

Acrostics of Prophecy and Conflagration in Lucan's *Bellum Civile*

As Lucan so vividly shows us, civil war is the epitome of *furor*, “madness unchained” (Fratantuono 2012). That dark force may be imprisoned for a while but can never be truly conquered, both because it permeates the cosmos and because it is the very force that enables man to conquer man on the field of battle. Building on the burgeoning scholarship showing how Lucan comments vertically on his own poem (Wheeler 2021, Hejduk 2020, Kersten 2017, Giusti 2015), this paper examines three acrostics that reinforce this theme: two that are volcanic and one that, in what might even be a glimmer of hope, is anti-volcanic.

First, I discuss the ironic metaphorical and metaphysical significance Lucan assigns to volcanic activity. On the one hand, it represents the madness ever ready to erupt from the human heart. At his military zenith, Pompey harnesses this power in a way that nearly destroys Caesar's army—yet he loses his momentum when an untimely spell of *pietas* holds him back (6.293-305). Even more strikingly, when the priestesses at Delphi are truly possessed by the divine soul—sometimes equated with Jupiter—that in Stoic cosmology animates the world, they are compared to erupting volcanos (5.86-101). They dread this divinity, because they know that the consequence of hosting it will be the punishment—or reward—of untimely death (5.114-20). The implication is that the very force imparting truth to humans will be the one that destroys the cosmos in the Great Conflagration. This is especially poignant in that Lucan in his introduction compares *himself* to a Delphic priestess receiving inspiration from Nero (1.63-66).

Next, I point out two acrostics in volcanic contexts that reinforce these themes. After the great battle of Pharsalia, Caesar is so elated at seeing the corpses littering the ground that he refuses to allow them to be burned. The narrator reminds him that Nature will do that job sooner

or later during the Great Conflagration (7.803-813), and reinforces this theme with an acrostic **AETNA**, one of antiquity's most famous volcanos. Before the great battle, Caesar's description of his mental state associates him with Delphic priestesses and also with Phaethon (7.292-303), metaphorical and literal victims of a fiery doom (Kessler 2011, Liu 2018). Lucan ties these images together with the acrostic **USTA**, "burned things" or perhaps "burned woman," unique in Latin epic. The turmoil of war and the turmoil within the human breast are both exhalations of the same world spirit; the *furor* that wins battles and inspires true prophecies is a destructive flame sweeping all in its path.

In Cato, however, Lucan offers a heroic antidote to this volcanic *furor*. Though Cato embraces the Stoic idea of Jupiter as the world-soul (9.580), he specifically refuses to consult the oracle of Jupiter Ammon, instead uttering truths from within the shrine of his own philosophical mind (9.564-65). When his men are dying of thirst, he refuses to drink from a meager water source until all have done so, a sacrificial act inspiring an encomium from the narrator that appears sincere (9.595-606). This praise spans a unique acrostic **SERENE**, either the adverb "serenely" or a vocative "serene one," as well as a telestich **STAS**, "you stand"; in Stoic discourse, forms of *serenus* and *serenare* are applied to the *sapiens* who stands above the clouds and storms of passion. The cloudlessness of the Libyan sky, though it creates hardship through drought, mirrors the cloudless serenity of Cato's soul.

While acrostics rarely introduce ideas that are entirely new (and their intentionality would be suspect if they did), they can help to highlight textual and thematic connections already present. Acrostics in the *Bellum Civile* associate volcanic activity with the key themes of Phaethontic hubris, Delphic prophecy, and the Great Conflagration. They also underscore the Stoic serenity of Cato in the Libyan desert. In Lucan's nihilistic universe, the possibility of truth,

human virtue, and a fresh start when the world blows up may be the closest he comes to a ray of hope.

Bibliography

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