

*Nunc flere potestas: Women and Mourning in Lucan's Bellum Civile*

Grief, lamentation, a constant reminder of the loss entailed by civil war colors the whole of Lucan's *Bellum Civile*. Soon after the war between Caesar and Pompey breaks out, the entire city of Rome is in mourning (2.16-66). All public business ceases, women fill the temples with their laments, men complain that they do not have a foreign enemy to fight but must fight civil war instead. An extended simile compares the city to a house mourning the death of a son (2.21-28); at the center of the simile is the mother suspended between fear and grief when her son dies. This weighted moment of suspended emotion before the full realization of impending events provides an opening to reflect the future loss. The simile concentrates the emotion of the city through an individual mother, lending a personal immediacy to the widespread sorrow. Immediately following the simile is a description of the women mourning throughout the city. As they do so, one of them directs her fellow matrons to perform ritual lament to the full; only now, when the outcome is uncertain, do they have the opportunity to give full expression to their grief; victory, even in civil war, will require celebration: *nunc flere potestas / dum pendet fortuna ducum; cum vicerit alter / gaudendum est* (2.40-42). That the women, in their grief, anticipate the horrors yet to come grants power to their lament; it gives expression to the depth of loss before it is fully realized. Their lament thus becomes a warning of future destruction, taking on the valence of persuasion to avert disaster at the critical moment. This theme of lamentation as warning pervades the epic. At several pivotal moments, women in mourning offer a warning or threatening voice just before action is taken, and mourning itself becomes an important element of persuasion.

Drawing on the numerous studies of women's lament as articulating communal loss and providing an alternate perspective on the masculine heroic ideal (Alexiou 2002, Foley 2001,

Fantham 1999), I examine the dynamics of women's mourning in the *Bellum Civile*. I first look at the description of Rome in mourning, particularly the differences between women's and men's laments. A detailed examination of the simile shows how the image of individual loss concentrates the broader context of the communal loss entailed by civil war. The mourning of the women in Rome is powerful in its performance of loss at a suspended moment; performing the depth of grief in anticipation of its full realization serves as a warning, an articulation of the private and the communal effects of the leaders' actions. This dynamic recurs throughout the epic. At several pivotal moments, just before decisive action is taken, women in mourning issue warnings of the implications of the actions under consideration. Their mourning itself, as a response to the coming disaster, becomes an important persuasive element of the warnings or threats. An image of Rome in mourning appears to Caesar just before he crosses the Rubicon (1.185-192); Marcia, coming from the grave of her previous husband, remarries Cato in a funereal ceremony to become a partner to his labors in war (2.326-391); an image of the dead Julia appears to Pompey threatening the disasters to come (3.1-35). Batinski argues that these three female figures, each associated with imagery of death, represent an aspect of the lost Republic (Batinski 1993). Cornelia's more extensive role in the epic is suffused with imagery of death as, even from her first appearance, she repeatedly mourns Pompey in anticipation of his eventual death (Keith 2008). Women's mourning at moments of suspension displays the ramifications of the actions to be taken; they embody the private emotion and communal loss that will necessarily follow from the political and military actions of men. This anticipatory lament thus takes on an element of persuasion, becoming a warning and a threat of the disasters to come.

## Works Cited

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