and Madame Roland,<sup>12</sup> and, perhaps, a little later met her in her brother's home. The following letter to Convers Francis, dated Boston, July 27, 1834,<sup>13</sup> 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:<sup>14</sup> "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."<sup>15</sup> On October 7 of that year, Emerson wrote Carlyle from Concord:<sup>16</sup> "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:<sup>17</sup> "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-

---

**Post by "Cassius" of April 4, 2022 at 10:02 AM**

One interesting thing I note is that this book apparently indicates that Frances Wright's book was issued in two parts, first chapters one through twelve, and then chapters thirteen through sixteen later. If so that is news to me.

---

### **Post by “Godfrey” of April 4, 2022 at 11:26 AM**

Googling, I found Philothea, A Grecian Romance by L. Maria Child as a free PDF. It might be a different edition of the same story, apparently without the Transcendentalist commentary. Although the commentary could be as interesting as the book!

One note: in her preface she notes that she wrote the book for her own pleasure 😊

---

### **Post by “Cassius” of April 4, 2022 at 12:38 PM**

Yes I am seeing a Gutenberg text edition which may have the main story. But you are right that the PDF version I mentioned in the first post seems to have a lot of background material.

I can say this after reading the first chapter. She exceeds Frances Wright in terms of writing flowery introductions - and that is not a compliment!

---

### **Post by “Cassius” of April 4, 2022 at 1:27 PM**

I have extracted PDF pages of most (but not all) of what appear to be the commentary pages. It would be desirable to get the full original PDF, but until we do these pages, plus the texts available elsewhere, should give us most of the interesting parts.

Here is the PDF:

[Extracts of Commentary on Philothea and AFDIA.pdf](#)

---

### **Post by “Joshua” of April 4, 2022 at 1:34 PM**

The Frontispiece is from an early portrait of Henry David Thoreau which, as you suggest, Cassius, I would know anywhere! The book itself, and its author, are totally unknown to me.

---

### **Post by “Joshua” of April 4, 2022 at 1:51 PM**

I don't know that I can quite get on board with identifying Thoreau as a Platonist or a neoplatonist. He was eclectic in the extreme (not to say eccentric), and seemed far more interested in the mysticism of the east than the philosophy of the west. He also denied the afterlife in one unusually candid journal entry.

I think he's decidedly more Aristotelian in many ways.

---

### **Post by “Cassius” of April 4, 2022 at 1:55 PM**

IT's going to take some time and effort for us to wade through this text, which may be longer than AFDIA with the philosophy buried under lots of layers of fiction. May well turn out to be worth doing but I want to go through the notes that are apparently added on before going into the text.

---

### **Post by “Cassius” of April 5, 2022 at 8:54 PM**

i am close to resigning myself to reporting that the title "Plato Against Epicurus" is true only in the most abstract sense. While it does appear that Childs had in mind the writing of a proper response to "A Few Days In Athens," she did so by constructing an entirely self-contained story set in the time of Pericles and Plato, and there is no mention of Epicurus whatsoever. I can tell already that in having Plato speak she is emphasizing doctrines that are clearly non-Epicurean, but there seems to be little if any point and counterpoint, and no real effort to compare much of anything from the two doctrines. it's going to take someone highly motivated to wade through the story to look for passages of philosophic importance, and I doubt it makes sense to

prioritize this while there is so much else to be done.

---

### **Post by “Don” of April 5, 2022 at 10:15 PM**

Thanks for taking one for the team, [Cassius](#) .

---

### **Post by “Cassius” of April 6, 2022 at 6:40 AM**

OMG you don't know how well "taking one for the team" applies. Compared to "Philothea," "A Few Days In Athens" is an action-packed thriller written in the plain and unadorned language of a cowboy talking about the showdown at the OK Corral.

I am afraid that Philothea captures all the ooziness that I have always associated with the world of "Transcendentalism." I am afraid I don't have the temperament for it.

I bet that it would probably be possible to go through it and pull out the descriptions and statements of Philothea (the lead character) and Plato (a major character) and we would find lots of good illustrations that could be laid against comparisons from Epicurus / AFDIA. But "taking one for the team" would hardly describe the effort required.

It would probably take someone like Joshua (with his experience in Thoreau) to even have a hope of getting very far, and I suspect he would think his time would be far more valuably spent elsewhere.

I probably overstate the hurdle but I do think it would take someone with a strong interest in the project for some personal reason. There are so many other important things to tend to I can't see it being near the top of anyone's list.

We very much need time spent on the \*real\* Plato to pull out this very same comparison, so doing it in a fictional setting probably needs to wait.

But if anyone comes across this thread and wants to tackle it, the project would be very unique and probably even very productive.