

Fertile for Nothing Good: Medusa's Offspring in Lucan's *Pharsalia*

In Book IX of the *Pharsalia*, Lucan provides an etiology for the prodigious number and variety of snakes found in the Libyan deserts. Having beheaded Medusa, Perseus undertakes the journey back to Greece. He originally intends to take a short-cut across Europe, but is forbidden by Athena, who argues that the inhabitants of the densely-populated areas will certainly look up to watch him fly over and thus be petrified by Medusa's head. Instead, she advises him to fly across Libya, which is barren and unpopulated. Here the drops of gore fall from the head onto the sand, giving rise to the numerous species of serpents that Cato will then face in his march across the desert.

Previous work done on this episode, most notably by Elaine Fantham and Martha Malamud, has focused on the parallel between the severed head of Medusa and that of Pompey Magnus, particularly since Book IX opens with the katasterism of Pompey and Cato's eulogy of the general. I suggest, however, that another parallel that is relevant here. According to Hesiod, after Kronos castrates his father, Ouranos, he tosses the genitals into the sea. The most famous "offspring" of this act is, of course, Aphrodite. But the drops of blood from the severed organs fell to the land, producing the Erinyes, the Meliai, and the Giants. Not only do the mechanical details of Lucan's Medusa excursus echo Hesiod's account of the castration of Ouranos, but the thematic elements share a strong correspondence with Lucan's focus on internecine warfare.

This paper will outline these elements, and place them in the context of Lucan's focus on boundary violation. It will also investigate the placement of this episode in Libya, a territory that is remarkable for its own lack of boundaries and landmarks.

Select Bibliography

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