

Lucretian Lightning in Lucan's *Bellum Civile*

This presentation will investigate how Lucan engages with Lucretius' non-providential worldview and re-uses Epicurean Lucretius in relation to the way in which Vergil does, but without the reality of the Olympian gods and the same re-mythologization of Lucretius that occurs in the *Aeneid* (Hardie 1986, 174-5). Specifically, I will conduct a close reading of the comparison of Caesar to a lightning bolt at *BC* 1.151-57, in order to highlight the philosophical tone of the passage and expand on the implications of an alignment between Caesar and Lucretian lightning.

The presence of Lucretian language in these lines has been noted by Esposito, who compares this to the impetus, destructive power and momentum of a river described at *DRN* 1.288-9 (Esposito 1996). But the passage seems to connect even more meaningfully with the Lucretian passage on lightning itself in book six. Lucretius describes the ability of lightning to pass through every kind of matter, and says that nothing can stand in its way (*DRN* 6. 225-227). He describes the reasons it can pass through other elements easily and how it gathers speed as it goes (*DRN* 6. 323-339). He also describes the land and heavens quaking from the force of the bolt and the thunder (*DRN* 6.285-89).

The passage seems to share more than a linguistic and descriptive affinity with the *De Rerum Natura*, however. Hardie discusses the way in which Vergil deals with Lucretian lightning, saying that, for him, lightning is a traditional religious symbol whose meaning is complicated by references to Lucretius; the natural-scientific material is placed into a religious context and thus re-mythologized, while still retaining a "pseudo-scientific tone" (Hardie 1986, 185-7). I will argue that Lucan retains the pseudo-scientific tone and Lucretian language, like

Vergil, but the religious implications of the symbol and its mythological context are not made concrete. The purpose of book six of the *DRN* is, as Lucretius states at 6.50-55, to give the reasons and workings behind seemingly inexplicable phenomena (like thunder, lightning, and disease), in order to relieve men's minds of the terror of the unknown and their tendency to attribute these things to the gods; augury is useless (*DRN* 6.379-422). Getty, in his commentary on the *Bellum Civile*, mentions the linguistic connection between this passage and the language of augury, citing Lucretius as comparanda: "the expression *caeli templa* may have been used first by Ennius . . . Cortius points out that the word had a technical meaning in augury . . . the Etruscan augurs, whose task it was to observe the flashing of lightning and its return heavenward, divided the sky into sixteen parts (cf. *Lucr.* 6.86-9)" (Getty 1992, 49-50). At the end of book one of the *Bellum Civile* there are a series of portents. Arruns the Etruscan augur, summoned by the Romans, receives very bad omens from his reading of the entrails and wishes they would prove false or invalid. Lucan ends this description by saying, "Thus the Tuscan read the signs enveloping and covering them in much winding obscurity" (*flexa sic omina Tuscus / involvens multaue tegens ambage canebat. BC* 1.637-8). In the *Bellum Civile* too, augury fails to provide any answers, and Lucan brings Lucretius' teachings to life in the narrative of book one. He reverses his epic predecessor's practice by putting re-mythologized Vergilian Lucretius into a de-mythologized poem.

Bibliography

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