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Cato amator: generic hybridity, monstrous transgressions, and elegiac emasculation in Lucan's Libyan tale (*Bellum civile* 9)

Introduction

Hybrids, monsters, freaks, and beasts „can be pushed to the farthest margins of geography and discourse, hidden away at the edges of the world and in the forbidden recesses of our mind, but they always return," as Cohen argues in the introduction to his reader *Monster theory: reading culture.*[1] In this article, we encounter at least three hybrids which had indeed been pushed to the margins but returned triumphantly to discourse and theory: the monstrous Gorgon Medusa, famous for transgressing biological and moral boundaries; Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, an „impure" epic that evokes and cites different genres, traditions, and myth versions; and Lucan's *Bellum civile*, an equally subversive and non-monolithic epic which, like Ovid's *opus magnum,* has reappeared in classical scholarship only in recent decades.[2] I examine the episode often referred to as „Cato in Libya", found in Lucan's transgressive amalgam of „bodies changed" and fleshly passions, from a perspective grounded in critical and feminist theory (the gist of which I explain in the first, theoretical, section). This monstrous (i. e. diachronic, intergeneric, and comparative) 'mixture' might admittedly seem bizarre at first, but in the mythical landscape of Libya – and in a collective volume on genre transgression –, we should not be surprised to encounter wondrous hybrids. Diverse *corpora* – physical or literary – lend themselves to diverse approaches, and a lecture *à rebours* can shed new light on the winding and twisting serpentine episode in Lucan's Book 9.

1 Epic monsters – monstrous epics: theorizing poetic hybridity

Ancient epics – Near Eastern, Greek, and Roman alike[3] – are fond of „man slaughters beast"-narratives, featuring a male hero's victory over an ugly, brutal, blood-thirsty, often female, creature.[4] Among all the mythical τέρατα, θαύματα, *monstra,* and *prodigia,*

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[1] Cohen 1996, 20.
[2] Martindale 1993, 55 – 74.
[3] Felton 2012, 104 – 126.
[4] Aston 2011, 34 – 35.

hybrid creatures[5] represent the largest group, including well-known monsters like the Minotaur, Centaurs, Sirens, Chimeras, Sphinxes, and Gorgons. Although they were also worshipped at times,[6] liminal beings combining at least two different normatively acknowledged species, genres or genders have been considered transgressive: „The too-precise laws of nature as set forth by science are gleefully violated in the freakish compilation of the monster's body".[7] Modern scholars of ancient monsters emphasize their significance for the study of human imagination: inexistent yet imaginable, hybrids are „créations de l'esprit" and „productions de l'imagination humaine, pour les unes totalement oniriques, pour d'autres, avatars fantasmés de diverses mésaventures de la perception ou de l'entendement".[8] As „mental constructs", monsters „offer a privileged point of entry into the collective imagination of a people".[9] They inhabit a limbus between *tremendum* and *fascinans*[10] and have stereotypically been disparaged as the result of „unlawful" intercourse[11] or other „unholy" acts of mixture and are, thus, aligned with „bastards" and „freaks"[12], symbols of moral depravity or political turmoil.[13] Because hybrid monsters deviate from any notion of norm and standard, they call for „a radical rethinking of boundary and normality".[14] Perceived as threats against the patriarchal order, monsters had to be eliminated by the very epitomes of patriarchy: strong, masculine, fearless, clever epic heroes.

Today, the humanities have adopted a critical stance towards normative gender and power structures as well as a vivid fascination for abysses and margins of imagination, ruptures, and transgressions of seemingly natural boundaries. The admiration of epic heroism has passed its peak, whereas divergence from canonical ideals such as the beautiful, healthy, and abled body have gained popularity. One particularly influential thinker in this regard was Michel Foucault, who, in his lecture series *Les Anormaux* (1974–1975), defined the monster as „the limit, both the point at which law is overturned and the exception that is found only in extreme cases", which „combines the impossible and the forbidden" and, thus, contradicts any norm and law.[15] But Foucault continued a

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5 Despite its sound and origin, the word „hybrid" was not applied to composite creatures in classical Greek – instead, one or two constitutive elements were precisely named, as in ἡμίονος („half-donkey" = mule) or τραγέλαφος („goat-stag"), the latter being, according to Aristotle, a mythical „imaginative animal" (Létoublon 2009, 23).

6 On monsters and chthonic creatures in the Underworld, see Heil in this volume (p. 156–157).

7 Cohen 1996, 6–7.

8 Jouteur 2009, 43.

9 Hopman 2012, xii.

10 Gevaert/Laes 2013, 211; Brittnacher 2009, 155.

11 This idea can also be found outside of the imaginative world of myth. Röttgers, in his introduction to the essay collection *Monster* analyzes European moral and law texts before the Enlightenment according to which a disabled child's mother could be accused of immoral motherhood (2010, 10–14).

12 Foucault 2003, 63–64; Schmitz-Emans 2010, 118–120; Bartl/Catani 2010, 12.

13 Lowe 2015, 14–27.

14 Cohen 1996, 6.

15 Foucault 2003, 56.

discussion begun much earlier: the demarcating, yet permeable, line between humans and animals had already been central to ancient philosophy. Aristotle and Pliny the Elder both commented on the philosophical problem that extraordinary, unruly creatures challenge all taxonomic efforts of classifying and organizing the world into clear-cut categories. Depicting, describing, or theorizing about creatures in-between provided an opportunity to rethink the question of what it meant to be human.[16] Since „the human was a fragile and fluid entity and there were different levels and classifications [citizens, women, foreigners, slaves] of humanness,"[17] the tangents and borders between species had to be constantly negotiated.

Attempts to ban unruly hybrids from the public sphere as well as from artistic and literary representation because of their disruptive potential have been numerous. Hardie suggests that Augustus' socio-political measures of moral restoration might have been an „anxious response to the fact that the age of Augustus really was an 'age of the marvellous'"[18] during which the standards for imaginability were decisively redefined. Hence, the Augustan and early imperial „sense of order in both the political and the aesthetic spheres" did not solely attempt to suppress or exclude the monstrous and the marvellous, but rather to limit, contain, and manage these phenomena by imposing stylistic and moral rules.[19] Lucretius' claim for the exclusion of impossible hybrid creatures from science and philosophy (5,878–924)[20] and Vitruvius' „attack on the taste for monstrous and anti-realist forms" [21] are part of this restrictive policy, as well as poetic discourses on unity.

The latter is most prominently treated by Horace who, in analogy with many treatises on poetry, understands literary works metaphorically as bodies designated for perfection and beauty – values stereotypically equalized with order, harmony, evenness, proportion, and balance.[22] In the opening lines of his *Ars poetica*, Horace uses the image of a hybrid creature as a deterrent example for ill-constructed, unmatching texts (Hor. *ars* 1–5):

> *humano capiti cervicem pictor equinam*
> *iungere si velit et varias inducere plumas*
> *undique collatis membris, ut turpiter atrum*
> *desinat in piscem mulier formosa superne,*
> *spectatum admissi, risum teneatis, amici?*   5

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16 Hughes 2010, 107–109.
17 Hudson 2017, 15.
18 Hardie 2009, 3.
19 Hardie 2009, 4.
20 Nelis 2009, 253–256.
21 Hardie 2009, 5; cf. Lowe 2015, 19–23.
22 Fischer 2010, 48–51; Schmitz-Emans 2010, 121–122.

> To a human head if a painter should wish to join a horse's neck, and make multi-colored feathers grow on limbs gathered from all over, so that horribly in a black fish-tail she ends, a beautiful woman up above, would you, friends let in for a viewing, hold back your laughter? (trans. Ferriss-Hill)

This aesthetic judgment becomes central for the poetological discourse which praises unity, purity, and clarity, while disparaging narrative and stylistic dissolution. Ancient aesthetics measure unity and consistency of artistic works based on their analogy with nature.[23] Hence, a non-linear, shape-shifting text is, for the prescriptive Horace,[24] equally unnatural, confusing, and ridiculous as a deformed, impaired, female and hence even more monstrous, chimera, „like a sick man's dreams, such that neither head nor foot can be reconciled with a single form" (*ars* 7). The hybrid creature „combines all four branches of the ancient animal kingdom",[25] and evokes creatures from Homer, Hesiod, Plato, Virgil, and Lucretius. The enigmatic disjointedness of limbs is „mirrored and accentuated by the tortuous syntax"[26] which complicates the imaginative process:

> [S]ome components are missing, we begin to realize, others inadequately explained. That the head belongs to a woman is unexpected (in this Greco-Roman milieu a human head is by default a man's), and this causes us to go back to the beginning/top and start over, readjusting and refining our mental image. [...] The need to choose between the possible syntaxes of *collatis membris* must be part of the general illusion: Horace is deft enough a poet that when he creates an ambiguous grammatical construction, and with it an ambiguous image, he typically intends for us to ponder.[27]

Although Horace demands harmony and clarity, his own *Ars poetica* in parts lacks unity and structure, and his oeuvre repeatedly turns to grotesque aesthetics.[28] Later on in his poem (*ars* 73–85), he characterizes the well-established genres epic, elegy, iambic poetry, hymn, tragedy, comedy, and satire according to their apt rhythm, style, register, themes, and the emotions they shall evoke in the audience lest the poet wants to be ridiculed. Nevertheless, in the opening lines, he has himself *demonstrated* a possible narrative mode for the ekphrasis of impossible hybrid creatures of which neither form nor content can be assigned to a certain generic category – the signifier (distorted syntax) supports the unimaginable signified (the chimeric female monster) which thus becomes, if not natural, at least imaginable. In other works, too, Horace „does not always

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[23] Citroni 2009, 20.

[24] Horace is not alone in this judgment of taste: Up to the 18th century, sets of poetic rules by authorities like Pierre Daniel Huet (*Traité de l'origine des romans*, 1670), Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux (*L'Art Poétique*, 1674), Alexander Pope (*An Essay on Criticism*, 1711), or Johann Christoph Gottsched (*Versuch einer critischen Dichtkunst*, 1730) referred to the monster-analogy when they advised cohesion and coherence in writing (Fischer 2010, 48–51).

[25] Ferris-Hill 2019, 39.

[26] Ferris-Hill 2019, 40.

[27] Ferris-Hill 2019, 41–42.

[28] Ferris-Hill 2019, 44–46; Pietropaolo 2018, 193n2.

obey his own injunction".[29] His self-subversion reveals a paradigmatic ambiguity: the fear of violating the laws of nature in a manner of hubris *and* the fascination for artistic transgression, god-like creation, and human transcendence through arts.[30]

The theoretical discourse on hybrid genres in classical literature was initiated by Wilhelm Kroll's seminal chapter „Die Kreuzung der Gattungen" (1924). Considering the many dialects, meters, and topics in Hellenistic poetry and its Roman heirs, the positivistic German philologist sees a „crossing" of generic boundaries as constitutive for Roman poetry: thematic content formerly reserved for certain meters are suddenly dealt with in others, language registers alternate, and new genres are formed through a combination of others.[31] In line with the *zeitgeist*, Kroll uses biological and genetic metaphors to speak about the „*production* of new literary species by means of cross-breeding"[32] when he describes Augustan „hybrids" of epic and elegy (Catullus' epyllia; Virgil's *Georgics*; Ovid's *Fasti*), of elegy and rhetorically refined letters (Ovid's *Heroides*), or of bucolics and elements from a wide range of poetic genres (Horace's *Odes* and Virgil's *Georgics*). Kroll's underlying assumption is one of generic essentialism[33] – allegedly stable generic categories are mixed in an act of intellectual decadence:

> Roman poets not only avoid advertising *Kreuzung*, they tend to stage programmatic respect to a traditional genre, precisely to be able to dramatize their work as deviation or genre-bending [...]. To this end, they need genres to be perceived as strong, pure, and sufficiently unmixed; they practice a reconstructive approach to genre, not a capricious reshuffling.[34]

The ideological assumptions and metaphors with their slightly disconcerting connotations of 'racial' purity set aside, Kroll nevertheless observes and theorizes a playful tendency in Roman poetry that breaks away from conservative aesthetics. Performative in its self-awareness, the concept of genre transgression or „crossing" thus transcends that of generic hybridization in a deconstructionist manner which anticipates Jacques Derrida's inherently subversive *Loi du Genre:* „La loi et la contre-loi se citent à comparaître et se récitent l'une l'autre en ce procès",[35] or as Braund puts it more concisely: „if a system has 'rules', then that is an invitation to break them."[36] When Roman poets seem to re-establish prescriptive generic categories, the citation of blue-print genres

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29 Hardie 2009, 10; Citroni 2009, 28 – 30. See also Farrell 2003, 394 – 396, on how the *Ars poetica* itself transgresses the rules it prescribes for literary production.

30 Armstrong 2009, 90 – 94.

31 Kroll 1924, 202 – 209.

32 Barchiesi 2001, 147.

33 Barchiesi 2001, 146 – 148. Ambühl (2019, 180, and in this volume [p. 21]) critically evaluates heavy-handed biological metaphors (e. g. crossing, evolution, fertilization, infection) frequently employed to describe intergeneric interferences.

34 Barchiesi 2001, 156.

35 Derrida 1980, 255.

36 Braund 2001, 140.

already entails deviance.[37] Derrida does not take meter into account – an essential genre marker for ancient literature.[38] But his relativistic model of intergeneric citation that allows for subversive resistance against and awareness of systemic norms does capture the Roman poets' „healthy tendency [...] to treat literary form dynamically"[39] nicely. They do so through the integration of „unepic" topics into hexametric epics, thus exposing the flexibility of the allegedly heroic and „masculine" genre,[40] or vice versa, by treating subjects of epic grandeur in stereotypically light-hearted elegiac distichs.[41] The act of transgression, as discussed in Foucault's „Preface to Transgression" (1963), an essay with immense impact on philosophy, humanities and social sciences,[42] operates in similar ways as Derrida's *Law of Genre* that already entails its potential breach: „The limit and transgression depend on each other for whatever density of being they possess: a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable and, reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows".[43] Accordingly, transgression in Roman poetry does not reveal a lack of interest in traditional forms, but rather a keen awareness of the poetic tradition that the playful transgressors depend on. Appreciation for such poetic undertakings requires a familiarity with the existing frameworks, both in the authors and the attentive readers. When poets switch between narrative modes, stylistic registers, and genre-specific markers, they expect the audience to recognize the matrices they cite, synthesize, and convert.[44]

The case of Ovid, „the poster boy of Augustan generic hybridization",[45] might illustrate the creative irony of generic clichés. Ovid enjoys asserting prescriptive generic rules while at the same time subverting and blurring them. He embraces the „contamination that epic undergoes when mingling with other genres", which „implies in some sense the abandonment of its totalizing pretenses, and of the character of absolute

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37 On prescriptive definitions of ancient literary genre (i. e. epics as poems about heroes and battles), see the introduction and Bernhard Söllradl's chapter in this volume (p. 93).

38 Hinds 2000, 234.

39 Hinds 2000, 235.

40 This is a point already expressed by Myers, who sees epic as „the one genre that can accommodate and indeed even aims for such [generic] diversity (1994, 12 – 13). The argument is further developed by Hinds: Although often stated as extraneous to epics, the presence of women, love, and passion is always considered and restated in the very genre. This „institutionalized otherness within epic of the genre's female and erotic elements" (2000, 232) is thereby transformed into an integral characteristic of epic itself (cf. esp. 223 – 231 and 241 – 244).

41 Hinds 1987, 115 – 116.

42 The resulting „transgression trend" in the humanities has also been criticized: „Transgression has become a safe topic for the progressive intellectual", states Ashley Tauchert in *Against Transgression* (2008, 10). In defense of the present volume's focus, it might be stated that her very enterprise confirms Derrida's and Foucault's very findings on a metatextual level: if the study of transgression is considered a new norm, the governing standards require such a backlash.

43 Foucault 1977, 34.

44 Hinds 1987, 117.

45 Hinds 2000, 224. See also Sharrock 2021.

'truth' that epic innately possesses."[46] It is, hence, logical, that Ovid's oeuvre is central to many investigations on Augustan genre transgression and metatextual monstrosity.[47] Traditional approaches to the *Metamorphoses*' generic affiliation either sought to highlight their essentially epic traits while minimizing all deviant elements[48] or, like Kroll, to state the opposite and emphasize the *Metamorphoses'* epic impurity.[49] Newer Ovid-scholarship in the wake of Conte and Hinds rather synthesizes these contrary positions: „generic inconsistency in a piece of poetry"[50] does not automatically prove a lack of generic awareness on the poet's part, but a continuation of the Alexandrian playfulness towards tradition and innovation of literary forms.[51] Instead of playing down the „gap between prescription and practice, which is so fundamental to the construction of genre in a classical Roman poem," Hinds acknowledges the „continuing and active dialectic between the genres so mixed, for author and readers alike, 'staged' within the text of the poem concerned."[52] Poetic *recusationes* – apologetic explanations why authors apply certain genres or topics and not others – become the meta-reflective locus for generic explorations: here, the genre „stages itself", the text becomes a „spectacle of literary genres".[53]

But Ovid rejoices not only in literary hybridity, but also in the creative confusion of genders, bodies, and species, as he programmatically embraces the most unnatural phenomenon of artistic hubris – transformation. „Fascinated by distortions of all kinds",[54] Ovid is attracted to monstrous figures like Medusa, the Minotaur, Centaurs, or Scylla. They lose their traditional negative connotations, they are no longer being simply slaughtered by heroes, but become emblems of poetic creation and artistic license.[55] The *Metamorphoses*' irregular and twisting narrative structure provides a labyrinthine frame for the abnormal, impure, uncanny, monstrous, but fascinating and desirable Other. This twofold hybridity can be read against the backdrop of a tradition that the poetic *enfant terrible* evokes and rejects at the same time. His persona's aspirations are revealed candidly: he knows about a poet's power to create fabulous beings that are otherwise impossible or scorned as objectionable (cf. *am.* 3,12,21–22) and presents his monsters qua poetic fabrications.[56] But in this audacious act of intermingling generic hybridity and hybrid creatures, Ovid has a famous, almost even more monstrous epic successor: Lucan.

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46 Rosati 2002, 281.

47 Gildenhard/Zissos 2016, 15.

48 Heinze 1919, followed by Brooks Otis 1970, 83–89.

49 Cf. Hinds 2000, 221.

50 Hinds 1987, 115.

51 Hinds 1987, 116; Jouteur 2001, 209–211.

52 Hinds 2000, 222.

53 Conte 1994, 123–124. On the conspicuous absence of a *recusatio*-passage in the *Bellum civile,* see Kersten in this volume (p. 57–59).

54 Lowe 2015, 7.

55 Jouteur 2009, 44.

56 Jouteur 2009, 47.

2 Symbolic castrations in Ovidian elegy and Lucanian epic

The influence of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* on Lucan has been widely acknowledged in scholarship.[57] Both Ovid and Lucan have been criticized as well as praised for their „headless" or „monstrous" episodic epics without a single proper hero.[58] They share a fascination for dissolving bodies,[59] the human psyche in extreme conditions, and vivid descriptions of violence, change, and decay. Lucan also imitates, emulates, and intensifies Ovid in language and style.[60] We find corresponding themes,[61] cosmological passages, mythological digressions, metamorphic imagery, and similes of Ovidian coinage. Focusing on the civil war between Caesar and Pompey, the *Bellum civile* can be considered a narrative continuation of the *Metamorphoses* the final book of which looks ahead to Ovid's own times (the *mea tempora* so famously evoked in the proem) and the onset of the Augustan era.[62] But Lucan responds to a sense of *Ovidianism* on a broader scale: albeit striking in a hexametric epic concerned mainly with political power, military excursions, and gruesome battle fields, he is as keen a reader of Ovid's elegiac corpus as of the epic models he competes against.[63] The so-called Libyan tale – the core of Lucan's Book 9 – allows us to grasp his creative engagement with Ovid's *Amores* as well as with the *Metamorphoses.*

Let us begin with imagining Lucan reading *Amores* 1,8, Ovid's account of the procuress Dipsas. The *lena* – procuress or bawd – is a conventional threat for the elegiac poet in love.[64] Anxiety of her influence over the beloved *puella* vexes Tibullus, Propertius, and Ovid, although her character is just as 'womanufactured' as the *puella* herself.[65]

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57 E. g. Dinter 2010 and Wheeler 2002, 366–80 (366n16 provides an extensive bibliography on Lucan's reception of Ovid).

58 Dinter explicates the metaliterary implications of body imagery in the chapter „Lucan's Epic Body" in his monograph 2012, 9–49; cf. esp. 27–29.

59 On decapitations, amputations, bloody wounds, and dismembered limbs in Lucan (and other authors), cf. Most 1992; Dinter 2010 and Dinter 2012.

60 Wheeler lists numerous examples (2002, 367–370).

61 On the thematic continuity between *Metamorphoses* and *Bellum civile* cf. esp. Feeney 1991, 292–301.

62 Wheeler 2002, 375.

63 Elegiac notes in Lucan have not gained as much scholarly attention as his epic models, but the elegiac influence in Lucan's portrayal of couples and women (Cato and Marcia; Pompey and Cornelia; Julia's ghost; Cleopatra) has repeatedly been analyzed. In her article „Lucan's *militia amoris*", McCune examines several distorted elegiac moments in Lucan: „Lucan frustrates expectations by negating or inverting the elegiac passage or topos: the civil war thus disturbs even the apolitical world of elegy" (2014, 198).

64 Myers 1996 analyzes the character of the *lena* in Latin love elegy and actual Roman procuresses in rich detail.

65 Cf. Myers 1996, 1 and 6–10. Alison Sharrock (1991) coined the term *womanufacture* to point out that women are perceived, imagined, and represented as artistic creations rather than human beings. M. Wyke also examines the essential literariness of *puella* and *lena* in multiple articles (1987a, 1987b, 1989).

Her malign intention is, if we believe the heartbroken poet-lovers, to corrupt the girls listening to her, spawning their interest in luxury and, thus, turning their hearts away from impoverished poets in favor of wealthy lovers. The criterion for a good match is money, not immaterial qualities, literary talent, education, moral values, or nobility. Herself probably an aged former sex-worker,[66] the bawd advises against honesty, shame, chastity, and monogamy – the more lovers a girl has, the more presents she will get. In their disdainful portrayals of *lenae*, the elegists apply standard satirical invectives against old women: they are unattractive, greedy, and know black magic, love charms, and potent spells (*carmina:* 1,8,4 and 18).[67] Ovid's *lena*-poem is exceptionally long, comedic,[68] and ironic. The poet-lover overhears how Dipsas urges Corinna to despise him and his unrewarding poems. The elegy reproduces her instructions about how to attract and manipulate more generous lovers verbatim, and eventually, the poet curses her harshly. Yet the subtext suggests a more positive reading of her exhortations: Dipsas encourages Corinna to embrace her radiant youth, to enjoy her body and sexuality, and to resist the patriarchal norms that confine women to an unpropertied condition of domestic duties, silent self-denial, and subordination to their husbands. Moreover, attentive readers notice the likeness of the procuress and the elegiac narrator: when the eloquent (1,8,20) Dipsas teaches amatory rhetoric,[69] skillful deception, and sophisticated seduction in order to dishonor faithful marriage beds (*thalamus temerare pudicos:* 19), it becomes clear that she is not just a malevolent pimp, but rather a counter-ego for the *praeceptor amoris* whose erotodidactic *Ars* serves a very similar purpose. Ovid is, in a sense, a Dipsas himself.[70]

But whose opponent, if not the poet-lover's, is the infamously immoral Dipsas, then? Whether or not the reader Lucan asked this question, he came up with a plausible answer: Cato, the paragon of virtue whose traditional, Roman values oppose everything Dipsas stands for – prostitution, venality, luxury, immoderation, alcoholism, urban attitudes, flirtation, mendacity, adultery, sexual freedom, and femininity in general.[71] When Lucan leads his Stoic hero into the Libyan desert, he stages a bold thought-experiment: what happens when the notorious advocate of modesty, self-control, chastity, and rusticity meets the impersonation of moral depravity? The absurdity of such an

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66 Myers 1996, 1 – 6; the *lena* embodies what could be the *puella*'s future once her youth and beauty will be gone.

67 Cf. Myers 1996, 6 – 7; McKeown 1989, 202 – 203. In her Derrida-inspired analysis of the bawd as a seducing witch (1994, 84 – 6), Sharrock observes that the „imputation of magical interference in erotic matters to women, particularly older women, is part of the fear of the female, particularly the female control of sexuality" (84).

68 In his commentary on *am.* 1,8, McKeown emphasizes Dipsas' affinity to Roman comedy, esp. Plautus' *Mostellaria* (1989, 198 – 256).

69 On eloquence and rhetoric in Dipsas' *suasoria*-like sermon, see Gross 1996, 197– 206.

70 Sharrock 1994, 86. Cf. Gross 1996, 204 – 206; Myers 1996, 17 – 21.

71 Myers notes that elegy in general mocks the Roman *mores maiorum* as propagated by Augustus and is to be read against the moral discourse of Roman depravation and decline (1996, 14 – 15). She does not, however, mention Cato as the topical personification of traditional moral values.

encounter would strain even Lucan's imagination; but taking his cues from Ovid, he finds a way to confront Cato with Dipsas: he re-transforms the procuress into the snake of the same name, the venomous viper she had been all along before Ovid made her a bawd.[72] The eponymic thirst (δίψα) connects snake and woman: the former's bite inflicts insatiable thirst upon its victims and kills through parching them; the latter is a drinker – hence always thirsty, even before the poet condemns her to eternal thirst (1,8,114).

Libya is a suitable setting for a Stoic's confrontation with excessive passions; Hercules, Alexander, and the Argonauts undergo similar challenges in the Libyan desert that is imagined to be uninhabitable, at least for humans.[73] Cato's encounter with the Libyan snakes is preceded by a praise of his virtues (Lucan. 9,587–604). Leading his Pompeian troops, he denies all needs of his own and acts solely in his soldiers' best interest. Water is a scarce resource on their march through the desert, but, as is expected of a good general,[74] he patiently waits for everyone else to drink first whenever they find a spring (9,591–593) – with one exception: in the middle of the desert, when the soldiers are already suffering from heat, sun, and dehydration, they finally find a well, but it is infested with a „crowd of serpents, so many that the place could hardly hold them" (*inventus mediis fons unus harenis / largus aquae, sed quem serpentum turba tenebat / vix capiente loco:* 607–609).[75] Here, Cato drinks first, solemnly filling his *pocula* in the manner of Socrates,[76] and encourages his men not to be afraid of a possible poisoning of the water (612–618). In a bitter twist of irony, the pool's water is indeed not dangerous, but all the soldiers are nonetheless bitten, poisoned, and killed. Cato's attempt to save them from thirst results in a catalogue of grotesque deaths that mocks and subverts conventional epic *aristeiae*, thereby introducing a comical note into the parched landscape of civil war. Furthermore, the inglorious episode anticipates the eventual failure of Pompey's camp.[77] The first snakes mentioned are *aspides* and *dipsades* (610), anagrammatically connected but different in nature, since the hydrophobic asps stay at the water's edge while the dipsades are „thirsty in the water's midst" (*in mediis sitiebant dipsades undis:* 610). The wording recalls, as Leigh has observed, the insatiable thirst of Ovid's Tantalus, „the greedy avaricious man of myth par excellence."[78] Ovid's impotence-elegy in the *Amores* employs the mythic comparison when the frustrated poet-lover fails to perform sexually: *sic aret mediis taciti vulgator in undis* (*am.* 3,7,51). In the *Metamorphoses*, the unhappy Iphis also compares herself to Tantalus because she, too, suffers from a metaphorical thirst despite the physical closeness of what she needs – her be-

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72 E. g. in Nicander (*Ther.* 334–342), whose influence on Lucan is discussed in detail by Cazzaniga (1957). On ancient biological accounts on the snake, cf. Wick's diligent herpetological commentary (2004, 312–313).

73 Leigh 2000, 102–9.

74 Leigh 2000, 100; Wick 2004, 232–233.

75 I use Braund's translation (1992) with slight modifications where appropriate.

76 Wick 2004, 241–242.

77 Dinter 2012, 185; Bexley 2010, 138–139. On Cato's responsibility for the casualty, Malamud 2003, 42.

78 Leigh 2000, 101.

loved Ianthe loves her back, but a same-sex match appears impossible (*mediis sitiemus in undis: met.* 9,761). The fact that Lucan copies Ovid's wording almost literally – note the parallel placing of *mediis* and *in undis* – reveals Tantalus' haunting presence. The Ovidian echo hints at the moral dilemma at stake in this passage: self-renunciation versus uncontrollable thirst–read–desire, obedient submission versus audacious transgression.[79] It is logical that this passage has often been read as a parable of Stoicism on trial.[80]

The first death multiplies the philosophical challenge hyperbolically, when a *dipsas* bites the standard-bearer Aulus, who accidentally stepped on its head. His dying process initially resembles the ideal Stoic death – there is „no pain, no sensation of a bite, and even death's appearance is not malignant and the injury does not look threatening" (*vix dolor aut sensus dentis fuit, ipsaque leti / frons caret invidia nec quicquam plaga minatur:* 739–740). The subsequent symptoms, however, pervert any sense of self-mastery, rendering his suicide a typically Lucanian example of messed-up Stoicism (741–761):[81]

> *ecce, subit virus tacitum, carpitque medullas*
> *ignis edax calidaque incendit viscera tabe.*
> *ebibit umorem circum vitalia fusum*
> *pestis et in sicco linguam torrere palato*
> *coepit; defessos iret qui sudor in artus*   745
> *non fuit, atque oculos lacrimarum vena refugit.*
> *non decus imperii, non maesti iura Catonis*
> *ardentem tenuere virum, ne spargere signa*
> *auderet totisque furens exquireret arvis,*
> *quas poscebat aquas sitiens in corde venenum.*   750
> *ille vel in Tanain missus Rhodanumque Padumque*
> *arderet, Nilumque bibens per rura vagantem.* [...]   752
> *scrutatur venas penitus squalentis harenae,*   756
> *nunc redit ad Syrtes, et fluctus accipit ore*
> *aequoreusque placet, sed non et sufficit, umor.*
> *nec sentit fatique genus mortemque veneni,*
> *sed putat esse sitim; ferroque aperire tumentis*   760
> *sustinuit venas, atque os implere cruore.*

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79 Bartsch understands the conflict at work in this passage as „confrontation par excellence of the principle of boundary violation and the principle of boundary maintenance" (1997, 35). My approach here has a slightly different focus but is compatible with Bartsch's Bakhtinian view.

80 As do Morford (1967), Fantham (1992), Bartsch (1997), Leigh (2000), Bexley (2010), and Lowe (2010). Wick, however, rejects the idea of any metaliterary or allegorical reading harshly, labelling anglophone philosophical interpretations „methodischer Unsinn und unseriös" (2003, 315n1). My own, obviously very different, approach set aside, Wick's judgment appears slightly inconsequent, as she mentions Cato's similarities to Socrates and structural parallels to other literary scenes that negotiate gluttony and immoderation.

81 Bexley 2010, 40–45.

> Look – the silent venom creeps along, and devouring fire eats away the marrows and with hot decay it sets the guts ablaze. The poison drinks up moisture spread around the vital parts and starts to parch the tongue on his dry palate; there was no sweat to pass across the tired flame, the stream of tears recoiled from the eyes. Not the glory of the state, not the authority of saddened Cato could stop the burning warrior from boldly scattering the standards and in his frenzy seeking far and wide the waters which the thirsty poison in his heart demanded. If he were hurled into Tanais or Rhône or Po, if he were drinking Nile when it wanders through the fields, he would burn. […] Deep he probes for channels in the arid sand; now he returns to the Syrtes and takes the waves in his mouth, and the sea-water gives him pleasure but yet does not suffice. And he is not aware of the type of doom and death by poison, but thinks it thirst; and he steeled himself to open with his sword his swelling veins and fill his mouth with blood.

The positive connotations of snakes in ancient thought, be they medical like those of the Aesculapian snake or religious as in the many cults involving the chthonic reptiles, are completely absent from Lucan's apocalyptic scenery. The excessive frenzy depicted in this scene is first and foremost detrimental to the virtues of a Roman citizen – the empire's glory and Cato's principles (747) become irrelevant to the poisoned man. He opens his veins in a desperate attempt to cure his thirst, but the act is far from the heroic self-sacrifice his Stoic general would approve of – Aulus' fatal self-consumption is the ultimate commitment to insatiable need; metaphorically, he wages „civil war against his own body".[82] In that, he recalls another Ovidian glutton: Erysichthon whose immoderate transgression, punished with eternal hunger and eventual autophagy (*met.* 8,738 – 878), also inspired Lucan in Book 3, when he has Caesar cut down the sacred grove at Massilia (Lucan. 3,399 – 452).[83] But since Roman psychology links uncontrolled desire to the feminine,[84] we see that raging thirst threatens *virilitas* as much as *virtus:* the *dipsas* emasculates its victim, leaving him, his companions, and especially his general Cato helpless. Unable to save his troops, that is, the Pompeian mission and Rome, Cato's „philosophy is impotent".[85] At the same time, we see that the epic ideals fail as soon as the seductive snake appears: in the Libyan desert – and perhaps also in Lucan's Neronian times –, „arms and the man" have become pointless.

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[82] Eldred 2000, 71. The author discusses Lucan's snakes in depth; her article's main purpose, however, is to show that each soldier's destiny literally re-enacts the respective snake's name (*dipsas* – thirst; *seps* – septic wound, etc.) and that the snakes, therefore, transform their victims into embodiments of their signifiers. Given the descriptive nature of the snakes' names in the first place – they are named after their poison's effect – Eldred's argument that Lucan inscribes a metaliterary „reification of language" (70) onto the dying soldiers' bodies has the air of a *petitio principii.*

[83] Cazzaniga 1957, 35; Wick 2004, 314. Bexley also highlights the parallels between Aulus' insatiability and Caesar's inexhaustible greed as a conqueror (2010, 139).

[84] Lowe 2010, 120.

[85] Eldred 2000, 63. On Cato's failure and attitudes towards it in newer scholarship, cf. Bexley 2010, 139 – 141. The death of Mopsus in Apoll. Rhod. 4 is the archetype for epic narrations about encounters with Libyan snakes. It is likely that the motif of powerlessness when witnessing a comrade's death by snake-poison reflects the Argonauts' ἀμηχανία. Fantham discusses Apollonius' influence on Lucan (1992, 113 – 119).

The Tantalus-allusion has already been mentioned, but there is more to it if we consider the context of Ovid's phrase „thirst in the midst of waves" and return to Lucan whom we, still, imagine being immersed in Ovid's *Amores.* In the famous impotence-elegy (*am.* 3,7), the *poeta amator* compares his erectile dysfunction despite a beautiful and willing girl's presence to Tantalus' insatiable need in the midst of plenty (*sic aret mediis taciti vulgator in undis: am.* 3,7,51). This poem has found its way into Lucan's civil war on numerous levels: in Book 1, Pompey is notoriously characterized as an inert tree-trunk, unable to balance his weight effectively on his own and rather a shadow than his former self (1,135 – 143):

> [...] *stat magni nominis umbra,* 135
> *qualis frugifero quercus sublimis in agro* [...],
> *nec iam validis radicibus haerens*
> *pondere fixa suo est, nudosque per aera ramos*
> *effundens trunco, non frondibus efficit umbram* [...]

> He stands, the shadow of a great name; like in a fruitful field a lofty oak, [...] clinging with roots no longer strong, by its own weight it stands firm, and spreading naked branches through the air, it makes shade with trunk, not foliage.

This unflattering comparison draws on the same, albeit inverted, imagery that Ovid used for the lack of control over his body: „I lay like a dead tree-trunk, a mere spectacle, a useless weight, and it was unclear whether I was body or shadow" (*truncus iners iacui, species et inutile pondus,* / *et non exactum, corpus an umbra forem: am.* 3,7,14 – 15). In Book 9, however, impotence is no longer Pompey's problem, but that of his loyal general Cato. Seeking an explanation for his embarrassing sluggishness, Ovid's lover suspects a *lena*'s sorcery and mentions magical rituals, *venena* and *carmina* (*am.* 3,7,27– 36) similar to those of Dipsas in *am.* 1,8. A maleficent Dipsas/*dipsas* apparently has the power to reduce manhood in a warrior – an amorous elegiac lover in Ovid, a Pompeian soldier in Lucan. The light-hearted story of the poet-lover's erectile dysfunction is transformed into a gory epic death scene in Lucan's Libyan desert.

Struck with horror, Cato's sole reaction is to protect his other soldiers from Aulus' bad example: he commands them to take up the troop's standards, which the standard-bearer Aulus threw shamefully and sacrilegiously away before – note the phallic symbolism – and to turn away immediately because „none was allowed to learn that thirst had so much power" (*iussit signa rapi propere Cato: discere nulli* / *permissum est hoc posse sitim:* 761 – 762). The contempt for Aulus' condition echoes Ovid's invective against Dipsas' alcoholism: like Ovid (*am.* 1,8,114), Lucan places the invidious thirst in the accusative (*sitim*) emphatically at the end of the verse. Both Cato and Ovid's poetic persona are afraid of the lessons taught by Dipsas/*dipsas* – neither the elegiac *puella* nor the horrified Pompeian soldiers shall listen to, that is, yield to nefarious thirst.

3 Medusan reflections: Ovid, Lucan, Cixous

But where, except from Ovid's *lena*-elegy, did the *dipsas* come from in the first place? Maintaining the logic of text-immanent motivation of events, how can Lucan introduce a bunch of emasculating, morally offensive beasts in a narration about the decay of democratic values in Roman history? To understand the intricate connections between Lucan's Libyan tale and the decline of military heroism, it is useful to consider another Ovidian reference. The common ancestress of both Dipsades, Ovid's procuress (Dipsas) and Lucan's snake (*dipsas*) is a hybrid creature with a very strong appeal to Ovid and Lucan alike, a beast apt to be conquered by a typically epic male hero – and an official icon of female empowerment since the 1970s: Medusa. Of all the recalcitrant feminist re-appropriations of the petrifying monster, I would like to point out Medusa's artistry, acknowledged e. g. by classicist Victoria Rimell, Elizabethanist Lynn Enterline, and Algerian-French feminist philosopher Hélène Cixous. A victim blamed for being raped and punished through transformation (*met.* 4,772–803), Ovid's Medusa manages to turn her fate into defense: returning the intrusive gaze of whoever approaches her, she consumes her viewers and transforms them into life-like marble statues. The objectified „looked-at woman" becomes an „ultra-powerful viewer" who still „turns her audience on, and is compulsive viewing, yet her audience is 'castrated' even as it is permanently fixed in the state of open-mouthed arousal".[86] Medusa captures her spectators and exhibits their attempted violence in stone, just as Arachne and Philomela do with fabric.[87] Being a sculptress, Medusa also proves the compatibility of „masculine" creative arts and „feminine" procreative motherhood: even posthumously, she gives birth to the winged horse Pegasus, the hybrid creature Chrysaor (*met*. 4,785–786), and to the plentitude of snakes in Libya when Perseus carries her severed, blood-dripping head through the air and thus fertilizes the parched Libyan desert (*met*. 4,617–620).

It is this latter element,[88] alongside many details in language,[89] that Lucan adopts from Ovid's epic although deities and the supernatural are else remarkably absent in the *Bellum civile*:[90] in the long etiological digression (Lucan. 9,619–699) between the praise of Cato's virtues and the brutal dying of his men he tells how Perseus' conquered Medusa and how her blood spawned the many snakes in Libya through an act of miscegenation between the fertile dripping liquid and the sterile sandy soil (*quid secreta nocenti / miscuerit natura solo:* 620–621). The mixture of different elements (blood – soil) mirrors the monstrous composition of species in the one who causes it (woman – snakes). Lucan omits Medusa's non-serpentine offspring, but traces of Pegasus, the horse that founded

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86 Rimell 2006, 7.

87 Hardie 2002, 175–176; Enterline 2000, 17 and 33–35.

88 Apollonius is the first author to mention a fertilization of the Libyan desert through Medusa's dripping blood (Apoll. Rhod. 4,513–517).

89 Fantham discusses the many verbal Ovid-references (1992, 111–113).

90 On the presence or absence, respectively, of divinities in Lucan, see Kersten in this volume (p. 48–50).

the Muses' spring of inspiration, can be found in the subtext: there *is* a *fonte Medusaeo* (*met.* 5,312) in the middle of the desert, yet it is not Pegasus' peaceful *locus amoenus* that we know from Ovid, but a horrible snake-infested pool.[91] Poetic inspiration and creative fantasy, however, are strictly rejected in the apocalyptic world of civil war, and Lucan is eager to frame the recourse to supernatural myth with apologetic assertions that he does not believe in this tale himself but has not been able to find a more scientific explanation for the existence of the serpents (*non cura laborque | noster scire valet, nisi quod volgata per orbem | fabula pro vera decepit saecula causa:* Lucan. 9,621 – 623). Yet critics agree that Medusa is a source of inspiration[92] – a Muse – for him: transgressive avatars of hers are scattered through the entire epic's female figures and contribute to the fall of Pompey's camp.

The first hybrid creature to appear in the *Metamorphoses* and the only mythical creature in the entire *Bellum civile*, the Gorgon Medusa clearly occupies a special position for both Ovid and Lucan. Ovid's first pentad involves many conventional topics of high epics: cosmogony, assembly of the gods, cultivation of land, founding of cities, early civilization, and epic adventures of heroes.[93] This last issue, the „quintessentially epic hero whose *virtus* is tested in a series of trials"[94] is of interest here: Perseus' adventures at the end of Book 4 (*met.* 4,610 – 5,251) include travelling, various marvels, fights against villains, the rescuing of a beautiful damsel in distress, amorous rivalry, and the killing of a monster. These plot elements, alongside verbatim allusions,[95] can each be assigned to epic predecessors: as a strategist and favorite of Minerva, Perseus resembles the cunning Odysseus, as a fighter, he reminds us of Hercules, the battle-scenes, adventures and encounters with aggressors and monstrous creatures recall both *Iliad* and *Aeneid*, and the pursuit of Andromeda against her first fiancé recalls Odysseus' combat with Penelope's suitors and Aeneas' fight against Turnus, Lavinia's former fiancé.[96] Thus condensing epic models, „Ovid neither parodies nor burlesques high epic, but rather reinterprets the form, intensifying both the brutality of Homer and the sentimentality of Virgil by limiting his war narrative to 250 lines."[97] But it is not only the brevity with which Ovid tells his „Perseid", but also the ironic stance towards the hero that deprives the passage of its epic glory: Perseus succeeds in conquering the snaky-haired monster only because of Minerva's help and by killing her in her most inactive, immobile, and least defensive state: sleep (*met.* 4,779 – 785).

In her seminal essay *Le rire de la Méduse*, a manifesto for female empowerment through writing, Hélène Cixous connects ancient gender expectations, Cartesian mind-body dualism, and modern sexism, when she draws attention to the limitations of fe-

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91 Malamud 2003, 41 – 3.

92 Fantham 1992, 96.

93 Keith 2001, 239 – 40; Gildenhard/Zissos 2016, 14 – 16.

94 Keith 2001, 240.

95 Hardie 2002, 179.

96 Keith 2001, 240 – 245; Feldherr 2010, 330 – 331.

97 Keith 2001, 245.

mininity in patriarchal thinking: the female other, emblematically symbolized by Medusa, „has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty (guilty of everything, guilty at every turn, for having desires, for not having any; for being frigid, for being 'too hot'; for not being both at once; for being too motherly and not enough […]).“[98] Cixous re-appropriates Medusa not as a figure of guilt, shame, and horror, but as an icon for female expressivity:

> You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing. Men say that there are two unrepresentable things: death and the feminine sex. That's because they need femininity to be associated with death […]. They need to be afraid of us. Look at the trembling Perseuses moving backward toward us, clad in apotropes.[99]

Cixous, thus, reveals Perseus' heroism to be a need for masculine self-assertion on the backs of women. Considering that the hero feels repeatedly obliged to legitimize (e. g. *met*. 4,640–641) and to identify himself as „the conqueror of the snaky-haired Gorgon“ (*Gorgonis anguicomae Perseus superator:* 4,699), one can hardly refrain from agreeing with Cixous' polemic stance. Whether intended by Ovid or not, Medusa is this episode's iconic heroine: her transformative powers are described in detail while the accounts of Perseus' deeds either remain abbreviated and superficial or de*monstra*te their dependence on Medusa's potency – her head kills two hundred men, not Perseus himself (*auxilium* […] *ab hoste petam: met.* 5,178–179). Ironically, „the possession of so powerful an advantage as the Gorgon's head casts doubt on the very heroism Perseus so desperately wants to prove.“[100]

It is this deranged heroism, the comedic subversion, and the chaotic frustration of epic greatness that appeal to Lucan and that fit into his apocalyptic world of civil war. He indulges in the gory potential the amputated snaky head entails,[101] and shows the powerful „supermonster“[102] Medusa both as a seductive *femme fatale* and as a sympathetic *puella* with an absolute „lack of malice“[103] at the same time. Here, she is indeed „beautiful and she's laughing“,[104] as Cixous puts it. The Gorgon delights in her serpentine hair, which also protects her at night, and we might again think of Ovid's Corinna who mourns the loss of her wild, Medusa-like mane (*am.* 1,14) after an unsuccessful experiment with hair dye,[105] when we watch Lucan's Medusa carefully combing her snakes until the hair-ends – the serpents' heads – spit out venom (Lucan. 9,632–635):

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98 Cixous 1976, 880.

99 Cixous 1976, 885.

100 Feldherr 2010, 317.

101 Dinter analyzes the automatism of Medusa's serpentine locks: her hair acquires a life of its own, comparable to the stellified lock of Berenice in Callimachus and Catullus. The snakes even outlive her; the blood from her severed head forms new heads in the sand (cf. Dinter 2010, 185; Dinter 2012, 45–47).

102 Fantham 1992, 104.

103 Lowe 2010, 124.

104 Cixous 1976, 885.

105 Further parallels between Medusa and Corinna are pointed out by Rimell 2006, 21–24.

ipsa flagellabant gaudentis colla Medusae
feminea cui more comae per terga solutae
surgunt adversa subrectae fronte colubrae
vipereumque fluit depexo crine venenum. 635

[The snakes] lashed Medusa's neck itself – she was delighted; the serpents, in the manner of women's hair, hung loose across her back and rose erect across her brow in front, and when the locks were combed the vipers' poison flows.

Lucan's Medusa-excursus appears even less supportive of epic quests than Ovid's: suitable for his poetic strategy of *auxesis,* he intensifies the danger by having Perseus attack her while she herself is asleep, but some of her serpents are still awake (*vigilat pars magna comarum:* Lucan. 9,672). At the same time, however, he heightens Perseus' inaptitude for heroic tasks: it is Perseus' divine half-sister Minerva who leads his hand in the killing act (675–677):

ipsa regit trepidum Pallas dextraque trementem 675
Perseos aversi Cyllenida derigit harpen
lata colubriferi rumpens confinia colli.

Herself does Pallas guide the anxious man, and with Perseus turned away, she steers the Cyllenian scimitar which trembles in his hand and ruptures the wide junction of the snaky neck.

Perseus also depends on Pallas' help after Medusa has been decapitated: she has to hide Medusa's *os* with snakes lest her dead eyes petrify Perseus (*nec Pallas spectare potest vultusque gelassent | Perseos aversi, si non Tritonia densos | sparsisset crines texissetque ora colubris:* 681–683). In a comic contrast to Ovid's unseemly self-confident hero, Lucan informs us two times verbatim that Perseus' gaze is averted (*Perseos aversi:* 676 and 682) and that he would not have been able to finish his adventure alone. Pallas navigates his flight (685–689) over the Libyan desert with its steep shadowing rocks which even darken the moonshine (693–695). In Elaine Fantham's opinion, the choice of route for carrying the decapitated trophy-woman is not entirely rational and thwarts the epic convention of a helpful wise deity: „What Perseus' courage (with a little help from his gods) has achieved is the spreading of this evil power from its remote queendom into an area further east but still uninhabited.“[106] This is no triumphal procession, no well-deserved spoliation of an enemy, but anti-epicism at its best.

The scene's moonless gloominess and the presence of a feminized monster with dangerous eyes bring us back to Ovidian elegy: the *lena* Dipsas is also „a rather Medusan figure“:[107] her appearance, Ovid tells us, is dreadful because of her intimidating gaze – „from her eyes, too, double pupils dart their lightnings, with rays that issue from twin orbs“ (*oculis quoque pupula duplex | fulminat et gemino lumen ab orbe venit: am.* 1,8,15–16). Among her magical powers we find the ability to dye the moon – a faculty

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106 Fantham 1992, 108.
107 Rimell 2006, 19.

which Ovid later claims for his own poetry too (*am.* 2,1,23–24); the poet informs us that he has himself seen blood dripping down from the stars because of Dipsas' magic (1,8,11–12). Dipsas begins her speech with the observation that a wealthy young man has been interested in Corinna: struck by her beauty, he stood motionless (*haesit et in vultu constitit usque tuo: am.* 1,8,24) – we see a similar reaction to female beauty in Ovid's Perseus who falls in love with Andromeda and „almost out of the sky as – dumbstruck by this vision of helpless, modest, loveliness – he forgets to flap his wings".[108] The procuress Dipsas encourages her listener to deceive suitors by strategically „averting the gaze" (*cum bene deiectis gremium spectabis ocellis: am.* 1,8,37) in the manner of Perseus when he attacked Medusa and carried her head away. The secretly listening poet of the *Amores*, however, is not a Perseus who, aided by a deity, knows how to attack the monstrous female from behind: he overhears only parts of Dipsas' speech because she stops talking when his „shadow betrays him" (*me mea prodidit umbra:* 109), and it is likely that she even succeeds in „castrating" him, as we see in the impotence-poem. Her recipe for deceitful manipulation of lovers by „sugaring of the pill" recalls a lurking snake's ambush: „wicked poisons hide in sweet honey" (*impia sub dulci melle venena latent:* 104) – and resembles the Lucanian dipsas' bite which is invisible and imperceptible to the victim Aulus and his observers who only notice his furious, thus stereotypically feminized, desire for water without realizing its poisonous background. After watching Aulus' suicide motionlessly, Cato asks his soldiers to avert *their* gaze to prevent them from being „castrated" by the amphitheatrical spectacle themselves.

4 Coda: uncoiling transgressive entanglements

As a daughter, an avatar, and an intellectual heiress of Medusa, Lucan's *dipsas* attacks Aulus when he steps on its head – the part of her body that replicates what Medusa is famed for: her serpentine head – and harms without being seen or looked upon directly. As a daughter, an avatar, and an intellectual heiress of Ovid's Dipsas, the snake subverts the traditional values which Roman society is built upon and which Cato desperately strives to defend. The feminized nature the snakes embody conquers any notion of epic virtue and virility in the patriarchal, Stoic sense, anticipating Pompey's eventual defeat. Thereby, Lucan's *dipsas* magnifies politically what Ovid's Dipsas has begun on a private, amorous level. Darker, less humorous moods replace the joyful atmosphere of the *Amores.* Cato turns out to be an elegiacally unhappy lover of the Roman republic: his manly efforts are eventually insufficient to achieve his ideals. A modern reader is left to wonder whether his failure could have been avoided if he had not downplayed the hazards of Medusa's offspring in his patronizing way. Cato, unlike Lucan, has apparently not read Ovid's *Amores* carefully enough; otherwise, he would not have underestimated the blood-thirsty *dipsades*' threat of castration. He mistakes his surrounding for the

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[108] Liveley 2011, 61 on *met.* 4,676–677.

world of traditional high epic whereas the Libyan desert, the posthumous territory of the hybrid creature Medusa and her monstrous offspring, already suggests that generic purity is porous and prone to supernaturally transgressive disruption.

The many Ovidian references hint at the breakdown of the heroic world that Cato has attached himself to. The elegiac echoes represent an open affront to his moral values; he expects his troops to be fearless warriors, not effeminate lovers subject to bodily needs and extreme emotions. The only epic references in the Libyan passage direct us to the *Metamorphoses*, an inherently transgressive epic in which different genres and traditions are at play, especially in the episodes that involve hybrid creatures and monsters. If, as Eldred has suggested, Cato's soldiers each experience the cruel death inscribed in the snake's names – the bite of a *dipsas* induces fatal thirst, that of a *seps* leads to septicemia –, we might adapt her argument and infer that the appearance of a *hybrid* creature results, at least in Ovid and Lucan, in a transgressive hybridization of the epic genre and its traditional masculine ideals. Cato's attempt to restrain the Libyan snakes through Stoic self-control and appeals to manly honor fall short. He lacks, however, the whimsical irony of Horace's prescriptive poet who, although he pretends trying hard to ban the hybrid creature from his aesthetics of purity, knows that he does not escape his transgressive chimera's charms himself.

Looking for feminist empowerment in an epic concerned with civil war might be equally difficult as finding water in the Libyan desert. It certainly demands the sacrifice of some victims unwilling to adapt their gaze. But if we trace Lucan's *dipsas* back to her elegiac namesake, the procuress Dipsas, and her metamorphic ancestress Medusa, the mythical Libya might turn into an experimental test site of intertextual masculinities and female resistance against epic heroism, narrow morals, and monolithic genre conceptions.

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