

Lucan's Acrostics and the Irony of Art

At the heart of ancient martial epic lies a paradox: the orderly and pleasing medium of hexameter verse describes the chaotic destruction of war. Building on recent scholarship emphasizing Lucan's mischievous use of acrostics (e.g., Giusti 2015, Kersten 2017, Hejduk 2020, Wheeler 2021), this paper discusses how Lucan reinforces that paradox and others through ironic vertical commentary on his own art.

First, Lucan offers a brilliant play on the multiple meanings of *caput*, "head." Pompey is the hero of the Republic only because he is destined to lose, because if he were to win, he would become a tyrant; more specifically, he becomes the true Roman "head of state" only through the removal of his physical head (Mebane 2016: 203). In a gruesome description of the revenge taken by Sulla's followers against Gaius Marius's nephew, an old man recounts in great detail the mutilation of the body and, especially, the head (*BC* 2.181-97). In the mutilated acrostic **APUTC** (193-97), Lucan cuts off the *caput* from **CAPUT** at the *caput* of the line, thus rendering his **CAPUT** as unrecognizable as that of the unfortunate nephew. The cue phrase from which the acrostic springs, *agnoscendus erat* ("it had to be recognized," 193), completes the literary joke: just as the soldiers should have left the face recognizable to please Sulla, so Lucan should have left the **CAPUT** recognizable to please his reader—and yet to do so would have defeated their (the soldiers' and the author's) purpose, since mutilation was the whole point of the episode.

Second, a self-refuting acrostic points up Lucan's awareness of the ironies of authorship in a world that had descended into moral and physical chaos. Right before the great battle of

Pharsalia, Caesar's soldiers are so eager to fight Pompey's that they rush from the camp pell-mell (*BC* 7.331-36). The acrostic **CASU**, which could be interpreted "with a fall," "by chance," or "disastrously," emphasizes the horizontal text's assertion that the charge is disorderly (*ordine nullo*, 332), artless (*arte nulla*, 333), and precipitous (*praecipiti cursu*, 336). Yet the point of an acrostic—and especially this one, so rich in ingenious cue phrases—is that it is arranged *in order, artfully*, by a purposeful mind. To be an author of historical epic is necessarily to impose structure and meaning upon one's material, even if that "meaning" amounts to the assertion that there is no meaning.

Finally, an acrostic two books later contains a similarly self-refuting reflection on authorial truth in the context of heroic *mythos*. In the exotic land of Libya, the poet indulges in an uncharacteristic digression on Hercules stealing the golden apples of the Hesperides (*BC* 9.359-66). By complaining about the invidious sort who expect their poets to relate "true things" (*vera*, 360), he effectively calls attention to the outlandishness of the story; yet at the same time, the vertical voice labels the episode as **VERA** (362-65). Moreover, the phrase *virgineus chorus* (362), though Lucan applies it here to the Hesperides, hails from Ovid's description of the temple of Hercules and the *Muses* (*Ars* 3.168), those slippery poetic spirits who, according to Hesiod, "know how to tell many lies similar to truth, but also how to voice true things when we want" (*Theog.* 27-28).

In conclusion, the paper calls for increased awareness that Lucan's acrostics exhibit the sophisticated black humor of his horizontal text, reinforcing his complex web of metaphors in a new dimension. His vertical voice contributes a sardonic commentary not only on the narrative, but also on the narrator of a beautifully constructed poem about ugliness, where recognizability and concealment, meaning and nihilism, are constantly in tension.

Bibliography

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