

Noscendi Nilum Cupido: the Nile in Lucan's Bellum Civile
Eleni C. Manolaraki (University of South Florida)

During Cleopatra's banquet in Lucan's *Bellum Civile* Caesar asks the priest Acoreus to explain the sources of the Nile and its summer inundation. Instead of the specifics he asks for, he receives a lengthy but evasive reply (10.172-331). Critical discussion of this passage has moved in a twofold direction [Holmes 1999; Romm 1992; Sanford 1937; Francken 1893]. The Nile excursus has been interpreted as a thinly veiled criticism of Caesar's (and Nero's) imperialistic ambitions and/or a response to the ancient scientific and ethnographical preoccupation with the Nile [Huss 1990]. As such, it runs parallel to the contemporary naturalistic treatises of Seneca and Pliny the Elder. Building on these general conclusions, my discussion integrates the Nile excursus more specifically within the epic, within Seneca's *Natural Questions* 4A, and within the larger poetic struggles in Nero's court.

First, I connect this episode to the multiple references to the Nile throughout the epic (e.g. 2.417, 4.135, 6.307, 8.447, 9.163). Earlier in the narrative, Lucan addresses the river as a curse or taboo, guilty of Pompey's death as much as the human agents involved in it. This representation of the Nile is solidly anchored in the human perspectives of space, time, and historicity, which vest nature with human passions. In contrast, Acoreus strips the Nile of its temporal and spatial boundaries, and divests it from the historical symbolism projected on it elsewhere in the epic. By showing nature as disconnected to the human drama of civil war, Lucan politicizes Seneca's scientific description of the Nile (*Natural Questions* 4A). Indeed Lucan uses his uncle's treatise not merely as a source for the hydrology of the Nile (as has been already established) but as a model of how nature's sublimity cancels the human, limited perception of geographical boundaries and historical time.

Second, because Acoreus's digression draws on the old epic *topos* of the bard in the banquet [Schrivers 2006; MacKay 1968, Steele 1924] his disquisition on the Nile can be seen as a statement of Lucan's own poetics. Certainly, the Hellenistic interest in rivers, and especially the Nile, as material for poetry (Longinus 35.2) encourages this meta-poetical interpretation. In this vein, Lucan's exuberant digression can be seen as a river of poetry and a challenge to Nero, a gesture in their notorious literary struggle to surpass each other by writing ever more elaborate verses [Dewar 1991]. I conclude that, far from being a digression only marginally related to the plot of the *Bellum Civile*, Acoreus' Nile description reflects Lucan's views on the proper relationship between humans and nature, and that it is integral to the political, literary, and meta-poetical agendas of Lucan's epic.