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### **Book chapter :**

Bexley, E. (2010). *The Myth of the Republic: Medusa and Cato in Lucan Pharsalia* 9. N. Homke and C. Reitz (Ed.), *Lucan's Bellum Civile: Between Epic Tradition and Aesthetic Innovation*, (pp. 135-153). Berlin: De Gruyter.

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## The Myth of the Republic: Medusa and Cato in Lucan, *Pharsalia* 9

ERICA BEXLEY

Lucan's *Pharsalia* contains two prominent mythic excursuses: Hercules and Antaeus in Book 4 (581-660), and Perseus and Medusa in Book 9 (619-699). For a long while the former was more familiar and has, as a result, benefited from numerous insightful analyses demonstrating how it functions as a paradigm for the desert montage that follows it.<sup>1</sup> The latter remained relatively untouched until a recent profusion of articles and commentaries began to highlight many of its central themes.<sup>2</sup> All of this discussion has been immensely fruitful. Nonetheless, much remains to be said about how the Medusa excursus directs attention towards specific aspects of Cato's subsequent behaviour. Although more complex than Hercules and Antaeus, Perseus and Medusa perform essentially the same function within Lucan's narrative, establishing a frame of reference against which each proceeding sequence of action may be read. That these inset tales are meant to mirror each other is confirmed by their respective positions in the fourth and ninth book – a balance that would be even more apparent were the epic completed to its probable twelve-book conclusion.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the two stories share significant motifs. Both are set in Libya; both recount a one-on-one confrontation between a civilizing mythic hero and a monstrous native inhabitant; both are followed by a battle sequence.

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- 1 For interpretations of Hercules and Antaeus, see Ahl 1972 and 1976: 91-103, Grimal 1949, and Saylor 1982. Bruère and Thompson 1970: 167-172 detail the important Virgilian echoes in this episode.
  - 2 For example, Eldred 2000, Malamud 2003, Papaioannou 2005, Raschle 2001, and Saylor 2002. The recent commentary on Book 9 by Wick 2004 also, obviously, treats this episode in depth.
  - 3 Fantham 1992: 97. For discussion of the estimated length of Lucan's unfinished epic, see Vögler 1968: 222-226, and Ahl 1976: 307-325 who refutes the idea proposed by Bruère 1950 and Thompson 1964 that Lucan's work would have ended at Actium. Yet another view is espoused by Brisset 1964: 163 and Masters 1992: 216-259, who argue that the work is complete as we have it. This theory, clever though it is, attributes too much of a contemporary twentieth-century aesthetic to Lucan, assuming a lack of closure that is simply not characteristic of early imperial Latin literature.

They are also neatly antithetical, since the myth of Antaeus is recounted to a Caesarian, the slippery Curio to whom Lucan gives the dubious honour of being the *vendor urbis* (4.824), while Perseus and Medusa pertain to a 'Pompeian', the upright Cato, whom Lucan describes as *pater urbi* (2.388). The evident parallel nature of these two digressions implies that Perseus and Medusa are just as vital for interpreting Cato's battle as Hercules and Antaeus are for understanding Curio's.<sup>4</sup>

As an interpretive paradigm, this mythic excursus brings the major motifs of Cato's ophidian encounter into sharp relief. Ostensibly, the tale explains why Libya has so many deadly serpents that can band together to attack Cato's men. Yet this *aition* is not the sole or even the most important purpose of Lucan's story. The poet focuses upon the image of Medusa's severed head and the powerful effect of her eyes. He subsequently uses these two motifs to illustrate Cato's *virtus*. On the one hand, the decapitated Medusa symbolizes the doomed republican cause and the disintegrating body of traditional Roman government. Faced with such violence and ruin, Cato is helpless. Yet on the other hand, Lucan transforms Medusa's stony gaze into a positive force and stresses that Cato's role as a witness helps his soldiers endure their pain.

Elucidation of these motifs was the original, single purpose of this paper. The result, however, rapidly became twofold, since any analysis of this episode inevitably requires a concluding pronouncement on the effectiveness of Cato's *virtus* and the *libertas* Lucan thereby envisages. This in turn demands some consideration of the unfortunately hazy details of Lucan's life, his political and philosophical stance in particular. Consequently, my focused examination of how the Perseus and Medusa story directs one's subsequent interpretation of Cato and the snakes has also become the basis for a broader discussion of the views that may have influenced and shaped Lucan's poem.

## 1. Medusa's Head

At first glance, the paradigm presented by Perseus and Medusa appears straightforward: Perseus, a culture hero, arrives in Libya to confront and defeat a native snaky opponent. This inset, as a traditional epic motif, prompts expectations that Cato will somehow fulfill Perseus' role just

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4 Admittedly, Lucan writes one other mythic digression at 9.348-367 and also uses it to illustrate Cato's character. On this, see Ahl 1976: 260-262, and Shoaf 1978: 146-150. The connections Lucan draws between Hercules and Cato are certainly significant but their brevity coupled with their lack of proximity to the snake episode suggests that they are a less direct and specific interpretive paradigm than Perseus and Medusa.

as Aeneas makes use of Hercules' *exemplum* in the *Aeneid* (8.185-275).<sup>5</sup> Were this the case, Cato would eventually triumph in his battle with the snakes and thereby achieve a symbolic, moral victory over the destructive forces of Caesarian tyranny and civil violence.<sup>6</sup> This, however, is not what Lucan wrote. Cato never actually fights a serpent hand-to-hand; instead, Cato's soldiers are the hapless victims of Libya's venomous reptiles, and the battle they undertake results in no definite outcome of victory or defeat. As in his treatment of Hercules, Antaeus, Curio and Juba, Lucan here subverts the expectations created by his own digression. Only, in this instance, it is all the more surprising since the *Pharsalia* portrays Cato in far more positive terms than Curio. While the earlier mythic excursus makes a strong point about the unnaturalness of civil war, the misplaced *virtus* it entails, and the Caesarian propensity to misinterpret history,<sup>7</sup> the later one forgoes the opportunity for a contrasting celebration of Cato. In fact, Perseus is hardly the focus of this mythic inset; Medusa far eclipses her antagonist, and the principal pattern of association that emerges is the gorgon, Cato and the republican cause.

Lucan achieves this seemingly improbable link via one of the most prevalent images in his epic: the severed head.<sup>8</sup> That Medusa's decapitation was already an integral part of the myth before it was subjected to Lucan's stylus does not in any way preclude its significant bearing on the narrative. Cut off, dripping gore, held in the hands of a conqueror, the severed head is one of the focal images of Book 9, which culminates in Caesar weeping crocodile tears over the head of his rival, Pompey.<sup>9</sup> In anticipation and echo of this historic beheading, Lucan strews the *Pharsalia*'s narrative with headless *trunci*: the victims of Sulla's purges are defaced and decapitated (2.124; 166-167; 171-173; 190-191); wretched Massiliotes struggle to identify their relatives' headless bodies (3.760-761); Agave and Pentheus make an appearance in Lucan's description of Thessaly (6.357-359); anonymous soldiers at Pharsalos practice pre-despoliation decapitation (7.626-628) and facial mutilation (7.628-630); even Cato envisages

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5 This is not to imply that Virgil's inset story of Hercules and Cacus is in any way unproblematic, just that Virgil's narrative does not associate Aeneas with Cacus. Such an inversion is alien to the world of the *Aeneid*, but perfectly characteristic of Lucan.

6 See below, 141-143.

7 Ahl 1976: 91-103. The Caesarian tendency to misread, or be ignorant of history is most prominently displayed in Caesar's tour of Troy near the end of Book 9.

8 Malamud 2003: 32. For a detailed analysis of the role of *caput* in Lucan's epic, see Dinter 2005: 301-304.

9 Fantham 1992: 110 and Malamud 2003: 32.

beheading as one of his possible fates (9.213-214).<sup>10</sup> Given the context, Medusa's head represents the republican army and cause that Cato has inherited.

Lucan's bloodied *capita* also symbolize more than Pompey's death. Taken together with Lucan's other prolific scenes of mutilation, they represent the disintegration of the state, of Rome's power and the republic's – an association made patently obvious by the tasteless pun Lucan inserts into the mouth of Gnaeus Pompey (9.123-125):<sup>11</sup>

Dic, ubi sit, germane, parens; stat summa caputque  
orbis, an occidimus Romanaque Magnus ad umbras  
abstulit?

Earlier in his epic, Lucan refers to Rome as *caput mundi* (2.136; 655), establishing a parallel between Rome's political control and the body's physical integrity.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, he imagines the Senate as a collection of *membra* (5.36-37). Hence his descriptions of mutilation are more than simple Neronian indulgence in gory detail; they constitute a very literal enactment of the common metaphor that aligns body and state.<sup>13</sup>

So Perseus' decapitation of Medusa, like all others in the *Pharsalia*, is a symbol of the most graphic crime of civil war and of Rome's corresponding political turmoil. Moreover, as Fantham astutely observes, when Lucan imagines Medusa he employs idiomatic terminology reminiscent of conflict: *adversa fronte*.<sup>14</sup> That Lucan uses this and similar phrases repeatedly in his portrayal of the battle of Pharsalos indicates how integral

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10 Most 1992: 397.

11 Bartsch 1997: 16 analyzes this excerpt with the remark “the state in civil war becomes a mutilated body parallel to those of its citizens.”

12 Dinter 2005: 302.

13 This metaphor appears to have been fairly prevalent in Latin literature, particularly in the late republican and Augustan periods. Cicero puts it into Catiline's mouth in *Mur.* 1.51. Livy 1.55 describes the discovery of a real human head on the Capitol as a favourable portent for Rome's *imperium*. Indeed, Livy seems to have liked the metaphor, referring to Rome as *caput orbis* at 1.16.7 and 21.30.10-11 and placing the idea into Menenius Agrippa's story at 2.32.8-12. Ovid likewise uses the phrase in *am.* 1.15.25-26 and *met.* 15.434-435. In *clem.* 1.3.4-5, Seneca describes the populace's dependence upon a king in terms of the body being ruled by the head.

14 Fantham 1992: 101-102. She also observes that Lucan makes two references to Pallas Athena's aegis in Book 7 (149 and 570), both of which imply that the goddess and her gorgon emblem are fighting on the Pompeian side. Clearly Lucan's link between Medusa and the Pompeian partisans is not isolated to Book 9.

the image is to the poet's vision of civil war.<sup>15</sup> A further verbal marker of civil violence is the phrase *caesa caput Gorgon* (9.679). Here, as on many other occasions throughout the epic, Lucan is punning on Caesar's name, an assertion that is confirmed by the juxtaposition of *caesa* and the severed head that evokes the republic's final death throes. The story of Perseus and Medusa is shot through with motifs of civil strife, and these associations in turn imply that Cato's battle with the snakes ought to be read as yet another warped form of *bellum civile*.

This is certainly the case. Even though Lucan's snakes all have Greek names and hence are not specifically designated as the soldiers' fellow citizens,<sup>16</sup> Cato's men still perceive this encounter as the equivalent of the battle of Pharsalos. Exhausted and distraught, they exclaim *reddite Thessaliam [...] pro Caesare pugnant/dipsades et peragunt civilia bella cerastae* (9.849; 850-851). Not only do the Libyan serpents conduct *civilia bella*, but they also seem to do it on Caesar's behalf. Of course it is not clear whether *pro* should be read as "instead of" or, more resonantly, "on behalf of", but either way these republican soldiers view the snakes as substitutes for their Caesarian opponents.<sup>17</sup>

Lucan also ensures a close connection between the violence of the myth and the serpentine attack by continuing to emphasize *capita*. The first snake in the catalogue is described as a head – *hic quae prima caput movit de pulvere tabes/aspida somniferam tumida cervice levavit* (9.700-701).<sup>18</sup> That Lucan also refers to its neck doubly enforces the association with civil strife and the unlucky Pompey. Still within the catalogue, the *amphisbaena* is portrayed with a *geminum caput* (9.719). During the attack on Cato's soldiers, the *dipsas* twists back its head to bite – *torta caput retro* (9.738), Sabellus' neck and head liquefy (9.781), and a *iaculus* spears poor Paulus

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15 Fantham 1992: 101. This phrase, and variations on it, occur at 7.321; 465; 575; 621. Malamud 2003: 38 also observes that Perseus is described as *aversus* at 9.676.

16 Batinski 1992: 76 asserts that the snakes' Greek names establish them as suitable enemies for Roman soldiers. However, the battle of Massilia in Book 3 is waged primarily against Greeks and Lucan still depicts it as civil war: see Raschle 2001: 251. It is true that Lucan focuses on the snake's names, but his purpose is partly to set up a mock *aristeia* – see Johnson 1987: 52-53 – and partly to explore the etymology of the names via the soldiers' deaths. This latter effect of the episode is noted by Eldred 2000: 66-72, and Martindale 1976: 51.

17 In this same volume, Lowe makes the interesting observation that Lucan often uses Libyan animals in similes for Caesar and his soldiers: "Libyan beasts are anti-republican metaphors (p. 120)."

18 Eldred 2000: 65.

through the temples – *serpens/perque caput Pauli transactaque tempora fugit* (9.823-824).<sup>19</sup>

Such graphic violence further confirms this episode as a portrayal of civil conflict, since the soldiers' deaths replicate the disintegration of the body politic. As observed above, one man's head melts – *colla caputque fluunt* (9.781) – while another's frame is distended to the point of being unrecognizable – *tumidos iam non capit artus/informis globus et confuso pondere truncus* (9.800-801). Here the resonance of *caput* and *capit* may not be accidental, and the *truncus* inevitably recalls Pompey.<sup>20</sup> The final scene (9.828-833) in Lucan's catalogue of ophidian combat expresses this body politic motif in yet another of the poet's vividly physically realized metaphors. Murrus spears a basilisk, but the poison still manages to run up the spear and into his arm. In desperation, Murrus performs self-amputation. Here the *Pharsalia* presents civil war in miniature as Murrus fights and mutilates his own body.<sup>21</sup> Also, the cause of this violent act is the king of snakes, the basilisk who *in vacua regnat [...] harena* (9.726), further linking Murrus' mutilation with Caesar's tyrannical ambitions.<sup>22</sup>

There remains one other motif through which Lucan sets the snakes' battle against the larger canvas of civil war, and that is the perversion of nature. In the course of the *Pharsalia*, Caesar's onslaught tears head and body from their natural as well as political unity.<sup>23</sup> Lucan imagines Caesar as a destructive natural force (1.151-157) and the war that he instigates as a perversion that even affects the cosmos. Indeed, nature often colludes with Caesar, as at Thessaly, where the topography mirrors Caesarian violence.<sup>24</sup> Since these associations have become well established by the time the reader reaches Book 9, it is not difficult to interpret the snakes as Caesar's momentary replacements: their venom warps natural form and Libya's landscape, *fertilis in mortes* (9.620) co-operates with them. So, when Aulus cannot find water in the *venas* of the desert (9.755), he resorts to opening his own *venas* (9.760). Libya, which is *non nemorum protecta coma* (9.627) breeds the serpents who were originally Medusa's *coma* (9.632 and 672). The effects of snakebite not only dissolve the body's

19 See Eldred 2000: 65 for a fuller description of these passages.

20 Vergil's famous phrase at *Aen.* 2.557 – *iacet ingens litore truncus* – is recalled to a greater or lesser degree every time Lucan uses the term *truncus*. See also Lucan. 8.698-699.

21 Eldred 2000: 71-72 rather tentatively offers this allegorical reading as one of the ways to interpret this final scene of serpentine combat. It is a suggestion I fully support, having interpreted the scene along exactly the same allegorical lines prior to reading her article.

22 Eldred 2000: 72.

23 Dinter 2005: 306-308 regards Caesar's action as dehumanizing the body.

24 See Masters 1992: 150-178.

unity, but also make it exceed its limits – *humanumque egressa modum* (9.794) – in a manner reminiscent of Caesarian overreach. Lucan may link Cato and the republican army with the head of Medusa, but Caesar is undoubtedly embodied in her noxious offspring.

Clearly, Lucan's Perseus and Medusa excursus supports several fundamental and interlinked allegorical interpretations. Both the snakes and Perseus' act of severing Medusa's head symbolize a particularly Caesarian kind of violence and are therefore intimately connected to the civil strife portrayed in the rest of Lucan's epic. The specific parallels between Medusa and Cato confirm Cato's inheritance of the cause for which Pompey ostensibly fought while at the same time underscoring the republican partisans' inevitable defeat. The gods may help Perseus, but the doomed cause of republican Rome has Cato as its only *numen* (1.128). Here Lucan is not concerned with Cato's decision to participate in *civilia bella* – a question he has already considered in Book 2 (286-323) – but with the effectiveness of this participation.<sup>25</sup> Cato's allegorical confrontation with Libya's snakes implies that he is powerless to prevent Rome's body politic from disintegrating. Indeed, his own impotence and the vanity of his venture is something Cato himself acknowledges on more than one occasion.<sup>26</sup> In this respect, his activity is futile: he cannot stop the civil war that is played out in front of him, nor can he revive the republican *libertas* that, he admits, died before he even became involved. Like Medusa's fate, Cato's failure is already a given, cemented into historical and textual record despite Lucan's overwhelming desire to alter it.

Of course, the difficulty inherent in any allegorical interpretation is the sheer range of possible meanings. It is in order to defend my particular reading and locate it in relation to recent scholarship that I append this brief coda to my initial discussion. In keeping with the (still) dominant rubric of post-structuralism, several recent articles on this episode interpret either the mythic excursus or the snakes as being essentially

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25 Bonner 1966: 284 observes that the speeches of Cato and Brutus in Book 2 are paired like rhetorical exercises typical of the declamation schools during and just prior to the Neronian era. Clearly, the rapidly developing idea of Cato as a largely Stoic moral *exemplar* sat uneasily beside the unavoidable facts of his participation in civil war.

26 2.301-303: *non ante revellar, / exanimem quam te complectar, Roma; tumque / nomen, libertas, et inanem prosequar umbram.* 2.315-316: *me solum invadite ferro / me frustra leges et inania iura tuentem.* 9.204-206: *olim vera fides Sulla Marioque receptis / libertatis obit: Pompeio rebus adempto / nunc et ficta perit.* Cato persistently regards the death of the republic and of *libertas* as something that has already happened, perhaps through the benefit of Lucan's twenty-twenty hindsight. This idea also surfaces in Seneca *epist.* 14.13.



metapoetic.<sup>27</sup> Lucan's introductory disclaimer – *non cura laborque/noster scire valet, nisi quod volgata per orbem/fabula pro vera decepit saecula causa* (9.621-623) – combined with the myth's overt Ovidian echoes,<sup>28</sup> has led Malamud and Papaioannou to assert that the episode is an allegory for the process of writing poetry.<sup>29</sup> But this misapplies Ovidian themes to Lucan's text: Lucan's metapoetic moments generally occur in relation to a *vates* and not in the context of metamorphosis.<sup>30</sup> Besides, the disclaimer he uses is a reasonably common *topos* of didactic literature.<sup>31</sup> I am in agreement with the aforementioned interpretations to the extent that I have focused my argument upon the patterns of imagery appearing in this passage that are commensurate with those found elsewhere in the epic – heads, mutilation, perversion of nature, and (as remains to be seen) the gaze. Where I differ, however, is in this popular invocation of a closed referential system, namely that poetry is, in the final assessment, about poetry. The purpose of the Perseus and Medusa and snake allegories is to illustrate the character of Lucan's Cato, not just as a persona in Lucan's epic, but also as a historical person, and a political and philosophical ideal. Hence their meaning reaches beyond the confines of the poem, although detailed discussion of this must perforce be postponed until later in my argument.

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27 Eldred 2000 interprets the snakes as predominantly metapoetic, even declaring (63): "Lucan's epic [...] is itself about poetry." Malamud 2003: 32 asserts that the gorgon's head "is an emblem not just of civil war, but of Lucan's own artistic production, *Civil War*." Papaioannou 2005: 228-234 is influenced by Malamud's argument and suggests that the Medusa episode is designed to draw attention to Lucan's incorporation and adaptation of Ovid's text.

28 Fantham 1992: 104-106 examines Lucan's debt to Ovid in this passage. Malamud 2003 and Papaioannou 2005 base much of their respective analyses on this textual relationship. The connection between Ovid and Lucan also points to the latter's use of Hellenistic literature. Hellenistic influence is almost palpable in the Libyan excursus, especially in the idea that Medusa's blood was the *aition* of snakes (9.696-700, compare *met.* 4.617-620), which derives from A.R. 4.1513-1517. For further details of Lucan's use of Hellenistic literary motifs, see Landolfi 2007, Leigh 2000, and Shoaf 1978: 143-148.

29 Malamud 2003: 32, 40-41 and Papaioannou 2005: 231-234.

30 For a comprehensive study of the *vates* and his or her role in Lucan's epic, see O'Higgins 1988.

31 Wick 2004: 247 analyses other occurrences of this sentiment in Latin literature. Raschle 2001: 180 remarks that the disclaimer may also be used to justify Lucan's transition from historical to mythological material: "Schließlich muss ein am Realismus orientierter Dichter seinem Publikum verständlich machen, warum er vom eingeschlagenen Pfad abweicht und plötzlich seinem Werk mythologische Stoffe hinzufügt."

## 2. Cato's Eyes

The second and equally important way in which Lucan aligns Cato with Medusa is through the gorgon's gaze. In a recent article, Saylor remarks that looking is key to both the Perseus and Medusa excursus and Cato's battle with the snakes.<sup>32</sup> Lucan's repeated use of the verb *spectare* in these two episodes has encouraged some scholars to interpret them as a warped form of amphitheatrical entertainment.<sup>33</sup> Yet the verb need not necessarily evoke the arena. A more pertinent explanation, and one that more fully clarifies Cato's behaviour is Seneca's idea of the Stoic witness, the self-reflexive spectator who aims at becoming impervious to suffering. Consequently, Lucan aligns Cato's gaze with Medusa's by granting both a hardening effect, although in Medusa's case it is literal and in Cato's more emotional. As with the severed head, Lucan associates this other fundamental aspect of Medusa with the republican cause: the hapless Pompey stoically composes his own death while Caesar embodies a mutability that is directly opposed to the gorgon's defining characteristic.

In order to explore the meaning and effects of Cato's gaze, it is necessary to address the influential view propounded by Leigh in his 1997 monograph, *Spectacle and Engagement*. Leigh notes that Lucan refers to both Curio's defeat and Cato's odd ophidian battle as *spectacula* (4.784; 9.805).<sup>34</sup> He regards the latter episode as having two kinds of spectatorship, operating on different but interrelated levels: Cato watches his men "with horror and sympathy" while Lucan, in collusion with the snakes he apostrophizes, creates amphitheatrical entertainment resembling a *venatio*.<sup>35</sup> The readers, as spectators, are presented with "an amphitheatre unburdened with Stoic elevation, as just a source of spectacle, a theatre of blood."<sup>36</sup> Moreover, Cato's failure to help his men in any practical way has led Leigh to conclude that the desert march is "an allegory for the impotence of philosophy."<sup>37</sup> A significant result of Leigh's theory about Lucan's aesthetics is that Cato's creed and behaviour are belittled. However, just because Lucan revels in the horror created by the snakes, it does

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32 Saylor 2002: 459 provides a comprehensive list of Lucan's references to eyes and looking in this section of Book 9.

33 Leigh 1997: 265-282 is the major proponent of this view. Raschle 2001: 252-253 admits that he largely follows Leigh in his allegorical interpretation of the snakes.

34 Leigh 1997: 250, 279, 290.

35 Leigh 1997: 273-282.

36 Leigh 1997: 279.

37 Leigh 1997: 273.

not follow that their violence is more integral to Lucan's meaning than Cato's steadfast survival.

While I certainly agree with Leigh that Lucan's Libyan scenes employ imagery of the games – indeed the element of spectacle is a crucial part of all Lucan's civil war descriptions – I do not find his interpretation of Cato convincing. In the first place, Cato does not watch his men “with horror and sympathy” so much as with an extreme form of detachment (9.881-889):

cogit tantos tolerare labores  
 summa ducis virtus, qui nuda fusus harena  
 excubat atque omni fortunam provocat hora.  
 omnibus unus adest fati; quocumque vocatus  
 advolat atque ingens meritum maiusque salute 885  
 contulit, in letum vires; puduitque gementem  
 illo teste mori. quod ius habuisset in ipsum  
 ulla lues? casus alieno in pectore vincit  
 spectatorque docet magnos nil posse dolores.

Cato is present at every man's death, but the only support he provides is the strength for them to die, and this comes through his role as *spectator*.<sup>38</sup> He does not treat these deaths as a form of entertainment<sup>39</sup> nor does Lucan create a separate narrative level for his readers to regard them as such. Admittedly, Cato's behaviour is odd even for one of Lucan's heroes, a characteristic commonly indicating that Lucan is straining to make a point at the price of verisimilitude, or that he is borrowing material from elsewhere. In this particular instance, Cato's role as both *spectator* and *testis* bears remarkable resemblance to the portraits of the witness that appear in Seneca's *Epistulae*.<sup>40</sup> Notably, Seneca regularly uses the verb *spectare* in these situations. In *epist.* 11.8, he declares:

Aliquis vir bonus nobis diligendus est ac semper ante oculos habendus, ut sic tamquam illo spectante vivamus et omnia illo vidente faciamus.

He picks up the idea again in *epist.* 25.5 – “*Sic fac,*” *inquit “omnia, tamquam spectet Epicurus”* – and 85.29, where the brave Stoic *invictus ex*

38 Narducci 2001: 182-184 asserts that Lucan also characterizes Cato's behaviour as that of a good and respected general, who tends to all of his men. This is not an unreasonable theory. I do not, however, agree with Narducci's suggestion (183) that Lucan drew upon Caesar's self-promoted *exemplum* in order to praise Cato. Lucan's Cato is completely antithetical to his Caesar and it seems improbable that Lucan would create such an allusion.

39 Leigh 1997: 276 admits this.

40 Narducci 2001: 184-185 likewise draws connections between the behaviour of Lucan's Cato and the role of the witness in Senecan philosophy.

*alto dolores suos spectat*. This kind of spectator, not the audience member at the games, is the model for Lucan's Cato.

Such evidence leads to a further refutation of Leigh's argument – Cato's battle with the snakes is not entirely free from "Stoic elevation." In fact, a scene Seneca illustrates in *epist.* 78.21 is not only key to Lucan's portrayal of Cato at 9.881-889 but also to Seneca's philosophy:

Habes, quod agas: bene luctare cum morbo. Si nihil te coegerit, si nihil exoraverit, insigne produs exemplum. O quam magna erat gloriae materia, si spectaremur aegri! Ipse te specta, ipse te lauda.

This passage, more than any other in the *Epistulae*, explains the behaviour of Lucan's Cato as distinctly Stoic.<sup>41</sup> As is widely recognized, a large part of Seneca's Stoic doctrine concentrates on freeing the individual from fear and its attendant constraints, and so cultivating a variety of personal, self-reliant *libertas*.<sup>42</sup> In this regard, Seneca is often especially concerned with freedom from the fear of bodily suffering.<sup>43</sup> Cato's men are ashamed to die noisily – *puduitque gementem/illo teste mori* (9.886-887). The concept inherent in Lucan's depiction is that they must distance themselves from their own suffering. No matter how ineffectual it may seem given the situation, it is the quality of Cato's endurance and rationalized response that is meant to help his soldiers as they undergo the effects of fatal poison. Earlier in Book 9, Cato has associated his role as *testis* with the soldiers' necessary *patientia* (390-392): *hi mihi sint comites [...] / qui me teste pati vel quae tristissima pulchrum / Romanumque putant*. Essentially, Lucan's Cato allegorizes a Senecan Stoic response to pain.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, it is as if Lucan had lifted Cato from the pages of Seneca and made his role as imagined spectator quite literal.<sup>45</sup>

In keeping with Cato's physical enactment of Seneca's idea, this Senecan brand of emotional detachment even succeeds in saving a life in

41 I have called the Senecan doctrine 'Stoic' for the purposes of simplification in such a short paper, but it is true that Seneca compiled his philosophical views from a variety of authors and this is equally so with Lucan. Treating Lucan's work as an epic of doctrinaire Stoicism is thus misguided, as Lucan appears to have been far more influenced by his uncle's version than any other. For a contrasting view, see Martindale 1984: 72-73.

42 See Gowing 2005: 78-81. Bartsch 2006: 183-208 provides a very informative study of the Senecan concept of freedom and ethical behaviour, and the ways in which the philosopher develops these via the imagined presence of a witness.

43 Bartsch 2006: 194.

44 Narducci 2001: 185.

45 Making physical what is in other works either metaphorical or allegorical is, I feel, a particular quality of Lucan's writing style. Seneca specifically refers to Cato as an ideal witness at *epist.* 11.10; 25.6; 104.21-22.

*Pharsalia* 9. When Murrus is poisoned by a basilisk, he quickly amputates his own arm in order to continue living (9.830-833):

quam protinus ille resecto 830  
 ense ferit totoque semel demittit ab armo,  
 exemplarque sui spectans miserabile leti  
 stat tutus pereunte manu.

Via the terms *exemplar* and *spectans*, Lucan replicates the situation described in *epist.* 78 whilst adding his own typically gory epic touch. Murrus has managed to save his own life by means of a very literal, highly graphic form of detachment. That this resistance to pain and death is also a mental state is made clear by the fact that Murrus is able to watch his hand disintegrate as if it were his whole self – *exemplarque sui spectans miserabile leti* (9.832).<sup>46</sup> He resembles the sage described in *epist.* 85.29 who, unconquered, gazes down upon his sufferings. In the midst of all the carnage, Murrus represents a vindication of Cato's impassive stare.

If Cato's ethical gaze is demonstrably Senecan in origin, what, one may well ask, is the role of Medusa in all of this? Her gaze evidently constitutes an important parallel to Cato's. Typically, Medusa's look has a hardening effect. Taking his cue from Ovid, Lucan stresses, in semi-comic detail, the disastrous fate of whatever meets Medusa's eyes – petrified birds even fall from the heavens whenever she looks up into the sky (9.649).<sup>47</sup> At 9.640-641, Lucan's penchant for physical detail portrays the corporeal effect of Medusa's gaze: *anima periire retenta/membra, nec emissae riguere sub ossibus umbrae*. In less literal terms, this is also the intended result of Cato's fixed look. Cato is, as Seneca says, *rigidus* (*epist.* 11.10) and the adjective Lucan most commonly associates with him in Book 9 is *durus*.<sup>48</sup> Like Medusa's, his look should have a hardening effect; unlike Medusa's, it is meant to be salvific rather than mortifying.

Lucan also relies heavily upon the verb *spectare* in his description of Medusa. With characteristic hyperbole and dark irony, he declares that the snaky hair is the only part of Medusa one may look upon and still live (9.636-637): *hoc habet infelix, cunctis impune, Medusa/quod spectare*

46 Leigh 1997: 280-281, reads this depiction against Seneca's portrayal of Mucius Scaevola (*epist.* 24.5), which is a valuable approach, but wrongfully concludes that Lucan's imagery of the amphitheatre induces readers to treat Murrus as spectacle: "the reaction of the safe spectator Murrus offers a surrogate for such behaviour in a way that Mucius never could." Certainly Murrus is safe because he has managed to become a spectator, but a spectator of a very different kind from the one Leigh envisages – not an audience member, but a successful practitioner of Senecan Stoic detachment.

47 See above, n. 28 for discussion of the Ovidian intertext.

48 Thomas 1982: 114-116 notes and analyzes these instances of *durus* in Book 9.

*licet*. Of course, Lucan's observation skirts the nasty fact that this is not the case with her offspring. *Spectare* further appears in the account of Perseus' deed: Athena gives the hero a shield *in quo saxificam iussit spectare Medusam* (9.670), and is not able to look – *nec Pallas spectare potest* (9.681) – when the gorgon dies. Interestingly, all of these occurrences refer to Medusa as the indirect, reflected or avoided object of somebody's gaze. Lucan's narrative never allows its readers to look directly at the gorgon, nor the gorgon to exercise the power of her eyes. While Cato is a practising subject of this hardening gaze, Medusa, to whom the quality is innate, is only ever an object. On a narrative level, Lucan's trick cleverly keeps his audience safe from Medusa. Yet this play of subject and object could also have a further meaning, one that relates once more to the Senecan Stoic witness. Evidently, imagining a witness to one's deeds requires a certain degree of self-objectification. The paradox that the subject must become at least partially objectified in order to retain its subjectivity is played out in Murrus' harsh action against himself. Hence I tentatively advance the hypothesis that Lucan's Cato and Medusa represent the two contrasting elements of Seneca's idea.

Like Murrus, the dying Pompey perceives himself as both subject and object (8.621): *seque probat moriens*. He distances himself from the physical and emotional pain of his own death (8.615–617; 619–620) and comforts himself that eternity is also his witness – *aevumque sequens speculatur ab omni/orbe ratem Phariamque fidem* (8.623–624). Despite being Lucan's most emotional character, Pompey here attempts to achieve a Senecan form of *libertas*.<sup>49</sup> That this performance is given by the principal defender of moribund republican *libertas* indicates that this older form of political freedom is now no longer achievable. Senecan Stoic *libertas*, the careful maintenance of personal freedom in the face of tyranny, is the best Pompey can hope for.

Medusa's power associates the republican cause with a certain rigidity. Caesar, in contrast, is the essence of mutability, an idea clearly illustrated when Lucan links him to Medusa's serpentine progeny. Far from freezing each man's *anima* underneath his bones, the serpent's bite peels back his skin and opens his guts: *nam plagae proxima circum/fugit rupta cutis*

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49 Malamud 2003: 33–37 charts the changes that are wrought on Pompey's head from the moment of his death onward. Given that Pompey is unsuccessful in literally preserving his features, Malamud concludes (33) "Stoic death is overlaid upon the text's digressive, allusive insistence that the Stoic model is insufficient." Yet the whole point of Senecan detachment is that what happens to the body is, essentially, irrelevant. Pompey the man manages not to become enslaved by the pain inflicted by a tyrant, and this is the important point. The changes his head undergoes after this in no way negate his overtly pro-Senecan performance.

*pallentiaque ossa retextit;/iamque sinu laxo nudum sine corpore volnus* (9.767-769). Cato's men disintegrate (and in one case, inflate) to the point where they are no longer even a recognizable collection of body parts.<sup>50</sup> When Lucan observes *quidquid homo est, aperit pestis natura profana* (9.779), it is clear that the *homo*, as a singular identity in a single, cohesive body, is no longer.<sup>51</sup> Caesar aims to destroy the man, and the state, by destroying its body; Cato, and the Senecan ideals to which he adheres, aim to save some essential humanity by disregarding bodily pain.

Of course, giving his men *vires* via a display of his *virtus* when they are barely *vir* any more understandably makes Cato's morality seem a little fatuous to a modern audience. As a result, some modern critics balk at what looks like the sheer impotence of Cato's philosophy and assume Lucan must be mocking it.<sup>52</sup> The occasional difficulty inherent in taking Cato seriously lies in the paradoxical nature of Lucan's project. On the one hand, he is presenting a physical enactment of Seneca's idea, so if Cato fails to save his soldiers we want to assume the idea is failing. On the other hand, the idea is about self-restraint, so Cato can only promote it in a passive way.

Nonetheless, Lucan does manage to confirm the positive power of Cato's creed. To discover this confirmation, it is crucial to read the episode in sequence. In the beginning, Cato cannot save Aulus, the victim of a *dipsas* who eventually opens his own veins in an attempt to cure his desperate thirst (9.759-760): *ferroque aperire tumentes/sustinuit venas atque os implere cruore*. The passage conjures images of Stoic suicide, yet this is not, as Morford suggests, a valiant Stoic death. Morford asserts: "he [Aulus] would have failed in his agony had Cato not been present: thanks to him Aulus died master of his fate."<sup>53</sup> But Lucan underscores the shocking perverted nature of the deed by having Cato scurry quickly from the scene (9.761-762): *iussit signa rapi propere Cato: discere nulli/permisum est hoc posse sitim*. For Aulus, the force of thirst triumphs over any form

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50 The function and effect of such graphic violence in Lucan's epic is comprehensively and insightfully explored by Bartsch 1997: 10-47. Adopting Kristeva's notion of the abject, Bartsch asserts that in Lucan human identity relies almost solely upon bodily integrity. The confusion between subject and object even carries over into Lucan's syntax, and Bartsch regards this as a powerful expression of civil war, which necessarily violates the boundaries of enemy and ally. For a broader but equally convincing critique of violence in Neronian poetry, see Most 1992.

51 Bartsch 1997: 21.

52 See Leigh 1997: 267-273, and Johnson 1987: 35-66 who reads Cato's virtue as quite simply delusional and argues that, in Lucan's universe, Cato is no better than Caesar.

53 Morford 1967: 128.

of self-restraint or self-reliance, and Cato is powerless to stop it.<sup>54</sup> Yet, when Murrus faces the final ophidian opponent roughly one hundred lines later, his emotional and physical detachment grants him survival. As opening and closing scenes, they frame the ideal of freedom from suffering by presenting one failed and one successful *exemplum*, both in reminiscently Stoic terms.

### 3. Libertas or Death?

Clearly Lucan's Perseus and Medusa allegory is not a straightforward celebration of one man's triumph over a serpentine opponent. Lucan associates Cato far more with Medusa than he does with Perseus and, as in the case of Hercules and Antaeus, thereby subverts his paradigm. But unlike the pattern of Hercules, Antaeus, Juba and Curio, Lucan's later allegory does not aim solely to cast the historical protagonist in a bad light. Cato is a far more complex character than Curio, and the story of Perseus and Medusa more ambiguous than its counterpart in Book 4. To start with, Perseus does not possess the same Roman military associations as Hercules, a point that detracts from the possibility of his being a civilizing force.<sup>55</sup> The result of his mission is also rather ambivalent, as Medusa's decapitation enables a race of deadly serpents to come into being. Finally, by cutting off her head, Perseus is acting in a way that, in the context of Lucan's *Pharsalia*, embodies the Caesarian conduct of civil war.<sup>56</sup> Medusa is likewise ambiguous. She may be a hideous native Libyan monster, but her face, Lucan avers, also helps the gods to succeed in battle against the giants (9.655-658). Her steely gaze concludes a war that myth records as an assault against the established order of heaven. Unlike Erichtho, who defies and perverts the Olympian powers (6.461-465; 523-525), Lucan's Medusa is a principle of order in Book 7, where she – or, at least, the most important part of her – fights on the Pompeian side.<sup>57</sup>

By linking Cato with Medusa, Lucan illustrates the two principal facets of this troubling hero. On the one hand, he is part of the doomed

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54 As Leigh 1997: 269 observes, “Morford is surely correct to see Aulus’ opening of his own veins as an imitation of the classic mode of Stoic suicide. It is less clear that it is true to orthodox Stoicism to open one’s veins in order to satisfy a raging thirst.”

55 One of the many resonances of the Hercules and Antaeus episode is that it represents the conflict between native barbarian and civilized Roman. See Ahl 1976: 96, 98 and Saylor 1982: 170-174. This theme is also present in the Perseus Medusa excursus, but unfortunately I have had neither the time nor the space to explore it here.

56 Malamud 2003: 39.

57 See above n. 14.



republican cause. It is not just that his active involvement in civil war will ultimately be unsuccessful, but that he is also powerless to stop a destructive force that is specifically Caesarian. Medusa's decapitation and the graphic physical disintegration of Cato's soldiers represent the Caesarian impulse to destroy the political body of the republic. Cato struggles against this force that is innately inimical to *libertas* – *par quod semper habemus/libertas et Caesar* (7.695-696) – but ends up its victim rather than its vanquisher. On the other hand, while civil war viciously continues to unfurl before Cato, Lucan attributes a particular kind of power to his hardnosed hero. Cato's gaze confers bravery that is almost as potent as a glance from Medusa. In this manner Lucan illustrates the self-reliant *virtus* and ultimately selfish *libertas* advocated by his uncle Seneca.<sup>58</sup>

The paradox is that Lucan's Cato 'fights' while at the same time seeming to favour a kind of passivity. He knows he cannot save the moribund political system of which he is an integral part, and so advocates the personal freedom of the individual – a freedom he will eventually exercise through suicide.<sup>59</sup> Yet such a view of Cato seems problematic for many prominent critics of Lucan. Both Johnson and Leigh feel that Cato's detachment combined with Lucan's aesthetics – his vicious style, graphic violence, black humour – indicate that the author is undermining the sage and his Stoicism.<sup>60</sup> Sklenář, in contrast, affirms Cato's Stoic ethics, but asserts that they fail to work in Lucan's non-Stoic universe.<sup>61</sup> In each case, critics are trying to resolve the undeniable disharmonies in Lucan's work and his portrait of Cato in particular. Yet they do so by turning Lucan into a kind of postmodern cynic or nihilist.<sup>62</sup> Rudich succinctly encapsulates this critical tendency:

in the eyes of a post-modernist, any discourse necessarily subverts itself which makes an inquiry into its author's attitudes inconsequential. By disregarding the specifics of the Roman imperial audience as well as the operation of the period's rhetoricized mentality, this kind of scholarship primarily reflects the sensibilities of the reader who is construed not as Lucan's, but as our own contemporary.<sup>63</sup>

58 Shoaf 1978: 150 aptly calls this the "paradox of selfish selflessness."

59 Lintott 1971: 503 expands this idea to embrace the entire project of Lucan's epic: "the moral for the poem was not a political programme (for which Republican history was no longer relevant), but a prescription for the individual."

60 Johnson 1987: 35-66 and Leigh 1997: 265-282.

61 Sklenář 1999 and 2003: 60 posits a "systematic opposition between Cato's ideals and his environment."

62 As Narducci 2001: 172 remarks, this manner of interpreting Cato is largely, if in some cases indirectly, influenced by quasi deconstructionist approaches. Even the author of this paper has proposed a theory along these lines for a forthcoming article – a theory she hereby renounces.

62 Rudich 1997: 108.

The portrait of Lucan as cynically detached is simply not convincing. If nothing else, his narrative voice could certainly never be accused of neutrality.<sup>64</sup> Hence a more fruitful approach may be simply to accept the disharmonies and attempt to trace their varied geneis.

In the case of Lucan's Cato, several significant and potentially contradictory influences may be hypothesized. As I have already observed, there is notable overlap between Cato's behaviour and that recommended by Lucan's uncle, Seneca. In turn, this politically safe image of Cato as a Stoic wise man is at least partially composed of accretions from the declamatory schools.<sup>65</sup> So far, the portrait is unified. However, Seneca's and the declaimers' Cato is largely dissociated from the complexities of his actual historical context and thus becomes a neatly one-dimensional figure. When Lucan reanimates Cato, he faces the contradictions stemming from Cato's participation in the civil war.<sup>66</sup> Lucan must deal with the historical material that Seneca's sanitized Cato barely addresses. Hence a kind of *contaminatio* takes place between the obviously influential Senecan version of Cato as Stoic *exemplar* and the historical Cato's behaviour. For the Cato of the late republic did not advocate the resignation of an early imperial Stoic.<sup>67</sup> Likewise, the *libertas* he chased was not the same as Lucan's and Seneca's: "Cato's relevance in Neronian Rome [...] lies not in his political views, but rather in the manner in which he conducted himself in trying circumstances."<sup>68</sup> There is more than one definition of *libertas* at work here, and both of them are found in the confusing portrait of Lucan's Cato.<sup>69</sup>

An equally crucial factor in Lucan's depiction of Cato is the poet's own life. As Lucan's critics have often observed with some perplexity, the Pisonian conspiracy for which Lucan became *paene signifer* (Suet. *vita Lucani*) did not intend the restoration of the republic; it was going to replace one Caesar with another.<sup>70</sup> Any argument that the *Pharsalia*

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64 D'Alessandro Behr 2007: 7.

65 See Bonner 1966: 284-286 for some details on the deliberations typically put into Cato's mouth for the sake of rhetorical exercise.

66 See above n. 25.

67 George 1991: 239 remarks that as a man, Cato provided both good and bad *exempla*, and that he came to be admired for his *constantia* much more than for his republicanism.

68 Gowing 2005: 79.

69 George 1991: 238 observes that definitions of *libertas*, *dignitas*, and *auctoritas* (to name only a few) changed significantly once the principate was instituted.

70 Griffin 1984: 159 believes that the conflict between Lucan and Nero was purely literary and does not view the *Pharsalia* as a work of opposition in any way. "We shall have to accept that Lucan's political views were seriously inconsistent, for the poem cannot be a manifesto for the conspirator. Love of

supports Cato and denounces Caesarism obviously has to address this glaring detail. So does any argument that Lucan was a nihilist. The most viable solution to this problem is that Senecan philosophy did not view kingship and *libertas* as incompatible: it simply made a sharp distinction between a tyrant and a good ruler.<sup>71</sup> Hence Lucan's epic denounces both Caesar and Alexander as tyrants and has Cato admitting to the death of the republic even when he is involved in a bitter fight for its survival.<sup>72</sup> Yet there is one more snag: the *libertas* Seneca depicts is generally a form of non-involvement whereas Lucan was, in literature and in life, involved up to his eyeballs. Without more detailed evidence, this contradiction can never fully be resolved, but it is clearly yet another integral part of Lucan's view of Cato, whose resistance the poet praises in no uncertain terms.

One final question remains and that is the issue of Cato's *virtus*, the moral quality that enables him to convey strength to his soldiers. Like *libertas*, *virtus* has various shades of meaning in Lucan's epic and Cato's brand must therefore be carefully delineated. Certainly, the *Pharsalia*'s discordant universe entirely overturns the concept of martial *virtus*, upon which more traditional epic was built.<sup>73</sup> The battle between Cato and the

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the Republic was not to be served by replacing Nero with another stagestruck aristocrat, and indeed, the conspirators, according to Tacitus, did not invite a consul of the year to join them, because he might urge the restoration of the Republic." By not allowing for this primarily Senecan Stoic notion of *libertas* being compatible with absolute rule, Griffin fails to perceive the possible nuances in Lucan's actions. Also, the passage in Tacitus to which she refers (*ann.* 15.52.3) is not nearly so clear-cut as her argument implies. Piso wished to prevent Marcus Julius Vestinus Atticus from joining the conspiracy *ne ad libertatem oreretur, vel delecto imperatore alio sui muneris rem publicam faceret*. Here Tacitus is using *res publica* in the more general sense of "state" rather than the specific form of government that existed prior to the principate. At the absolute opposite end of the scale from Griffin is Martindale 1984, who argues that Lucan was not aiming for *senatoria libertas* but full restoration of the republic. Yet this view also seems implausible given that Lucan's vicious attacks against Caesar in the *Pharsalia* need not apply to Caesarism *per se*. Martindale 1984: 67 fails to make this careful distinction.

71 See Wirzubski 1950: 143-147 for a concise description of the relationship between Stoicism and *libertas* during the early principate. For the question of *quid interest inter tyrannum et regem*, see *Sen. clem.* 1.2.4.

72 George 1991: 257 concludes, like Martindale 1984, that Lucan rejects the prevalent Stoic theory of a just king and uses the poet's portrayal of Alexander as evidence. Yet, as George himself earlier observes (241), the Roman Stoic writers tended to depict Alexander as an arrogant over-reacher rather than the ideal ruler imagined by some of their Greek counterparts. The major snag with any argument that Lucan aimed at restoring the republic is that it removes the young poet too much from his contemporary milieu.

73 Johnson 1987: 53, 57. Lucan foregrounds this idea early in Book 1 (667-668): *scelerique nefando/nomen erit virtus*.

snakes certainly represents some of the perversions inherent in civil war and civil war narratives. However, Cato's *virtus* should not be judged solely as martial prowess. Although Lucan has Cato admit that he will take part in civil war and that this will inevitably make him *nocens* (2.288), the poet is also careful never to depict him actively engaging in combat. In the snake scene, Cato's *virtus* is not meant to be practical or military, even though Lucan plays upon this meaning by exploring *virtus* in the context of serpentine battles. As is the case with *libertas*, there is some disjuncture between the ideals Lucan attributes to Cato and his historical actions. This does not mean that Lucan does not take Cato's *virtus* seriously, merely that the panoply of history will not fit Stoic theory.

The myth of Perseus and Medusa offers a portrait of Cato as a hero of the doomed republic and a Stoic *exemplar*. Although its parallels are not always pristine, or even straightforward, it provides a framework for interpreting the equally allegorical scene of Cato's battle with the snakes and reveals that his triumph is not so much physical as spiritual. Lucan takes Cato seriously but still does not let him win in any real sense. Yet this is characteristic of Lucan's contradictory vision of Cato – a vision that can only be understood when the text is placed in context. While it is currently out of fashion to make any reference to the author's life, I feel that whatever sketchy evidence we have for Lucan's political and philosophical allegiances provides fundamental background to Lucan's Cato. This character's stubborn defiance of tyrannical power is presented as an admirable trait. It is also, unfortunately, a foregone conclusion from Lucan's vantage point. The detached *sapientia* advocated by Seneca bleeds into Lucan's work as the only option remaining for the man who wishes to be free. Lucan's Cato is simultaneously selfish and selfless; impotent yet powerful. In some respects he is a battleground for Lucan's own political views, and the key to understanding this viciously tortured epic. Contradictions in Cato's characterization do not point to a subversive cynicism typical of a late twentieth century deconstructionist, but rather to the troubled political beliefs of a young aristocrat who struggled to find a satisfactory solution in the options offered to him, since in the end resistance had become almost, but not quite, purely rhetorical.

