Intertextual Comets and Caesarean Bloodshed at Tac.*Ann*.15.47

Tacitus ends his narrative of 64 CE by cataloguing notable prodigies (*Ann*.15.47.1-2). Though some may skim over the so-called archival material with which annalistic historians begin or end years, Ginsburg shows how Tacitus manipulates the structure, patterns, and expectations of annalistic form to artistic ends in the Tiberian books (Ginsburg 1981; also McCulloch 1980, Bartera 2011; for annalistic prodigies: Rawson 1971, Levene 1993, Oakley 1997, Shannon 2012). Events at beginnings and ends of years reflect thematically back on their own year and forge thematic links between years, encouraging us to investigate such notices for wider meaning. This paper aims to do just that through a close analysis of the comets with which Tacitus closes 64 CE. In particular, I show that these comets contain significant yet unnoticed intertextual allusions to two poets with whom Tacitus is elsewhere in dialogue: Vergil's account of the chaos after Caesar's death at the end of *Georgics* 1 and Lucan's account of Caesar's invasion in *Bellum Civile* 1. Tacitus, I argue, uses these allusive prodigies to draw connections between Nero and Caesar, the Republic's civil wars and the politics of Neronian Rome.

Tacitus' language in describing the portents points to these two intertexts (*vis <u>fulgurum non alias</u> crebrior, et sidus <u>cometes</u>, sanguine inlustri semper Neroni expiatum*, *Ann*.15.47.1), and I'll begin with Vergil. Vergil closes *Georgics* 1 with the portents that follow Caesar's assassination, culminating in lightning, comets, and a grim vision of the civil wars that followed (*<u>non alias</u> caelo ceciderunt plura sereno/ <u>fulgura</u> nec diri totiens arsere <u>cometae</u>* V. *G*.487-92); this combination of *non alias* with *cometes* is unique to these two passages in extant Latin literature. Vergil's context is the aftermath of the assassination of Julius Caesar; Tacitus' is the buildup to the foiled assassination attempt on Caesar's Julian heir and the bloodshed that

followed. While scholars have noted that aspects of the subsequent Pisonian Conspiracy may allude to the Ides of March (esp. Woodman 1993), no one has yet analyzed the ways in which this prodigy list supports and expands on the resonance of that allusive relationship, creating narrative expectations for a Caesarean end for Nero that does not yet come.

An intermediary window reference complicates and enriches this intertextual relationship. When Lucan's Caesar invades Italy, prodigies also occur, including comets: *terris mutantem regna cometen,/ fulgura fallaci micuerunt crebra sereno*; and once more, the combination of *cometae*, *fulgura*, and *creber* is unique to these two passages. Lucan's prodigies, moreover, respond to Vergil's: Roche (2009) notes that Lucan retrojects Vergil's portents to Caesar's invasion to suggest that Caesar's war against his country was the greater perversion. Tacitus' intertext expands on Lucan's allusivity by using the comets to foreshadow not Nero's assassination but rather the preemptive civil war that Nero will wage against his people as a result of their failed Caesarean plot. Lucan's is a text in which Caesar is the spiller of blood, not the one whose blood is split, and Tacitus' Nero follows suit. Tacitus' conspirators may think that they will rid Rome of their own Caesar (as in the *Georgics*), but instead they awaken that Caesar's inherited drive to besiege his country (as in the *BC*).

This paper argues that Tacitus echoes Lucan and Vergil as part of a literary and historical narrative strategy. Tacitus uses the intertextually-interdependent language of these poets to create a *synkrisis* between Caesar and Nero, between the Republic's bloody politics and those of the empire's final Julian *princeps*. My methodology combines work on historiographical intertextuality (esp. O'Gorman 2007, 2009; Damon 2010) with work on the structure of annalistic narratives (see above). By investigating the structural role of Tacitus' comets along

with their intertextual pedigree, I shed new light on Tacitus' artistry in annalistic closures in the Neronian books and on his wider strategies for writing a Nero who'd be remembered.

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