

Lucan's Elegiac Loser, or, Why Pompey Can't Get Lucky

Fortuna is the reigning divinity of Lucan's *Bellum Civile*, where the war that determines the fate of Rome is often presented as a game of chance. But for the Romans (as for us), "getting lucky" could refer as easily to the bedroom as to the gaming table. Several scholars have recently demonstrated Lucan's persistent engagement with love elegy in depicting his "epic" heroes (e.g., McCune 2013, Littlewood 2016, Plago 2020). This paper discusses some ingenious means through which Lucan casts Pompey as an elegiac loser, including Roman games, Ovid's exile poetry, and mischievous marginal letterplay.

First, I suggest that Lucan borrows from elegy the idea of winning or losing a game of dice as a metaphor for being lucky or unlucky in love. As Propertius plays at *tali* while attempting to cheat on Cynthia, he tries for the "Venus throw," the highest roll, but keeps rolling the unlucky "dogs" (Prop. 4.8.45-46). The Greek names for these throws were "the Coan" and "the Chian," associated with the islands of Cos and Chios, respectively. Hejduk (2019) has argued for the intentionality of a Lucanian acrostic telling Pompey to "Go to the Coan!" Yet after Pompey loses at Pharsalia, he abandons his fate to the winds, indifferent to his destination because his wife is with him (8.190-92). His steersman turns the ship toward Chios ("Loser Island") and Asina ("Ass") (8.195), a place that appears nowhere else (Duff 1928: 450) and thus seems to have been chosen for its speaking name.

Next, I discuss several points of contact with Ovid's exile poetry. Lucan's universe has many general similarities with that of the later Ovid, such as the crucial role of Fortuna, the Jovian thunderbolt of a tyrannical "Caesar," the mythologization of contemporary figures, and the tendency toward blackly humorous hyperbole. For both authors, the exile's wife is central.

Whereas Ovid's wife remains in Rome, however, Pompey's comes with him. There is some truth in the taunt of Julia's jealous ghost that her "rival" will lead to Pompey's destruction (3.21-24). It is indeed because of Cornelia that "Pompey is unmanned and sets his love above the fate of nations (5.727-31)" (Littlewood 2016: 160). It may not be coincidental that the line in which Cornelia, addressing the dead Pompey, blames herself as the "cause for you of fatal delay" (*letiferae tibi causa morae*, 8.640), *mora* being an elegiac buzzword, begins the acrostic **LENA** (unique in Latin epic), the "procuress" who is the elegiac hero's nemesis.

Finally, I explore how Lucan employs the quintessentially Ovidian trope of the sea journey as a metaphor for art and life, especially for Pompey in "exile" after Pharsalia. Ovid shows himself transformed from the overconfident pilot steering the ship or chariot of Love in the *Ars Amatoria* to a helpless passenger tossed in a storm that defeats the "art" of the pilot taking him into exile (Tr. 1.2). Lucan employs this trope, but with a twist: though Pompey has given up control, his skilled *magister* steers the ship as cleverly as a charioteer rounding a *meta*—toward Egypt, the place of Pompey's imminent death. The importance of this "turning point" for Pompey is reinforced by the telestich **META**, whose E is from *metae* (both the telestich and the word *meta* appear in Lucan only here). Moreover, Lucan describes his fatal turn around an "untouched turning-post" (*inoffensae metae*, 8.201) in a line that alludes to Ovid's expressed wish for his friends, unlike himself, to round the turning-post of life untouched (Tr. 1.9.1). Whereas "Ovid" is both poet and character in his own poem, steersman and passenger, the expert control of Lucan's *magister*—perhaps a figure for himself as artist, steering the ship of his epic—contrasts with the feckless defeatism of his protagonist.

Lucan was keenly aware of the irony of a martial epic offering no possibility of glory, since military victory coincides with moral defeat. This theme is enhanced by his engagement

with elegy, a genre in which the lover's loss is the poet's gain. Attentiveness to some of his more devious literary games can help steer our understanding of his epic on a successful course.

Works Cited

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