

As We Are Wont to Do: Violence in Book Ones of Imperial Latin Epic

This paper examines several passages of extreme chaos or violence within Book One of Vergil's *Aeneid*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Lucan's *Bellum Civile*, Valerius Flaccus's *Argonautica*, and Statius's *Thebaid*. Utilizing the historical reality of the context in which these authors were writing, the paper will argue that these turbulent passages at the outset of these epic undertakings (both poetically and narratively) are reflective of the turbulent times in which each author was writing their poetry. These scenes, I argue, are indicative of the idea that whenever political turbulence that may upset the status quo began to arise in Rome throughout the period in which these poets were active, violence was often one of, if not the first solution employed. Likewise, the narrative moments when these violent scenes occur usually happen on the precipice of some great upsetting of the general status quo, such as Aeneas and the storm, the Argonauts and their own storm, the various ill omens at the conclusion of Book One of the *Bellum Civile*, the storm that precedes the brawl between Tydeus and Polynices, and the storm that wipes out humanity in the *Metamorphoses*.

While previous scholarship has discussed these scenes individually, it would appear that there has not been any work done in comparing this scene type, taking place at one specific point in an epic, across several poems. This paper looks to address this desideratum.

The paper opens with a brief introduction to the theory: The poets are commenting on a fact of Roman life in the chaotic early imperial period by employing similarly chaotic scenes in the opening books of their epics. From there, I move chronologically, beginning with an analysis of such passages in Vergil down to Statius, providing context for the environment the poet is writing in and how they choose to interact with this perceived opinion about Roman response to crisis.

For Vergil, the storm is the gods' response to a threat to the hierarchy of Mediterranean power; the winds themselves are drawn up like battle lines marching out to war, and assail the Trojans who would establish themselves as the new standard in the future. Just the same, Rome's

response to a threat to a long-standing power, namely their senate, manifested in a storm of civil war that wreaked havoc on the Romans for decades.

Ovid takes a markedly more optimistic approach to the winds (or rather, rains) of change. When he introduces the cataclysmic flood in Book One of the *Metamorphoses*, humanity is indeed wiped out, but there is a return and rebirth of humanity in a new age. Importantly, this age is not as good as the one previous; out of the chaos of the great disaster, humanity survives, but comes out worse for having experienced it. Their divine punishment for their mistakes drives them to the brink of extinction, and pulls them away from a better age.

Lucan's *Bellum Civile* features a scene in Book One in which the populace of Rome flees from the city when the news arrives that Caesar is fast approaching. This chaotic scene has individuals running this way and that, and even the senators scatter to the winds, although there is no one at the gates of Rome yet. They seem to believe that they are long past the point of diplomatic solutions, and their first instinct is to assume that war has already reached them, and they run. The list of omens following does nothing to dispel the notion that everything has gone wrong, a sentiment that Lucan feels extends to his own time, decades later.

Much like Vergil's storm, Valerius Flaccus's storm in Book One of the *Argonautica* is divine retribution against a group of individuals attempting to make great change on the sea. While the Trojans are attempting to find a new home, however, the Argonauts are simply the first men in the world to make an attempt at sailing. This is a great violation of the typical station of mortals, and the winds set out to punish them for their indiscretion.

The storm in Book One of Statius's *Thebaid* serves mainly as a way to partake of the trope of storms in epic poetry, as the poem is essentially landlocked. From a narrative standpoint, however, it is exactly what drives Polynices under the same cover that Tydeus wants to occupy, leading the two men to attack each other brutally before ever attempting to talk things out. Thematically, the insanity of these two complete strangers slugging it out reflects the insanity of over a century of political strife (the reign of Augustus mostly excluded) that Statius inherits.