

POMPEY'S HEAD AND CATO'S SNAKES

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LUCAN MAKES EXTENSIVE USE of the Medusa myth from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 4, using it to test the possibility of creating a discourse that can adequately represent the history that haunts him.¹ In Ovid's account, the allied processes of reflection and replication are central: Perseus slays the Gorgon by the trick of averting his eyes and looking at her reflection in his shield, just as the sea serpent tries to kill Perseus by striking at his reflection in the waves. As long as the Gorgon remains unique, she is undefeated and keeps to herself the power to produce likenesses: all who see themselves in her eyes are transformed into exact copies of themselves. As soon as she is reflected in the polished surface of Perseus' (borrowed) shield, however, she too becomes vulnerable to death—the doubling of her image is fatal. And even when the Gorgon is dead, the monstrous process of replication continues: the Gorgon's head produces offspring, copies of itself, in the snakes that dwell in Libya and in the twin horses Pegasus and Chrysaor.

Ovid, who characteristically redoubles the reflection motif, includes not only the detail of Perseus using his shield as a mirror to help him slay the Gorgon but adds an episode that inverts it as well: when the sea serpent that threatens Andromeda attacks, he goes not for Perseus but for his reflection on the surface of the sea (*Met.* 4.711–13).² The trick that enables the hero to slay Medusa fails to help the monster slay the hero, but at least the serpent had the right idea: he recognized that the hero had *become* the monster. Perseus, new owner of the head, has assumed the Gorgon's petrifying power, which he will shortly use to great advantage when his wedding feast breaks down into chaos and civil war.

Just as Perseus' mirrorlike shield creates confusion by replication, so Ovid creates confusion on an allusive level as well, as he conflates Homeric and Virgilian scenes of death in battle with pointed reminders of Rome's recent orgy of civic strife (one obvious example is that the battle is waged between Cepheus and Phineus, *socer* and would-be *gener*). Medusa's head presides emblematically over civil war on a political level, but over a peculiar sort of artistic production as well: in this *tour de force* of epic imitation, the

1. I thank Shadi Bartsch and *CP*'s anonymous readers, whose careful reading saved me from a number of mistakes. Those that remain are, of course, my own responsibility.

2. Vernant 1991, 136. Freud 1953 has the classic psychoanalytic analysis of the Gorgon as the representation of the mother's genitalia.

Gorgon's head transforms Perseus' enemies into statues, signs of victory. Most notably, Perseus' rival Phineus will become a lasting monument that will adorn forever his father-in-law's house (*Met.* 5.227–29):

quin etiam mansura dabo monimenta per aevum,
inque domo soceri semper spectabere nostri,
ut mea se sponsi soletur imagine coniunx.

Why, I'll give monuments that will last forever,
and you'll always be on view in your father-in-law's house,
so my wife can console herself with the image of her fiancé.

Thus already in Ovid's treatment of the Medusa myth we see two themes that will preoccupy Lucan: the degeneration of identity that seems to be inherent in Rome's continuing cycle of civil strife, and the frightening symmetries that exist between the processes of artistic production and the reproduction of violence. As a figure that presides over the boundaries between original and imitation, victor and victim, self and other, living and dead, and life and art, the Gorgon's head is an emblem not just of civil war, but of Lucan's own artistic production, *Civil War*.

POMPEY'S HEAD

Elaine Fantham's "Lucan's Medusa-Excursus: Its Design and Purpose" clearly lays out the symbolic importance of the Medusa episode in Lucan's *Bellum civile* (hereafter, *BC*) 9, arguing that the Medusa excursus is "a new Stoic myth of heroism, putting at its center the lethal horror of Medusa, source of the natural venom of Libya's snakes, and double symbol of the unnatural evil of human overreach and the impiety of slaughter among kin—that is of civil war itself."³ Fantham's analysis can be extended beyond the ethical and philosophical dimensions of the episode, for the Gorgon's head and its snaky offspring function at a textual, metapoetic level as well, especially in Lucan's portrayal of the death of Pompey.

The Gorgon's head is *the* head in this poem so littered with severed heads.⁴ Through the poetic devices of mythic digression and sustained allusion, Lucan elevates the motif of the head to the status of exemplary metaphor through his recounting of the Medusa myth. But, as the pattern of imagery that associates the Pompeian cause with the Gorgon's head suggests, there is another exemplary head in the text—the severed head of Pompey.⁵ By the time Lucan was writing, descriptions of the gory death of Cicero had become a stock part of declamatory exercises, offering speakers the chance to explore ironic reversals of fortune and to elaborate an established descriptive theme, *descriptio supplicii* (*Sen. Controv.* 9.2.21), and there can be no question that the treatment of Pompey's death is influenced

3. Fantham 1992.

4. In this, Lucan makes it clear, the war against Caesar repeats earlier conflicts. The cyclical nature of Roman violence is especially emphasized in 2.160–72, a vivid description of beheadings under Sulla.

5. Fantham (1992, 101–3) discusses the association of Pallas' aegis at 7.149 and 7.758–61 with the Pompeians.

by this tradition.⁶ But let us not therefore assume that the deployment of imagery of decapitation is merely rhetorical ornament. The point of decapitation as a weapon of terror is that it is at once terrifyingly concrete and powerfully metaphorical. The appallingly concrete act of beheading is committed precisely because it is symbolic, it is exemplary. The severed head not only becomes an emblematic representation of the violence of civil war, but also reminds us of the potential violence of metaphor.

Pompey's death is drawn out in a manner worthy of opera, as the narrative of the character's attempt to secure for himself a heroic, Stoic death is overlaid upon the text's digressive, allusive insistence that the Stoic model is insufficient. As Pompey plays out his extended death scene in *BC* 8, he attempts to maintain a composed mind and a composed mien (*BC* 8.612–21):

tum stringere ferrum
regia monstra parant. ut vidit cominus enses
involvitur voltus atque, indignatus apertum
Fortunae praebere, caput; tum lumina pressit
continuitque animam, *ne quas effundere voces
vellet et aeternam fletu corrumpere famam.*
sed postquam mucrone latus funestus Achilles
perfodit, nullo gemitu consensit ad ictum
respexitque nefas, servatque immobile corpus,
seque probat moriens atque haec in pectore volvit.

Then the royal monsters prepare to draw the sword.
When he saw the sword close up he wrapped his face and head—
unwilling to offer it naked to Fortune—in his cloak, then shut
his eyes and held his breath, *lest he should let loose any words
and ruin his eternal fame with weeping.* But after deadly
Achilles gored his side with a blade, he consented to the blow
without a groan, and looked away from/reflected on the crime,
and kept his body unmoving, *and he proves/applauds
himself as he dies* and ponders these things in his heart.

Pompey tries to fix his own future reputation by arranging his own body in the aspect he wants it to have as a corpse, unmoving and speechless. He covers his face and head, closes his eyes, and holds back his *anima*, lest he should pour forth any words and corrupt his eternal fame.⁷ He carries out the Senecan injunction to compress the body into as small a space as possible.⁸ Pompey (like the narrator at times) would like to rewrite history through a poetics of silence; only thus can he be a hero instead of a victim. Transforming himself into an insensible object, both unseen and unseeing, he holds back his voice and his very breath, an *imago* of immutability at the end of his turbulent life.

6. Roller 1997, 122–23.

7. See O'Higgins 1988 for a fuller discussion of the motif of attempting to suppress speech in the *BC*.

8. Cf. Too 1994, 220: "the Stoic must learn to circumscribe and compress his body so that it takes up as little space as possible ('limit the body,' 15.3; 'for this reason compress yourself as much as possible; look into yourself,' 28.10). 'Lucilius', furthermore, is told to imagine his lifetime as a mere point that is not to be and cannot be extended into any direction (*in hoc punctum coniectum es*, 77.12)."

But in contrast to the dying Pompey's attempt at immutability, silence, and immobility, the text itself darts from "text to text and from author to author" as it reveals the dying general as a pastiche, a composite of different literary commonplaces:⁹ even at the moment of his death, Pompey is unable to establish a fixed identity, for there is an inescapable theatricality to his character—a theatricality prefigured in the haunting description of Pompey's dream on the eve of the battle of Pharsalia (7.7–14), where, both spectator and actor, he sees himself being applauded in his own theater.¹⁰ As he dies, he is again both actor and spectator, a man beside himself. As he veils his head and closes his own eyes, he acts like a mourner at his own funeral (a role he is already dressed for, as we see at *BC* 8.54–57).¹¹ His mourning garb imitates the costume of Cato, who is described similarly at the beginning of the epic (2.372–78). Cato's untended hair and beard and mournful face mark him here as unique, the *only* person equipped (through disinterest) to mourn for the human race.¹² Pompey, belated character that he is, *enacts the role* of Cato, right down to the costume, when he tries to die as a Stoic sage.¹³ The doubleness of Pompey as he plays both actor and spectator at the moment of his death is wittily emphasized by the epigrammatic phrase *seque probat moriens* (8.620): like a Stoic *proficiens*, he proves himself by dying—but *probare* also means to applaud or approve. Like an actor monitoring his own performance, he applauds himself as he dies.

Lucan's Pompey creates, in the internal monologue, a text that is terminated by his own death while at the same time attempting to fix the image by which he will be memorialized in future texts.¹⁴ And if Lucan had ended his description here, this is the Pompey who would have remained in the minds of the *Bellum civile*'s audience, a figure with a reasonable claim to a noble death even in spite of the text's tendency to shatter into allusions to other famous characters.¹⁵ Indeed, immediately after Cornelia's lament, Lucan offers us a glimpse of how this idealized Pompey was remembered by his followers. Although, as we noted, Pompey had taken the precaution of covering his face before he was stabbed, in the narrator's account, bystanders were nevertheless able to witness his face and bearing as he was struck, and to testify that his face preserved both his beauty and his anger at the gods (8.663–67):

at Magni cum terga sonant et pectora ferro,
permansisse decus sacrae venerabile formae
irataeque deis faciem, nil ultima mortis

9. Too (1994) draws attention to the parallel between moving about in space and flitting from text to text in her discussion of Stoic notions of metaphor.

10. Ahl (1976, 178–82) has a fine analysis of this dream.

11. Cornelia sees him arriving at Lesbos: *Tum puppe propinqua / prosiluit crimenque deum crudele notavit, / deformem pallore ducem volutisque prementem / canitiem atque atro squalentes pulvere vestes*.

12. On Cato as the *unus homo*, the one assigned to die for the many, see Hardie 1993, 49.

13. Even his attempt to check his final words reminds us of Cato's example. The phrase Lucan uses here, *ne quas effundere voces*, has echoes in two of Cato's most significant moments in the poem: his refusal to consult the oracle of Ammon (*effudit dignas adytis e pectore voces*, 9.565), linked verbally to his paradoxical decision to join the fight against Caesar (introduced by the phrase *arcano sacras reddit Cato pectore voces*).

14. Connors 1994.

15. In addition to recalling the figure of Cato, Pompey's death scene alludes to the deaths of Turnus, Sulla, and Julius Caesar: Hardie 1993, p. 38, nn. 45 and 46.

ex habitu voltuque viri mutasse fatentur,
qui lacerum videre caput.

But while Magnus' back and chest resound with the blade
those who saw the mutilated head say
that the awe-inspiring beauty of his sacred form,
and his face, angry at the gods, remained;
death's final moments changed nothing
in the hero's face or expression.

The head remains miraculously unchanged, seemingly a testament to Pompey's passing out of the world of mutability, a transcendence foreshadowed in the narrator's apostrophe to the fleeing general at 7.680–97 (note especially the unchanging features with which he views the battlefield: *non inpare voltu / aspicias Emathiam*) and made literal in his ghost's catasterism at the opening of Book 9.

But does the noble *imago* of the dead Republican hero really remain unchanged? Lucan follows the eyewitnesses' assertion that death could do nothing to change its usual expression with a completely contradictory description of the actual decapitation (clumsily executed by the inexperienced Roman soldier who assists Achilles) and the subsequent treatment of the head (8.677–85):

o summi fata pudoris!
inpius ut Magnum nosset puer, illa verenda
regibus hirta coma et generosa fronte decora
caesaries comprehensa manu est, Pharioque veruto,
dum vivunt voltus atque os in murmura pulsan
singultus animae, dum lumina nuda rigescunt,
suffixum caput est, quo numquam bella iubente
pax fuit; hoc leges Campumque et rostra movebat,
hac facie, Fortuna, tibi, Romana, placebas.

O most shameful fate! When the evil boy recognized Magnus,
he seized in his hand the long hair admired by kings
and the beautiful lock of hair on his noble brow,
and he fixed the head on a Pharian spear, while his
face was still alive and his sobbing breath pulsed
through his lips and his staring eyes stiffened—
once, when that head ordered war, there was no peace;
once it made laws and swayed the Rostra and the Field of Mars.
Fortune of the Roman people, you used to be delighted
with this face.

Just as Pompey's final moments saw him imitating a number of different exemplars, so his head recalls other exemplary severed heads. Vergil had cast his Priam in the image of the dead Pompey, breaking the illusion of realism in his description of the sack of Priam's palace to describe the king, slain at the altar inside the house, as a headless corpse lying on the shore: *iacet ingens litore truncus / avolsamque umeris caput et sine nomine corpus* (*Aen.* 2.557–58). Ovid, imitating this passage in his parody of epic battles, describes another old man, Emathion, brutally slain at an altar; his head

bounces on the altar, its tongue still cursing, and breathes its last amid the flames (*Met.* 5.104–6):

decutit ense caput, quod protinus incidit arae
atque ibi semianimi verba exsecrantia lingua
edidit et medios animam exspiravit in ignes.

He cut off the head with his sword; it immediately fell
on the altar and there with its half-living tongue
it uttered curses and breathed its last breath in the midst
of the flames.

Ovid had signaled his recognition of Vergil's veiled reference to Pompey by naming his elderly victim Emathion, a name sure to suggest the battle of Pharsalia and Pompey's defeat. Lucan here shows his understanding of the Ovidian allusion, and closes the circle by using the detail of the still-breathing, speaking head in his account of the death of Pompey.¹⁶

The neatness of the double allusion here draws attention to itself, making the self-contradictory nature of Lucan's account of the head all the more emphatic: the eyewitnesses claimed to have seen his severed head looking just as usual, preserving his beauty and habitual expression, but the detailed description of the decapitation, modeled on the Ovidian passage, exposes their claim as unlikely at best, and reverses in every detail the narrator's own account of Pompey's careful arrangement of his corpse. The Roman soldier fixes the still-living head on an Egyptian pike, the mouth still murmuring and the breath still sobbing, undoing Pompey's attempt to hold his breath and stop his voice (8.616–17). Even the eyes so carefully closed by Pompey (*tum lumina pressit*, 8.615) are no longer shut, but *nuda*, exposed and staring. Far from being able to transcend change, as the anonymous eyewitnesses' claim would indicate, Pompey's face is now identical to the face of the goddess of change herself, Fortuna.

This is not the end of the head's vicissitudes. *Nec satis*, it is not enough: the head has yet to be embalmed (8.687–91):

nec satis infando fuit hoc vidisse tyranno:
volt sceleris superesse fidem. tunc arte nefanda
summota est capiti tabes, raptoque cerebro
adsiccata cutis, putrisque effluxit ab alto
umor, et infuso facies solidata veneno est.

Nor was it enough that the unspeakable tyrant saw this:
he wanted a proof of his crime to remain. Then with unspeakable
art the gory fluid was drawn from the head, and with the brain
removed the skin was dried, and putrefying fluids flowed from deep
within, and the face stiffened with infused poison.

The unspeakable art of embalming (*arte nefanda*) preserves what is left of the head after the fluids are drained away, the brain removed, and the skin

16. That Lucan had the Vergilian account of Priam's death in mind as well is evident from the description of Pompey's headless body tossed by the waves at 8.699–700.

cured: a countenance (*facies*) hardened by injected poison. This is the face that Caesar, fresh from his tour of the ruins of Troy, will finally confront at the end of Book 9—but not before we, the readers, have encountered its ghastly double in the Medusa episode (9.675–81):¹⁷

ipsa regit trepidum Pallas dextraque trementem
 Perseos *aversi* Cyllenida derigit harpen,
 lata colubriferi rumpens confinia colli.
 quos habuit voltus hamati volnere ferri
 caesa caput Gorgon! quanto spirare veneno
 ora rear, quantumque oculos effundere mortis!
 Nec Pallas spectare potest. . . .

Pallas herself is his guide, and directs
 Perseus's trembling Cyllenian sickle as the frightened
 hero *turns away*, bursting the broad expanse of her
 snaky neck. What an expression the Gorgon had,
 her head struck by the wound of the curved sword!
 Let me imagine how much poison poured from her face,
 how much death from her eyes! Nor could Pallas watch. . . .

Like Pompey, who veiled his head before death, the Gorgon dies unseen, a point Lucan makes by shifting from third-person narration to a first-person interjection from the narrator, who imagines her expression. We, along with the narrator, can only *suppose* what her expression was like: the opened mouth dripping poison, death pouring from the eyes—the very image of Pompey's mummified head, with its staring eyes, open mouth, and features petrified by poison.

The lengthy excursus on the slaying of the Gorgon prepares us for the final scene of *BC* 9, the moment when Caesar gazes on the uncovered head of his great rival (9.1032–39):

 sic fatus opertum
 detexit tenuitque caput. iam languida morte
 effigies habitum noti mutaverat oris.
 non primo Caesar damnavit munera visu
avertitque oculos; voltus, dum crederet, haesit;
 utque fidem vidit sceleris tutumque putavit
 iam bonus esse socer, lacrimas non sponte cadentes
 effudit gemitusque expressit pectore laeto.

He spoke thus, and uncovered the veiled head
 and held it. And now his appearance, relaxed by death,
 had changed the familiar expression of his face.
 At first sight, Caesar did not condemn the gift
or turn away his eyes; his gaze clung to the features
 until he could believe it; and when he saw the truth of the crime
 and thought it safe to be a good father-in-law now,
 he wept calculated tears and groaned from deep
 within his happy heart.

17. Fantham (1992, 110) emphasizes the connection between the Gorgon's head and Pompey's head.

Unlike Perseus, who turns his head away (*Perseos aversi*, 9.676) from the Gorgon, or Pallas, who cannot look as the final blow is struck, Caesar confronts Pompey's head directly. This confrontation is the culmination of a series of references to the Gorgon, the first in *BC* 6, when Erictho runs into trouble in her attempt to revive the nameless Pompeian soldier during the famous necromancy scene. She appeals to a mysterious deity who is unaffected by the usual constraints on the gods. This creature, able to break the mighty oath of the gods and lash the Fury with his own whips, is also able to gaze directly on the face of the Gorgon (6.744–49), unaffected by her deadly stare. A little later, just before the onset of the battle at Pharsalia, Lucan again mentions the Gorgon, this time in a description of Pompey's soldiers preparing for war (7.144–50), in a simile referring to the myth of the Gigantomachy. In it we see Pallas preparing for war by scattering the Gorgon's locks over her aegis, which becomes an icon of cosmic stability. By alluding to this extremely well known myth, Lucan aligns the Pompeian troops with the Olympians, making them the representatives of universal order and stability.¹⁸ But by so doing he inverts the typical usage of the Gigantomachy theme as a political allegory through the crucial, though unstated, *difference* between Pompey's army and the Olympian gods. The Olympians are victorious, Pompey's troops are to be miserably defeated.

Finally, during Caesar's *aristeia* on the Emathian fields Lucan describes his effect on the opposing soldiers in another simile (7.567–73) in which Mars battles against Pallas, who is armed with her aegis; though the outcome of the battle is not stated, it appears that Mars, who here represents the victorious Caesar at the height of his battle frenzy, will get the upper hand. In each of these instances, the Gorgon's terrifying power is aligned with the forces of order and defeated by the forces of chaos, and in each case the Gorgon metaphorically represents the Pompeian side, while Caesar is assimilated to demonic powers—the Demiurge, the Giants, Mars—that prove immune to the Gorgon's glare.

This Demiurge is now embodied in Caesar, who stares unmoved at Pompey's unwrapped head (*opertum detexit . . . caput*, 9.1032–33). As Fantham has noted, Caesar's speech when he has been given the head of Pompey "is followed by a single gesture: *sic fatus opertum / detexit tenuitque caput*. On the analogy created throughout Book 7 this act of unveiling the slaughtered kinsman's head parallels the unveiling of the Gorgon."¹⁹ As Caesar takes possession of the Gorgonic head of Pompey, he reveals the control over speech and gesture that gives him his terrifying power.²⁰ Like Ovid's Perseus, who uses Medusa's head to turn his enemies into statues that monumentalize his own power, Caesar's acquisition of Pompey's head gives him a symbolic command over the process of signification. There is an ironic

18. See Hardie 1986, chap. 3, for a full discussion of the Gigantomachy theme.

19. Fantham 1992, 110.

20. Well described by Henderson 1988, 141–42: "*Caesar* will be the signifier which projects into the totality of the discourse of the Empire the assurance that all discourse will orbit around the imperial signifier, that meaningfulness will radiate from *Caesar* at its centre, that *Caesar* will serve for the World as the master-sign dispensing legitimacy, propriety, identity, the right to exist, to 'own' a name, the Word-of-the-Father to Roman culture, that is to human culture. . . ."

contrast between Pompey's unsuccessful attempt to preserve an unmoved countenance at the moment of his death and Caesar's unemotional scrutiny of the head, followed by his politic shedding of crocodile tears.

CATO AT MEDUSA'S SPRING

Armed with the head of Pompey, Caesar becomes a second Perseus, able to transform those around him into emblematic signs, forcing them to signify even against their will whatever he wants. Lucan's version of the Medusa story, which precedes and prefigures Caesar's acceptance of Pompey's head, is an extended meditation on signs and interpretation—more specifically, it addresses the project of writing Roman history as epic. And it is through the Medusa story that Cato, the third major protagonist of the poem, is linked figuratively with the head of Pompey and the struggle to control the meaning of the civil war. For while Caesar and Pompey have both been associated through simile to the myth of the Gorgon, it is Cato who encounters Medusa's own offspring, and Cato who presides over the section of the text where the severed head achieves the exemplary status of myth. In her recent study, Shadi Bartsch, discussing Cato's trek through Libya, argues that in the confrontation between the stagy Stoic and the over-the-top serpents, "what we have . . . is the confrontation par excellence of the principle of boundary violation and the principle of boundary maintenance, two obsessive concerns of the poet throughout this epic."²¹ Bartsch's analysis engages the ethical and the political levels of the text, but it can be extended, for throughout Book 9 Lucan consistently writes Cato into scenes in which the text wrestles with the process of signification, culminating in his rewriting of Ovid's Medusa myth.

Matthew Leigh has shown that there is evidence of a common tradition for interpreting Libya and its monsters on an allegorical level. Various heroes (Heracles, the Argonauts, Alexander the Great, Regulus, Cato, and others) encounter variants of the ferocious conditions and snaky monsters characteristic of Libya in the literary tradition.²² Leigh argues that the journey through Libya was used by ancient writers as a symbolic pilgrimage, allegorically describing the virtuous hero's confrontation with the dangers of excessive desire and the passions. Leigh's argument demonstrates that Lucan was writing within a long-standing tradition of allegorizing Libya. Libya is, for Leigh, a "conceptual space," a notion that allows room for the possibility that the symbolism of Lucan's Libyan excursus should not be restricted to a simple allegorical interpretation in which the labors and wanderings of Cato exemplify the labors of Hercules and the Stoic notion of the harsh and narrow path to virtue. There are too many allusions to too many events, myths, and texts that would need to be explained or excluded in such a purely allegorical reading.²³

21. Bartsch 1997, 35.

22. Leigh 2000.

23. For Cato as a figure to be seen as *sui generis* rather than exemplary in the usual sense, see Heinrich 1996, 122.

Immediately after his encounter with the oracle at Ammon, Cato and his men enter a region of extreme heat and scarce water. When at last they encounter an abundantly flowing spring, they find it is infested with poisonous snakes (9.607–9):²⁴

inventus mediis *fons unus* harenis
largus aquae, sed quem serpentum turba tenebat
vix capiente loco.

A single spring was found in the midst of the sands,
flowing with water, but a crowd of serpents held it
and the place could hardly contain them.

The men are afraid to drink the water, which is full of venom, but Cato shows them by drinking it himself that the water is harmless after all—the venom is activated only by blood. The presence of the snakes leads the narrator to an Alexandrian enquiry into the reason for Libya's overabundance of snakes. He provides an elaborate aetiology for the snakes, but prefaces it with an emphatic assertion that the explanation offered in the text is actually *not true* (9.619–23):

cur Libycus tantis exundet pestibus aer
fertilis in mortes, aut quid secreta nocenti
miscuerit natura solo, *non cura laborque*
noster scire valet, nisi quod volgata per orbem
fabula pro vera deceptit saecula causa.

Why the Libyan air, fertile with death,
is saturated with such plagues, or what
secret nature has hidden in the poisoned soil,
our care and labor is not strong enough to learn,
except that a fable known throughout the world
has deceived the ages in place of the true reason.

Fabula, in Lucan's analysis, replaces the true *causa*, and poetry, instead of revealing the truth, deceives posterity.

Just after Cato has replaced the oracular voice of Jupiter Ammon and has been endorsed by the narrator as the real *parens patriae* and as a hero who will become a god, he encounters the snake-infested *fons*. This prompts the ever digressive narrator to locate his own narrative (*cura* and *labor*) in the realm of myth as *opposed* to truth.²⁵ The sudden reappearance of the narrator, who now links his *cura* and *labor* with myth and deception at the same time that he distinguishes his narrative from *vera causa*, casts some doubt on his emphatic endorsement (only seventeen lines earlier) of Cato as

24. Much has been written on Cato and the snakes: Leigh 2000; Aumont 1968a and 1968b; Batinski 1992; Kebrić 1976; Cazzaniga 1957; Morford 1967, among others.

25. This opposition is important, for it weakens any attempt to read the myths and mythic allusions in the ninth book as allegorical, or as myths that point or lead to a hidden truth. Frederick Ahl (1993, 141) has argued that for Lucan "the dissociation of truth from fact, of ideals from history, is a grand illusion capable of changing fact." Certainly this dissociation is of the utmost importance to Lucan, but I would argue that it is one he finds most disturbing, and that Cato's visit to the snake spring is one *locus* where he explores its troubling aspects.

parens versus patriae. A well-trained reader's suspicions—raised by the sudden outburst of the narrator and the mention of *fabula*—that the singular *fons* Cato encounters, snake-infested though it is, might be related to the common topos of the *fons* of poetry, would be confirmed by the next step of Lucan's narrative, which turns to the myth of Medusa, from whose severed head drops of blood fell onto the sands of Libya and were transformed into snakes.²⁶

As Fantham has demonstrated, Lucan here works closely from Ovid's account of Perseus, echoing Ovid's language and reproducing critical anomalies in the Ovidian account.²⁷ Her larger argument reveals Medusa's status as an emblem of ethical collapse. But for Lucan, a writer who wrestles to the death with the ethics of his own poetic project, ethics and representation cannot be separated. The figure of the Gorgon is not only, as Fantham argues, a figure exemplifying the horrors of civil war, but is also a figurative source for poetic inspiration.

Ovid too emphasizes Medusa as a source of poetry. In *Metamorphoses* 4.614–20, the blood from Medusa's head produces the Libyan snakes, but later Perseus' account of Medusa's offspring is quite different (4.784–86):

dumque gravis somnus colubrasque ipsamque tenebat,
eripuisse caput collo; pennisque fugacem
Pegason et fratrem matris de sanguine natos.

And while a heavy slumber held both her and the serpents,
he tore the head from her neck, and swift-winged Pegasus
and his brother were born from their mother's blood.

Here it is the winged horse Pegasus and his brother who are born;²⁸ Ovid's Perseus makes no reference at all to the snakes described earlier, in 4.618–20. In this doublet of the Gorgon's death, Pegasus and his twin replace the Libyan snakes, but the coexistence of both tales in close proximity emphasizes the identical origin of and the threatening similarity between the venomous serpents of Libya and Pegasus, the symbol of poetic inspiration, all monstrous progeny of the Gorgon's blood.²⁹

Though the birth of Pegasus receives little emphasis in the sprawling, violent tale of Perseus, it forms the connection to the next set of stories in *Metamorphoses* 5, stories that call into question the relationship between poetry and truth, and indicate the impossibility of separating claims to poetic inspiration from political claims to authority and power. Minerva, who has up to this point been her brother's guide and protector, flies from Libya to Helicon, where she greets the Muses and explains the reason for her

26. Ov. *Met.* 4.614–20; Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* 4.1513–16, in connection with the death of the seer Mopsus. See Bömer 1976, 189–91; Malamud 1995. Behr (2000, 110–20) has an intriguing discussion of both philosophical and poetic aspects of the snake episode and its epilogue, the encounter with the magical Psylli, who cure the remnants of Cato's army.

27. Fantham (1992, 105–6) cites in particular the anachronistic use of the *aegis* by both the Ovidian and the Lucanian Perseus—in both accounts, the head of Medusa is assigned to the *aegis* and at the same time is used by the hero to defend himself.

28. The brother is Chrysaor: see Hes. *Theog.* 281; and West 1966 ad loc.

29. For a discussion of the rhetorical meaning of *emphasis*, see Ahl 1985, 299–300.

sudden arrival (*Met.* 5.256–59): She has come to see Hippocrene, the new spring created when Pegasus struck the earth on Helicon with his hoof. But Hippocrene, symbol of poetic inspiration, turns out to be a contested site: by the spring with the Muses (the Mnemonides or daughters of Mnemosyne) are the nine daughters of Pierus, transformed into magpies when they dared to challenge the Mnemonides to a singing competition. At stake is property—and not just any piece of real estate. If the Pierides win, the Mnemonides must yield Hippocrene, here called not by its name, but by the epithet *Medusaeo fonte*, the spring of Medusa (*Met.* 4.312), to them; if they should lose, however, they must give up to the Mnemonides the Emathian plains (*Emathiis . . . campis*).³⁰ The victorious Muses receive as their prize a double legacy: the Medusan spring of poetic inspiration, and the fields on which the decisive battle of Rome's civil war was waged.³¹

POISONING THE WELL

As Cato, the unwilling—perhaps unwitting—recipient of the rapidly replicating *umbra* of Pompey, becomes the first to drink from the tainted waters of the Medusan spring, he brings death to his men despite his desire to save them. It seems at first that Cato escapes unharmed because, as he says, the venom of the waters can only be activated by blood—but can the survivors of Pharsalia claim to be unstained by blood? Although Cato states that the spring is harmless, we are never told that he was correct, and the text does not confirm him in his uncharacteristic optimism. In fact, the immediate aftermath of his decision to drink is the attack of the snakes. Cause (Cato's drink) is separated from effect (death by snake bite) by the digression that includes the Medusa story and the catalogue of snakes, but Lucan makes it clear that the same snakes who infest the *fons* (*has . . . pestes*, 9.734) and inspire the digression are the ones that attack the army.³²

Rather than departing from the issues raised in the narrative, Lucan's rewriting of the Medusa myth is pregnant with meaning(s). It forms a perfect gloss on the snake-infested spring from which Cato drinks. Where Ovid offered two accounts of Medusa's offspring, the snakes and Pegasus, Lucan omits any reference to Pegasus and Hippocrene from his tale. He has instead conflated the two Ovidian accounts into one. Ovid locates Hippocrene (called the *fons Medusaei*, lest we forget Pegasus' family background) in a *locus amoenus* amid beautiful woods, caves, grass and flowers. Lucan inverts and reverses the topos, creating a *fons* infested with Medusa's snakes and set in the midst of a barren desert.³³

30. The Pierides' challenge is as follows (*Met.* 5.310–14): *nec voce nec arte / vincemur totidemque sumus: vel cedite victae / fonte Medusaeo et Hyantea Aganippe, / vel nos Emathiis ad Paeonas usque nivosos / cedemus campis!*

31. See Malamud and Johnson 1988.

32. Leigh (2000, 101) makes the intriguing point that the death of Aulus, one of Cato's men, invokes the image of Tantalus, and "invites a symbolic interpretation of the thirst inflicted on Aulus:" the insatiable thirst inflicted by the *dipsas* symbolizes the insatiable desire that should be resisted by the Stoic.

33. Malamud (1995) also discusses the tainted well in a somewhat different context.

When Lucretius wandered through the pathless places of the Pierides, he found a *locus amoenus* where no man had gone before, drank from untouched springs, and earned the crown that signified his mastery of the epic.³⁴ Lucretius' use of the *locus amoenus* topos sets forth a model of poetic discourse where inspiration from the Muses' spring gives the poet the ability to present healing medicine to humanity.³⁵ Lucan's model is vastly different. His Cato—a philosophical wanderer on the edges of the world like Epicurus and like Lucretius himself—finds in the midst of the desert a spring contaminated by Medusa's snakes, filled not with *integros fontes* but with venom. Lucretius, through his mastery of Pierian song, will lead his readers to *ratio*, but Lucan's narrator uses the *locus* of the spring to lament the fact that all his *cura* and *labor* will never lead to knowledge.

Lucan's careful reworking of Ovid's Medusa story reveals that the spring from which Cato drinks is identical to the Pierian spring, the source of Lucretius' inspiration as well as the site of confrontation between Ovid's battling sets of Muses. This is the tainted source of Lucan's inspiration as well. The poison in the well is activated by blood, which is never absent from the Emathian fields. Ovid's Minerva sets the Emathian fields as the award for poetic mastery in the fight between Muses and Pierides; the same fields are claimed by Lucan at the outset of his poem when he announces his intention to sing *bella per Emathios plus quam civilia campos*. Lucan conflates Lucretius' lovely spring of the Muses with his medicinal metaphor, combines it with Ovid's linkage of the Pierian spring to the Emathian fields, and produces as a model of his own verse the sinister image of the Muses' spring as a poisoned well. Drunk with inspiration from the well sprung from Medusa's posthumous offspring Pegasus, Lucan in his epic of *nefas* puts into words the Gorgon's silent scream of horror.

University at Buffalo (SUNY)

34. Monica Gale links Lucretius' poetic apology, first presented at 1.921–50 and then repeated at 4.1–25, with his attempt to demonstrate that myth need not be, as Epicurus would have it, excluded from rational argument. She argues that Lucretius intends to show that myth can actually be used to reinforce rational argument, so long as the mythical and poetic element in the *De rerum natura* is strictly subordinated to the philosophical element. Thus the description of the *locus amoenus* of poetry is twice followed by the description of the honey on the cup of bitter medicine: in Gale's words (1994, 139), "Epicurean *ratio* corresponds to the bitter but healing draught which actually effects the cure for mankind's sickness, while the 'honey of the Muses' is in itself neutral. Its value lies in the end which it serves."

35. I am not sure that Lucretius' use of the topos can be taken entirely at face value—he is at least playing with the clash between the claim of originality and the repetitious nature of both literary *topoi* and formulaic composition.

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