

The Snake and the Procuress:
Ovid, Lucan, and Seductive Disruptors of Roman Virtues

Lucan's *Civil War* challenges aesthetic perceptions on numerous levels: it is an epic without admirable heroes, without grandness and closure, an epic that even lacks the traditional deities, but rejoices in gory descriptions of violence and depravity (Bartsch. 1997). In Lucan's already devastated, war-shaken world, one episode intensifies the aesthetics of horror and ugliness almost to the absurd – the so-called Libyan tale at the core of Book 9 (Bexley. 2010; Leigh. 2000). The passage features general Cato, the topical paragon of traditional Roman virtue, as he leads his exhausted and parched troops into the Libyan desert (Cixous. 1976). Ingloriously, most of his men die – not in battle, but because of their general's encouragement to drink from a well that is infested by snakes. When the first soldier dies after being bitten by a *dipsas*, a viper whose bite induces insatiable thirst and parches its victim from inside, Cato's ideals of Stoic discipline and strength, his advice to overcome fear and to act "manly", are not only unhelpful, but in fact utterly destructive, leaving the soldiers to their fate and Lucan's readers with a sense of irritation about the unnecessary suffering and the preventable ugly deaths (Eldred. 2000).

But there is more to the snakes that challenge Cato's morals: the passage also reveals Lucan as a keen reader of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and *Amores* (Wheeler. 2002). Ovid's stance on Roman virtues is more light-hearted than Lucan's, but he, too, describes men's fear of suddenly losing power and control (Enterline. 2000). We find reflections on bodily needs and Stoic abstinence, and encounter another ever-thirsty *Dipsas* threatening everything Ovid's elegiac *poeta amator* fights for – only here it is not a snake, but a procuress who teaches girls how to manipulate their lovers (Myers. 1996). Lucan transforms Ovid's bawd into the snake of the same

name and thereby emphasizes the common core: the disruption of morals that fragile masculinities ascribe to feminized monstrosity (Wyke. 1989).

Examination of Ovid's and Lucan's serpentine passages from a perspective grounded in feminist theory admittedly may appear bizarre at first, but in the impoverished, parched, mythical landscape of Libya, one should not be surprised to encounter wondrous hybrids.

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