

An Empedoclean Reading of Nigidius Figulus' Prophecy:

Love and Strife in Lucan's *Bellum Civile*

At the end of Book 1 of Lucan's *Bellum Civile* the astrologer Nigidius Figulus utters a dire prophecy about the wretched fate that awaits Rome, based on the position of the planets in the sky. Mars is in Scorpio, one of its two houses, which makes it especially hostile, and it is also the only planet clearly visible in the sky. The benign planets, on the other hand, are unable to carry out their favorable influence: Venus is dim, Jupiter is hidden, and Mercury's motion is stayed (1.658-63).

This passage has consistently drawn the attention of scholarship. Two main issues have been addressed: first, whether Lucan is reporting a prophecy actually made by Figulus at the outbreak of the civil war, or is inventing it and putting it into the mouth of Figulus; second, whether the astronomic data are accurate or not. As for the first issue, every feature of the passage suggests that this is Lucan's creation: the order in which the planets are mentioned, the absence of the moon, and the direct apostrophe to the planets are absent in all the extant examples of *katarchai* (Roche 2009 *ad loc.*). As for the second issue, scholarship has almost unanimously concluded that the astronomic data are inaccurate, and the prophecy is mere poetic fiction (Housman 1926, 325-7; Getty 1941; Beaujeu 1979, 216. *Contra*, see Hannah 1996; Lewis 1998).

In sum, most likely Lucan is not reporting an actual prophecy made by Figulus at the time of Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon; conversely, he is inventing it himself, including data which are not astronomically accurate. The question that needs to be addressed at this point is why Lucan chooses to mention those specific planets in those specific positions. A simple answer, unanimously accepted by scholarship, may be that they generically convey the idea of the imminent and inevitable outbreak of the civil war. However, I believe that the explanation is more complex. In this paper I argue that the planets observed by Figulus should be interpreted as allegorical representations of the cosmic forces that Lucan envisions operate during civil war. More specifically, by means of Figulus' prophecy Lucan suggests that the time of the civil war between Pompey and Caesar can be compared with the second phase of Empedocles' cosmic cycle, namely

the progressive prevailing of Strife over Love, which will eventually lead to the complete domination of chaos, i.e. the fall of the Republic and the establishment of the Principate.

In Book 10 the Egyptian priest Acoreus, consulted by Caesar about matters of natural sciences, delivers a long speech in which, among other things, he illustrates the prerogatives of the most important planets. This explanation sheds light on Figulus' prophecy. Acoreus explains that Mars controls gusting winds and lightning (206), whereas Venus has power over births (208-9). Their areas of influence suggest a connection between these two planets and the two cosmic forces that according to Empedocles govern the universe: Mars can be associated with the destructive force of Strife, which tends to separate the constitutive elements of the cosmos, leading the world to annihilation; Venus, on the other hand, can be related with the creative force of Love, which puts the elements back together, granting life to the universe. As for Jupiter and Mercury, they may be linked with peace and regeneration, respectively, which Empedocles presents as inextricably connected with Love. As Acoreus points out, Jupiter actually presides over calm air (207), and Mercury, which governs water, cyclically restores the parched earth by causing the summer inundation of the Nile (209-18).

In light of this allegorical interpretation of the planets observed by Figulus, the astronomical picture that he derives his prophecy from becomes much more meaningful. By means of this picture Lucan suggests that in the civil war between Pompey and Caesar the destructive force of Strife (embodied by Mars) prevails, whereas the bonding force of Love (embodied by Venus) is weak, and cannot bring peace and regeneration (represented by Jupiter and Mercury, respectively).

Bibliography

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