

Lucan's Acrostic Solution to Caelius's Coan Riddle

In his discussion of the rhetorical use of *aenigmata*, Quintilian relates a famous riddle attributed to Marcus Caelius Rufus, sometime lover of the noble and notorious Clodia Metelli: *in triclinio Coam, in cubiculo Nolam* (*Inst.* 8.6.53). Modern scholars have managed to get most of this joke (see Hejduk 2008: 157): Cos, source of sexy garments and a famous elegiac poet (Philetas), and Nola, a walled city, suggest that Clodia is a tease in the dining room but a prude in the bedroom, especially given the obvious puns on *coeo* (have sex) and *nolo* (be unwilling). Nevertheless, no one has yet explained the precise significance of the forms *Coam* and *Nolam*. Since *Nolam* is the accusative of *Nola*, it seems likely that *Coam* is an accusative place name as well, standing perhaps for *Coam terram* (or *insulam* or *urbem*) as *patria* stands for *patria terra*. But why the accusative?

I argue that a key to this riddle appears in a massive 24-letter acrostic in Lucan's *Bellum Civile*, a new contribution to the surging tide of recent (Giusti 2015, Kersten 2017) and forthcoming (Kronenberg, Robinson, Wheeler) articles on acrostics in Lucan and other Latin poets. One of the persistent ironies of Lucan's epic is the disjunction between the narrator's assertion that Pompey is the hero we should all be rooting for and his depiction of the aging general as an abysmal leader, obsessed with the past and exhibiting the self-defeating behaviors of an elegiac lover (McCune 2013). Pompey's moral nadir is arguably his willing collusion with Rome's archenemy, the king of Parthia. A sentence acrostic spanning these lines, QUI ERAS (8.242-48), has been interpreted as a question, "Who were you, Pompey?", contrasting Pompey's glorious past with his shameful present (Kersten 2017). Yet these words could also be read as a relative clause embedded in a longer acrostic sentence: VAE I QUI ERAS COAM. If we

recognize *Coam* as an *accusative of place to which*, and make the reasonable supposition that “going to Cos” is a punning euphemism for experiencing sexual pleasure, then the force of both Caelius’s riddle (“in the dining room, she’s ‘to Cos!’”) and Lucan’s exasperated exclamation become clear. Pompey is being admonished, “Alas, go be a lover, be the man you used to be (not the washed-up embarrassment you now are).” The only appearance in Latin epic of vertical COAM is earlier in the same book, where Pompey’s wife Cornelia faints upon beholding her husband’s pallor (8.57-60), exhibiting symptoms suspiciously reminiscent of lovesickness.

Additional evidence supports the intentionality of the long acrostic. Most tellingly, Pompey’s sea journey in the lines spanned by ERAS mentions a breeze blowing “from the Coan coast” (*de litore Coo*, 246); given the ubiquitous metonymic association of epic poetry with the sea, the “Coan coast” would be a clever hint at the Coan acrostic along the “coast” of the poem. Moreover, the acrostic is immediately preceded by *another* acrostic sentence, complete with a kind of punctuation mark: A ISSES A TE Z (8.228-37). The Z—one of only three line-initial z’s in Latin epic—begins the striking phrase *Zeugma Pellaeum*, ostensibly referring to a city founded by one of Alexander’s generals, but with the double meaning of “Alexandrian connector.” I consider various possible construals of the cryptic A ISSES A TE, a clause especially suggestive in view of the epic’s emphasis on bodily dismemberment and psychic dislocation (Bartsch 1997).

The presence of such a long vertical string, injecting a voice recognizably Lucan’s yet distinct from his avowedly Pompey-worshipping narrator’s, suggests how acrostics could be a major source of meaning in ancient poetry, adding significantly to their polyphonic complexity. In solving Caelius’s riddle, Lucan also displays his “Alexandrian” wit, an aspect of this bombastic epic poet that is gradually coming to be appreciated.

Bibliography

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