

Was Shakespeare an Epicurean?

Post by "Cyrano" of January 10, 2024 at 7:59 PM

Lear Put His Finger On It

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"Tell me, my daughters, which one of you loves me most?"

Has any father ever asked such a question of his children? Especially in a public assembly? No, only in a fairytale. "King Lear" opens as such, but quickly becomes the most terrible tragedy in world literature.

The tragedy begins with that foolish question. But it hinges on the word "nothing." That is the answer the youngest daughter, Cordelia, gives to her father when he asks what she can say "to draw a third more opulent than your sisters'?" A third more land, he means. For Lear, disposing of his kingdom, means to give the largest portion to the most "loving" daughter.

The two older daughters, Goneril and Regan, beguile their father with grandiose hypocritical professions of love. Cordelia, honest and sincere, cannot play that game. Her reply is "Nothing, my lord."

"Nothing will come of nothing," responds King Lear. He thinks he is saying "Because you say 'nothing,' I will give you nothing" - no land.

And he is saying that. But Lear - unbeknownst to himself - is uttering words so profound that they reverberate throughout the universe!

For if 'nothing can come from nothing,' then something can only come from something. And that something from another something from another in an infinite regression. Makes sense. Almost too simple. But in childlike simplicity can be found the deepest profundity. No one understood this better than Shakespeare, genius of paradox and irony. But it does not take a genius of Shakespearean proportions to comprehend a universe infinite in space and time. It was figured out in Greece almost 3,000 years ago, and long before that in China and India.

Can we doubt that Shakespeare figured it out as well? He was very well aware of Epicurus, the foremost Greek materialist philosopher. Through the ages the philosophy of Epicurus influenced poets, statesmen and scientists from Lucretius, Omar Khayyam, Isaac Newton, Thomas

Jefferson to Stephen Greenblatt, exceptional Shakespeare scholar.

Great Epicureans living in Shakespeare's time were Montaigne, the French essayist whom Shakespeare read assiduously. Also Giordano Bruno, lover of the infinite material universe who lectured in London and was later burned at the stake by the Catholic Inquisition in 1600. At this time Shakespeare embarked on his series of incredible tragedies - "Hamlet," "Othello," "King Lear," "Macbeth," "Antony and Cleopatra"... Another contemporary Epicurean was Cyrano de Bergerac, greatest atheist of his time - perhaps of all time!

But for an Epicurean, Shakespeare needed only walk down the street. There lived Thomas Digges, mathematician and astronomer. He was the first to promulgate the Copernican system in English. Copernicus had "turned the universe upside down," but Digges went further than Copernicus by proposing that the universe goes on forever with an infinite number of stars.

Son of Thomas Digges was Leonard, a friend and ardent admirer of Shakespeare. He wrote a laudatory poem for the First Folio, the collection of 36 Shakespeare plays published in 1623. When Leonard's father Thomas died in 1595, his mother married Thomas Russell. Shakespeare named Russell as overseer of his will.

Given all the foregoing, may we not ask whether Shakespeare was an Epicurean? It's possible, perhaps probable. We know from his plays that Shakespeare was not a believer. And it would be just like him to give King Lear words that surreptitiously expressed the poet's position on the most foundational question of philosophy: something from something or something from nothing?

Too much philosophy? Well, we do want to know Shakespeare better. And here I feel we are entering the mind - the very heart - of "our world's greatest genius."

Post by "Cassius" of January 10, 2024 at 9:37 PM

Very good! Sounds like you wrote this for another context - it might even be the text of a youtube video or something similar, like your Cyrano presentation?

Post by "Cyrano" of January 10, 2024 at 11:28 PM

Yes. I wrote it as an article for the community paper (the [REDACTED] [REDACTED]) in the senior complex in v I've been doing a Shakespeare column there for over two years.

Post by “Cassius” of January 11, 2024 at 8:01 AM

I think that style would lend itself very well to a presentation encouraging people to look further into Epicurus. I'd probably expand it more in the direction of explaining some of Epicurus' / Lucretius' key positions (the only thing most people know seems to be to associate him with "pleasure"). Joshua seems to have a series of other good parallels that could be used to show the same ideas in both. A narrative like this over a series of slides, maybe even with background music, would be a very effective way of presenting those parallels. Probably the whole thing could wind up pointing to a place where we discuss a table of parallel Shakespeare/Epicurean references. I don't think we have a table anywhere do we [Joshua](#) ?

Post by “Don” of January 11, 2024 at 10:24 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Probably the whole thing could wind up pointing to a place where we discuss a table of parallel Shakespeare/Epicurean references.

One has to be careful here. From what I've seen on this thread and elsewhere on the forum and in published texts and papers, Shakespeare definitely had allusions to Epicurean philosophy in his work, evidently primarily via Montaigne via Lucretius. However, my contention would be that one has to be careful in saying Shakespeare was genuinely citing Epicurean sources as opposed to seeing lines that "sound" Epicurean or lines that evoke Epicurean ideas that are more widespread culturally. It's merely an extension of my frustration with Dewitt's "Christianity around every Epicurean corner" issue. That said, I genuinely find this Shakespeare angle fascinating and was completely unaware of its depth previously... So thank you all for this!

Post by “Eikadistes” of January 11, 2024 at 11:50 AM

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

I am not sure if he would be identified as "Epicurean", but I am absolutely **convinced** that Shakespeare was very familiar with Lucretius *De Rerum Natura*, and, given the time period, he **must** have owned one of a privileged number of copies that would have been available at the time.

You nailed the quote from *King Lear* (I include it in *the Hedonicon*). He contradicts Christian creation *ex nihilo* a few times.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, there are more than a few references to "atomi".

Shakespeare explicitly steals a few lines of Lucretius in *Othello*, when describing the Pontick Sea.

Those are just a few references, off of the top of my head. I include more in *the Hedonicon* because, parallel to my interest in philosophy, I spent the better part of a decade as a theatrical performer, and part of my education is in Shakespeare, so having done a number of shows, I am particularly attuned to recognize Shakespearean references, and, as I read Lucretius, I realized that Shakespeare must have been more than a passing fan.

Awesome find, [Cyrano](#) !

(Also, in another thread, we should explore the Lucretian influences on *Cyrano de Bergerac*, whom I think qualifies as an Epicurean).

Post by "DavidN" of January 26, 2024 at 9:06 PM

I'd agree with Don's caution, Catherine Wilson wrote "If the incorporeal of res cogitans of Descartes, the un-extended immortal monads of Leibniz, the world in the mind of Berkeley are salient concepts in the history of modern philosophy, this is chiefly because we are all, in a sense, epicureans now."

We have to recognize the distinction between those that choose to be Epicurean or those who have stolen or inherited our ideals. Many of the founding fathers read Lucretius as part of a classical education, but only Jefferson declared himself 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."

Post by “Joshua” of May 6, 2024 at 12:08 AM

Quote

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

This apparent change of heart at witnessing the allegedly supernatural also echoes Horace's repudiation of Epicureanism;

Quote

A remiss and irregular worshiper of the gods, while I professed the errors of a senseless philosophy, I am now obliged to set sail back again, and to renew the course that I had deserted. For Jupiter, who usually cleaves the clouds with his gleaming lightning, lately drove his thundering horses and rapid chariot through the clear serene; which the sluggish earth, and wandering rivers; at which Styx, and the horrid seat of detested Tænarus, and the utmost boundary of Atlas were shaken. The Deity is able to make exchange between the highest and the lowest, and diminishes the exalted, bringing to light the obscure; rapacious fortune, with a shrill whizzing, has borne off the plume from one head, and delights in having placed it on another.

-Odes, Book I Ode 34

Post by “Eikadistes” of May 7, 2024 at 4:55 PM

I've been reading more on the subject, and I found a few interesting anecdotes to share:

“Many scholars argue that these speculations were influenced by revived interest in ancient atomism, particularly that of Lucretius, the ancient Roman philosopher-poet. While Lucretius’s didactic poem *On the Nature of Things* was not translated into English until after Shakespeare’s death, his work was available in Latin, and was likely familiar to educated Elizabethans, as was the broader tradition of atomistic thought of which he was a key figure. Scholars also suggest a number of sixteenth-century interpretive intermediaries through whom Shakespeare might have known of Lucretius, including Christopher Marlowe, Michel de Montaigne, and the Italian

scientist and poet Girolamo Fracastoro. Crane herself argues that contemporary atomism probably arose **not** out of engagement with the ancients but out of novel recognition of theoretical problems posed by the prevailing Aristotelian theory, which held that matter can be infinitely divided, and which denied the possibility of empty space.” (Elliot, Natalie. “Shakespeare’s Worlds of Science”. *The New Atlantis*, No. 54 (Winter 2018), pp. 39-40)

“Such learned and venturesome Elizabethans as Bacon, Burton, and Milton read Lucretius in Latin editions from the Continent, but the vernacular collections of sayings of the philosophers that were popular throughout the age of Shakespeare pointedly omitted Epicurus and Lucretius, while quoting and praising the Stoics.” (Freehafer, John and Miner, Earl. “Stoicism and Epicureanism in England, 1530-1700”. *PMLA*, Vol. 88, No. 5 (Oct., 1973), pp. 1181)

“Once again it is impossible to determine whether in fact Shakespeare read Lucretius [***If Shakespeare read Lucretius it must have been in Latin...***], but the Lucretian tenor of the Shakespearean passage, if purely coincidental, is extraordinary. We do know that Shakespeare was familiar with much classical literature, and the close association of language, image and idea here seems to indicate a literary connection.” (Catto, Bonnie. “Lucretius, Shakespeare and Dickens”. *The Classical World*, Vol. 80. No. 6 (Jul. - Aug., 1987), pp. 427)

There are a few other source that I’d really like to dig through, *Lucretius and Shakespeare on the Nature of Things* by Richard Allen Shoaf (2014) as well as “Shakespeare, Lucretius, and the Commonplaces” by L. C. Martin, published in the *Review of English Studies* (Vol. 21, No. 83, 1945) **but** both are a tad on the rare and expensive side at the moment (\$51.00 for a 9-page article, and the book is only printed in Hardcover and currently unavailable on Amazon).

As I shared above, I found one stanza in *Othello* that *could* indicate that he had access to a Latin copy of *De Rerum Natura*, because the syntax and imagery of the stanza seems too similar (to me) to be a coincidence, but ... he wrote a lot, and I didn't find that much, and he could very well have been echoing the words of his contemporaries, who, themselves, may have had source documents.

Post by “Cassius” of May 7, 2024 at 5:07 PM

I find this to be a fascinating subject so thank you for those details Twentier and please keep adding them as you come across them.

Post by “Cyrano” of May 7, 2024 at 6:34 PM

To all the members here I send apologies for my long absence. Working hard on the column I write for a newspaper, maintaining my blog, trying to sustain my health (not least my mental health: yeah, what's going on now in the world and our country can make anyone sick)... - well all of this has put me to sleep on this site.

But the posts having to do with Shakespeare sure woke me up! Thanks a million, Twentier, Joshu and Cassius. In a private message I will send you my deep appreciation.

Post by "Cassius" of May 7, 2024 at 7:12 PM

Glad to hear that you are OK Cyrano!

Post by "Cyrano" of May 8, 2024 at 11:49 PM

Here is an excellent book on the subject...

