

Fighting over “Emathian Plains”: Lucan’s Reception of Ovid’s *Musomachia*

While scholarship has traditionally paid more attention to Lucan’s reception of Vergil, the past few decades have witnessed a welcome rise in attention paid to the extensive influence of Ovid upon Lucan’s *Bellum Civile* (Tarrant 2002; Wheeler 2002; Keith 2011; Watkins 2012). Lucan’s debt to Ovid is immediately on display in the opening line (Roche 2009; Keith 2011) when we read that the epic’s theme is *bella per Emathios...campos* (1.1), a phrase adapted from *Metamorphoses* 5 in the episode where the Pierides, nine sisters from Emathia who challenge the Muses to a singing contest, promise if defeated to “yield up our Emathian fields all the way to snowy Paionia (*Emathiis ad Paeonas usque nivosos / cedemus campis* (*Met.* 5.313-14). Such a conscious interaction with Ovidian epic in the very first line of the *Bellum Civile* invites us to view it as programmatic (Wheeler 2002) and take a closer look into the poetic potential Lucan may have found not just in Ovid generally but in the *Musomachia* episode in particular. Notably, the subject of the mortal sisters’ song is one that would certainly have drawn Lucan’s attention: divine civil war, namely the Gigantomachy and Typhoeus’ assault on Olympus. This paper will explore Lucan’s opening as a programmatic response to this Ovidian episode: what if the Muses lost and the human Pierides won? What if their song of civil war is still being sung?

This potential of reading Lucan’s epic of civil war through the lens of Ovid’s Pierides is pointed out in passing in Watkins (2012), but the fuller significance of this intriguing connection requires further exploration. First of all, the geography of the scene is suggestive for Lucan, since the human Pierides come from Emathia, a crucial code-word for Lucan that repeatedly evokes the fateful battlefield of Pharsalus in line with the poetic tradition begun by Vergil in his influential linking together of the twin civil war disasters at Pharsalus and Philippi (*nec fuit indignum superis bis sanguine nostro / Emathiam et latos Haemi pinguescere campos*, *G.* 1.491-

2). Furthermore, in the Muses' summary of their challengers' song, we are told specifically that Typhoeus' furious assault drove the terrified Olympian gods out of Greece to find refuge in Egypt. Interestingly, this is not only the very same itinerary taken by Lucan's Pompey, who flees from Greece to Egypt with the civil war victor Caesar in hot pursuit, but it also provides Lucan with an Ovidian model for a civil war song in which the traditional gods are absent (or at least in hiding), a famous feature of Lucan's poetics.

Finally, and even more significantly, the way in which Ovid sets up this mythical music contest between the mortal Pierides and the immortal Muses (who are often called Pierides themselves from their traditional association with Pieria: e.g. Hes. *WD* 1; Theoc. 10.24; Verg. *Ecl.* 3.85; Prop. 2.10.12; Ovid *Fasti* 2.269, etc.) marks this scene as a human challenge to the traditional nature and authority of poetry (Hinds 1987: 126; Anderson 1997: 525-6). It thus essentially enacts a kind of inner civil war between competing groups of mortal and immortal 'Pierides' over epic itself, between 'approved' and 'unapproved' epic narrative. The Muses begin their countering song by finishing the story of the Gigantomachy in the customary way with the Olympians' reassertion of victory; they are ultimately judged the victors over the Pierides, who in their defeat are now suddenly referred to as the Emathides (*Met.* 5.669), another pointed nod to the Roman civil wars. In Ovid's Augustan *Musomachia* episode, the powers of traditional epic defeat and thus silence the human song of civil war that cries out to be heard. Lucan, by evoking the Ovidian Emathides' song of civil war in his opening line, invites his later Neronian audience to imagine that this Emathian song of challenge to the Muses—to the powers that be, including the very power of memory itself—is not yet defeated but will at last be heard through his own epic *Bellum Civile*.

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