

Was Epicurus Sexually Active?

Post by “Pacatus” of February 23, 2023 at 6:22 PM

Some time ago, I came upon the following quote by Catherine Wilson (in an interview; I’m not sure if it’s also in her book):

“Epicurus himself liked women and had a series of affairs with women who were uncharacteristically allowed into the school.” <https://medium.com/perennial/how-...ll-ec69bf6c7d5b>

I hasten to say that I have no moral qualms or objections whatsoever. I would suspect that friendship was also part of any such relationships. But I have not been able to find any confirming sources. Has anyone else?

~ ~ ~

In addition to the cautions against the dangers of imprudence and profligacy ([PD08](#), VS51 and the letter to Menoceus), there seems to be one thoroughly affirming statement on sexual pleasure (which I think has been quoted here often), from Diogenes Laertius:

“I know not how to conceive the good, apart from the pleasures of taste, sexual pleasures, the pleasures of sound, and the pleasures of beautiful form.” (On the Ethical End, quoted in DL, x, 6)*

[Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Eminent Philosophers, BOOK X, EPICURUS \(341-271 B.C.\)](#)

The Greek word here translated as “sexual pleasures” is ἐρασθῆναι, and inflection of ἔραμαι which is also rendered as love (as it is in Bailey) – but with the connotation of romantic/sexual passion. It seems etymologically related to ἔρωϛ.

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, ἔρα^μαι](#)

[ἔραμαι - Wiktionary](#)

[ἔρωϛ - Wiktionary](#)

This is where I cry out to [Don](#) for help! 🤔

There seems to be a fairly large body of thought that Epicurus was celibate. But that seems to fall into something like the “bread and water in a cave” asceticism (possibly influenced by Stoicism?) that Cassius oft rebukes. Personally, I prefer a full-blooded, full-bodied Epicurus – including the pleasures of sex.

~ ~ ~

I'm sure a lot of this has been covered before (and I skimmed the threads a bit), but I'd enjoy hearing other's thoughts (even though it may all be speculative) on the subject - especially with regard to Wilson's claim and the proponents of the idea that Epicurus was (must have been?!) celibate. Thanks in advance.

+++++

* There is an expanded version in Cicero:

"For my part I cannot conceive of anything as the good if I remove the pleasures perceived by means of taste and sex and listening to music, and the pleasant motions felt by the eyes through beautiful sights, or any other pleasures which some sensation generates in a man as a whole. Certainly it is impossible to say that mental delight is the only good. For a delighted mind, as I understand it, consists in the expectation of all the things I just mentioned--to be of a nature able to acquire them without pain. . ." (Epicurus, On the End; Cicero, Tusculan Disputations 3.42-3.)

Post by "Charles" of February 23, 2023 at 7:26 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

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I haven't been able to find any concrete source on this. Though there are some suggestions or allusions that perhaps he had some relation in one way or another with Pythocles, whether that's in bad faith or not is hard to say given the nature of Plutarch.

Although it wouldn't surprise me, I wouldn't make the same claim as Wilson. The best we can say is "maybe he did."

Post by "Eikadistes" of February 23, 2023 at 8:00 PM

Epicurus taught that "**The occurrence of certain bodily pains assists us in guarding against others like them**" (VS 73). He seems to have had a **lot** to say about the potential pitfalls of unrestrained sexuality ...

History may justify *both* characterizations, the sinner and the saint: Epicurus may have pursued a less-restrained sexual path as a youth (*considering he was renown to have an attractive and beloved personality*), and may have run into some of the undesirable side effects that helped shape his sense of selective sexual prudence.

Post by "Joshua" of February 23, 2023 at 9:00 PM

Quote

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I think DeWitt infers from one of Epicurus' alleged insults against Plato or Aristotle that he was mocking them for pederasty. I'd have to find the citation, which DeWitt (from memory) implies rather than states directly. Presumably the kind of invective that gets thrown at every one at some time or other in antiquity, all though the insult passage in Laertius is confusing because the biographer himself seems to discredit every word of it.

DeWitt occasionally cannot help himself from making bricks by first making clay...

Post by "Joshua" of February 23, 2023 at 9:09 PM

Bottom of page 62 and top of page 63:

There remain the epithets "imposter" and "prostitute." For these it is the most plausible explanation that Epicurus discovered his teacher to be living a double life, preaching virtue, as all philosophers did, and at the same time practicing vice. Cicero informs us that most philosophers condoned the practice of homosexuality, and for once he agreed emphatically with Epicurus in condemning it as against Plato. The latter, as is well known, had essayed in his Symposium to sublimate this passion into a passion for knowledge. Epicurus also wrote a Symposium, in which he retorted: "Intercourse never was the cause of any good and it is

fortunate if it does no harm." In the case of Nausiphanes there is another item of evidence from the pen of Epicurus: "As for my own opinion, I presume that the high-steppers (Platonists) will think me really a pupil of the 'lung-fish' and that I listened to his lectures in the company of certain lads who were stupid from the night's carousing. For he was both an immoral man and addicted to such practices as made it impossible for him to arrive at wisdom." The practices here referred to have been interpreted as the study of mathematics, but the mention of adolescent lads, of drinking, and of immorality make the true reference unmistakable to any reader conversant with the shadier side of student life among the Greeks.

Post by "Don" of February 23, 2023 at 9:54 PM

Characteristic 2

Don translation: Epicureans generally think that the sage will never succumb to lustful desire or be overwhelmed by sexual passions.

Hicks: The Epicureans do not suffer the wise man to fall in love;

Yonge: They do not think that the wise man will ever be in love,

What is specifically being discussed here is ἐρασθήσασθαι to desire passionately, lustfully, in other words to be carried away by sexual passions (eros). Hicks's "suffer" appears overly strong. The original is more "suppose, think, expect" the sage to do this, so Yonge wins on this one. Mensch uses: they "do not think" this will happen.

Post by "Pacatus" of February 23, 2023 at 11:51 PM

Just to react generally and off-handedly thus far: there would seem to be a wide gulf between being "**overwhelmed** by sexual passions" and "selective sexual prudence." (Similarly between pederasty, which Joshua's posts are referencing, and any consensual adult homosexual relations.) But I'll wait on further elucidation ...

EDIT: Does eros *necessarily* imply being overwhelmed or carried away? Or just feeling romantic/sexual passion?

Post by "Cassius" of February 24, 2023 at 5:52 AM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

Just to react generally and off-handedly thus far: there would seem to be a wide gulf between being "overwhelmed by sexual passions" and "selective sexual prudence."

I agree, and it seems to me prudent to remember that every kind of "ethical" advice is a matter of context and still is judged in terms of all pleasure being desirable by nature (even though not all is to be chosen) and "what will happen to me if I pursue this course and what will happen if I do not?" There is a wide gulf between how events unfold in different contexts, and if you are confident that you have arranged circumstance so that a particular pleasure will not bring more pain than it is worth due to your preparations, then I would think Epicurus would say it would be appropriate to engage in it. Rules of thumb are good general guides but there is no god or fate guaranteeing results so the calculation of the risks is yours to do contextually.

Post by "Don" of February 24, 2023 at 5:54 AM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

Does eros necessarily imply being overwhelmed or carried away? Or just feeling romantic/sexual passion?

The verb ἔραμαι (of which ἐρασθήσασθαι is a form) does mean "desire passionately, lust after; desire eagerly" so there's a connotation of over the top sexual desire and lust.

Consider how the word "erotic" is used in English as sexually explicit: "Relating to or tending to arouse sexual desire or excitement:

- erotic entertainment and services
- I had an erotic dream last night.
- There's a local cinema that only shows erotic movies."

To my mind, "feeling romantic" and "feeling sexual passion" convey two similar but distinct feelings.

Eros was a god of love, desire, sexual passion, just like Aphrodite/Venus was a goddess of sex, desire, passion. The image that comes to mind after satyrs and nymphs ...uh... getting together in the forest.

[EROS - Greek Primordial God of Procreation](#)

Quote

Oppian, Halieutica 4. 10 ff :

"O cruel Eros (Love), crafty of counsel, of all gods fairest to behold with the eyes, of all most grievous when thou dost vex the heart with unforeseen assault, entering the soul like a storm-wind and breathing the bitter menace of fire, with hurricane of anguish and untempered pain. The shedding of tears is for thee a sweet delight and to hear the deep-wrung groan; to inflame a burning redness in the heart and to blight and wither the bloom upon the cheek, to make the eyes hollow and to wrest all the mind to madness. Many thou doest even roll to doom even those whom thou meetest in wild and wintry sort, fraught with frenzy; for in such festivals is thy delight.

Post by "Don" of February 24, 2023 at 5:57 AM

As a possible related aside, here's my translation of the characteristics of the sage given in Diogenes Laertius about sexual relationships:

[Quote from Characteristics of the Sage](#)

Sexual Relationships

The wise one will not establish a sexual relationship in a way that is against the law or forbidden by custom. Epicureans generally think that the sage will never succumb to lustful desire or be overwhelmed by sexual passions. According to the school, sexual passion is not sent by any supernatural force. They say that having sex like animals never did anyone any good, and people should be content if it does no harm. Epicurus also said that the wise one will not marry nor raise a family (and talked about the pains involved with that life); however, under certain circumstances, the wise one will forsake these rules and decide to marry.

Post by "Don" of February 24, 2023 at 6:03 AM

For ease of reference, here are my notes from

Characteristic 4:

Hicks: No one was ever the better for sexual indulgence, and it is well if he be not the worse.

Yonge: Marriage (Attalus's site says "Intercourse", otherwise identical to Yonge), say they, is never any good to a man, and we must be quite content if it does no harm;

So, is it marriage, intercourse, or "sexual indulgence"? The original is συνουσίαν which appears to convey sexual intercourse (and can be used in relation to animals copulating) and seems to be used in the sense of letting one's passions run away with them and not the institution of marriage.

The original is: συνουσίαν δέ φασιν ὀνῆσαι μὲν οὐδέποτε, ἀγαπητὸν δὲ εἰ μὴ καὶ ἔβλαψε.

So, possible literal translation: Sexual intercourse, they say, on the one hand, never profited or benefited (anyone), and, on the other hand, one must be content if it does not disable or distract the mind.

Post by "Don" of February 24, 2023 at 6:15 AM

And note that, whether Epicurus was sexually active or not, he certainly didn't demand celibacy from his students. A number of them, we know, had children!

Remember, too, that, according to some sources, Epicurus's health wasn't all that good. So, it's possibly the case that he wasn't physically up to the task of having sex. However, wasn't one of Timocrates' slanders that there were orgies every night in the Garden... probably only because there were women attending the classes and lectures and.. by Zeus!... writing philosophical treatises!! Oh my! Likely, due to the limitations on the movements of women in ancient Greek society, those women were most likely wives accompanied by their husbands or they were hetairai. Elodie Harper's novel *The Wolf Den* gives a vivid picture of the difference between the hetairai and the pornai in ancient Pompeii.

Post by "Pacatus" of February 24, 2023 at 2:12 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

The verb ἔραμαι (of which ἐρασθήσεσθαι is a form) does mean "desire passionately, lust after; desire eagerly" so there's a connotation of over the top sexual desire and lust.

Well, here I go: leaping out where I should probably fear to tread—

First, it doesn't seem to me that either the LSJ or Wiki entries for ἔραμαι necessitate that connotation, except for regard to things (as opposed to persons); similarly for ἔρος. (I don't know if it usually carries that connotation across the ancient literature, but it strikes me as something that is likely context-dependent.)

Even less so in other lexicons -

Slater: a. fall in love with, love c. gen. ... b. desire.

Autenrieth: enamoured of, in love with.

Etymonline has this for "erotic": 1650s, from French érotique (16c.), from Greek erotikos "caused by passionate love, referring to love," from eros (genitive erotos) "sexual love" (see [Eros](#)). Earlier form was erotical (1620s) -

And under the entry for eros, notes: "Ancient Greek distinguished four ways of love: erao "to be in love with, to desire passionately or sexually;" phileo "have affection for;" agapao "have regard for, be contented with;" and stergo, used especially of the love of parents and children or a ruler and his subjects."

Second, in order for sexual desire to have any per se negative connotation vis-à-vis Epicurus, it would have to fall into the category of unnatural desires, not a natural (albeit unnecessary) desire.

Third, a form of the same word, ἔραμαι, is used in the DL quote affirming sexual pleasures as among those apart from which Epicurus would not know "how to conceive the good."

"I know not how to conceive the good, apart from the pleasures of taste, sexual pleasures, the pleasures of sound, and the pleasures of beautiful form."

~ ~ ~

At bottom, I do not see Epicurus denigrating sexual pleasures at all, simply cautioning care. The denigrating connotations - whilst they might be apropos (or even predominant) in other cultural, philosophical and religious contexts - seem to me the kind of thing that Epicurus might have tried to rectify, as he did for hēdone itself vis-à-vis, say, the Stoics.

Post by “Pacatus” of February 24, 2023 at 2:19 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

To my mind, "feeling romantic" and "feeling sexual passion" convey two similar but distinct feelings.

I think sexual passion (in English now) can be felt in the context of a loving, romantic relationship, as well as in other (nonromantic) contexts. But I cannot say that what I sometimes feel toward my beloved should not be called sexual passion, shared in a loving relationship. That seems to me to be an unnecessary parsing.

Post by “Pacatus” of February 24, 2023 at 2:21 PM

I have reached out to Professor Wilson via Academia.edu, asking her about supporting evidence for her claim. If I get a response, I'll share it with all of you.

Post by “Don” of February 24, 2023 at 3:50 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

[Quote from Don](#)

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Oh, I have no problem with that idea! I think one should feel "sexual passion" for "(one's) beloved"! I would hope any relationship based on mutual attraction in a romantic context would

include sexual passion.

My point - granted I didn't say this well - was that a relationship can't be all sexual, erotic passion all the time. Feeling romantic" lead to "feeling sexual passion" but it doesn't necessarily need to. "Feeling romantic" can just mean showing love and affection for one's beloved. A "romantic dinner" need not lead to "sexual passion"... or at least not until you leave the restaurant.

To my mind, the parsing is helpful in the context of emphasis or context. "Feeling romantic" to me seems to express something long-term but also intimate. "Passion" is episodic and intense. Consider a "romantic" embrace or a "passionate" embrace or an "erotic" embrace. I don't get the same connotation from those. All are pleasurable, but they're not equivalent.

Post by “Pacatus” of February 24, 2023 at 4:31 PM

Agreed.

[Quote from Don](#)

A "romantic dinner" need not lead to "sexual passion"... or at least not until you leave the restaurant.



Post by “Joshua” of February 24, 2023 at 5:40 PM

It seems fitting here to remember that W. B. Yeats considered Lucretius' fourth book to contain "the greatest description of sexual intercourse ever written". He responded to it by writing that "the tragedy of sexual intercourse is the perpetual virginity of the soul"--in other words, that, try as they might, lovers never can succeed in becoming two in one.

Post by “Pacatus” of February 24, 2023 at 5:44 PM

[Quote from Joshua](#)

try as they might, lovers never can succeed in becoming two in one.

Rilke (going from memory here) defined love as “two solitudes that border and greet and protect one another.”

Post by “Eikadistes” of February 24, 2023 at 5:52 PM

[Quote from Joshua](#)

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Post by “Pacatus” of February 27, 2023 at 12:17 PM

Here is Professor Wilson’s reply to my inquiry (I’ll just share it without comment):

Thank you for your interesting query about Epicurus and his girlfriends. I am not myself a classical scholar (I work only the later reception of Epicurus and Lucretius) but I found some useful articles (which have references to other useful articles...)

Catherine J. Castner, in "Epicurean Hetairai As Dedicants to Healing Divinities?." Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies 23.1 (1982): 51-57, says: In addition, the literary sources list as living with Epicurus and members of his School the following women: Demetria (Phld., P.Hercul. 1005.v.16-17), Erotion (Timokrates in Diog.Laert. 10.7), and Leontion 00.4, and also, because of her intellectual prowess, in other writers).

(I pulled this as a PDF off the web).

Then there is Pamela Gordon in "Remembering the garden: The trouble with women in the school of Epicurus." Philodemus and the New Testament world. Brill, 2004. 221-243. She thinks the sexual freedom of the school might have been exaggerated by later Christian authors who wanted to portray it as utterly depraved.

In any case, the place of the hetairai (educated, attractive, unmarried or unmarriageable women, usually foreigners, who were preferred company for educated men but needed financial support) is one of the most interesting topics in Greek social history.

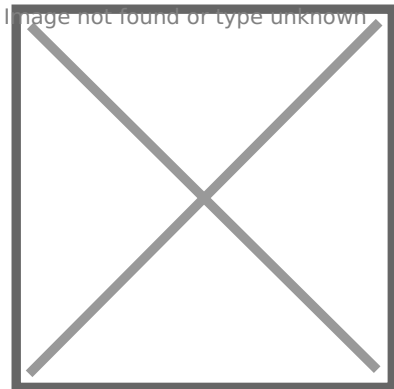
With best wishes,

Catherine Wilson

Post by "Cassius" of February 27, 2023 at 12:36 PM

Wow that is great Pacatus - a very friendly response!!

Post by "Don" of February 27, 2023 at 12:58 PM

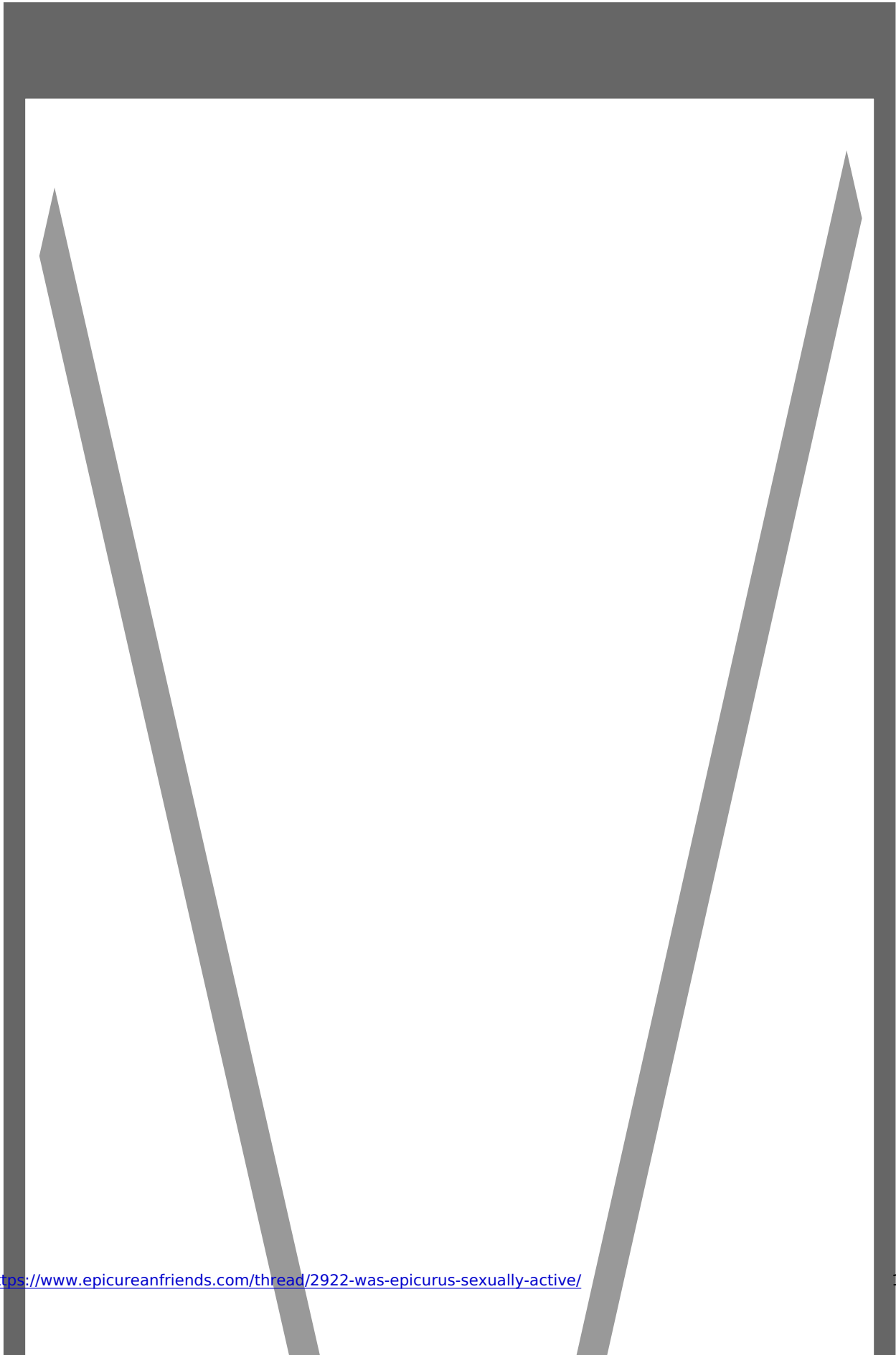


[Epicurean Hetairai As Dedicants to Healing Divinities?](#)

Epicurean Hetairai As Dedicants to Healing Divinities?

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[Remembering The Garden: The Trouble With Women In The School Of Epicurus](#)

Abstract Readers of Philodemus are well aware of the difficulties posed by the fragmentary state of the charred papyri. The premise of this paper is that...

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Abstract

Readers of Philodemus are well aware of the difficulties posed by the fragmentary state of the charred papyri. The premise of this paper is that similar but often unacknowledged obstacles confront us when we read almost any text about Epicureanism, even if the text happens to be relatively well preserved. The problem is that most of our sources— in addition to being late, fragmentary, and highly partisan—are already engaged in the process of reconstructing the first generation of the Garden. Hostile writers are eager to document what they portray as the immoral sensualism of Epicurus. Friendly sources take an apologetic stance against such polemics but may sometimes incorporate hostile material unwittingly. To illustrate the problem, this essay focuses upon the issue of Epicurean women. Ancient and modern authorities seem to agree that the Garden included many female members, but a second look reveals that the sources are not as reliable as has been assumed. In fact, most of what the ancient texts say about Epicurean women is bound up—sometimes inextricably—with the twenty-threehundred-year-old tradition of anti-Epicurean polemic and apologetic response. To generations of Greeks and Romans, the presence of women and slaves in the Garden was emblematic—for good or for ill—of the nature of Epicureanism.

Post by “Cassius” of February 27, 2023 at 1:32 PM

Note - As I think is indicated at Don's link, that Article from Pamela Gordon is a chapter in her book Philodemus and the New Testament World.