

LUCAN'S *DE INCENDIO URBIS*: THE EVIDENCE OF STATIUS AND VACCA

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dices culminibus Remi vagantis
infandos domini nocentis ignis.

Frederick M. Ahl has argued in *TAPA* 102 (1971) 1–5 that this reference in Statius *Silvae* 2.7.60–61 to a work by Lucan about the Great Fire of Rome can only be to a poem and not to a work in prose.¹ The reference forms part of a prophecy delivered by Calliope over the infant Lucan. Ahl believes that Calliope, “who is not noted for her enthusiasm for prose declamations elsewhere,” is prophesying Lucan’s success as a poet, and he finds it “strange” that mention should be made of a prose work in this context. Indeed “there is no logical reason” for the appearance of the work in the prophecy if it is not a poem. In support of this general argument Ahl makes three specific points: *haec primo iuvenis canes sub aevo* (73) looks back over all the works mentioned by Calliope, and *canes* “definitely suggests” that all of them are poems; *nec solum dabo carminum nitorem* (81) supports this inference; lastly the reference to the Great Fire stands in the exact centre of the prophecy—Ahl is not explicit about the significance of this, but it may be presumed that he believes that this place is too important to be occupied by a prose work.

A reader of Ahl’s study might be forgiven for supposing that *Silvae* 2.7 completely ignores Lucan as a writer of prose. In fact,

¹ He makes reference to my article, “The Authenticity of Lucan, fr. 12 (Morel),” *CQ* n.s. 7 (1957) 126–28 and to K. F. C. Rose, “Problems in the Chronology of Lucan’s Career,” *TAPA* 97 (1966) 379–96, in both of which the view is taken that the work mentioned by Statius was in prose. To those studies should be added D. Gagliardi, “Sul *De Incendio Urbis* di Lucano,” *RFIC* 96 (1968) 435–38 and my rejoinder to this, “Lucan’s *De Incendio Urbis*—Prose or Verse?” *RFIC* 99 (1971) 63–65.

however, Statius is careful to emphasize in lines 20–23 that Lucan achieved success in prose as well as in verse:

vestra est ista dies, favete, Musae,
dum qui vos geminas tulit per artes,
et vinctae pede vocis et solutae,
Romani colitur chori sacerdos.

It would therefore be very far from “strange” if Statius later included in the prophecy a reference to at least one work representing Lucan’s talent in that field. Furthermore line 21 makes it clear that for Statius no unbridgeable gulf existed between the writing of prose and the favour of the Muses. Ahl’s argument concerning *haec . . . canes* was anticipated in 1968 by Donato Gagliardi. My response to Gagliardi was published in 1971;² it will be sufficient to remark here that *canere* can be used of prose writing, that *haec* may refer only to the content of lines 64–72 and that even if neither of these observations could be made, it could still be argued that it is unduly restrictive to deny a poet the right to use *canere* of a literary output which was predominantly poetic. This point can be applied equally to Ahl’s inference from *carminum nitorem* in line 81. The argument from the central position of 60–61 remains, but if it has been correctly understood above, it is clearly incapable of bearing much weight. If Statius consciously located the reference in that position (and of this we cannot be sure), he may well have done so in order to impart a certain emphasis to the presence there, baleful and for Lucan ultimately fatal, of the *dominus nocens*. The fact that most of the works mentioned by Statius were in verse (about the *allocutio* to Polla it is impossible to be sure)³ should not be allowed to create an initial prejudice in favour of the *De incendio urbis* being a poem also. Statius had to compose in accordance with the facts. If he felt that Lucan’s response to the Great Fire was important and if the most noteworthy form taken by that response was a work in prose, Statius would have felt bound to mention it even in a context mainly concerned with poetry and perhaps to anticipate the reference by including at an earlier point the words *pede vocis . . . solutae* (22).

If the passage in Statius contained the only extant reference to the work, we should be unable to tell whether it was in prose or in verse

² See note 1 above.

³ Ahl’s reasons for believing it to have been a poem are less than cogent, *op. cit.*, 4.

though we should expect that in view of lines 20–23 one or more prose works would be mentioned in the prophecy. It is the occurrence of the title *De incendio urbis* in the list of works by Lucan given in Vacca's *Life* of the poet which makes it extremely likely that Statius' reference is to a prose work. The list concludes with the words: *epigrammata, prosa oratione in Octavium Sagittam et pro eo, de incendio urbis, epistolarum ex Campania*. Ahl believes that *prosa oratione* applies only to the works concerned with Octavius Sagitta and that the two works which follow were poems. Against this it may be argued that the words *in Octavium Sagittam et pro eo* are in themselves sufficient to identify the works as speeches and that the words *prosa oratione*, being otiose if they refer to these alone, must therefore describe all the remaining items in the list.⁴

Ahl has suggested, however, that the *Epistulae ex Campania* were

⁴ In the Suetonian *Life* of Horace *prosa oratione* has to be attached to *epistula* because of the existence of the poet's verse epistles: *venerunt in manus meas et elegi sub titulo eius et epistula prosa oratione quasi commendantis se Maecenati*. A learned reader has ingeniously suggested that *prosa oratione* was inserted in Vacca's list in order to prevent, in the absence of punctuation, *epigrammata* being taken with *in Octavium Sagittam et pro eo* (presumably in the sense "epigrams against and for Octavius Sagitta"), and that it is therefore not otiose and need not govern the subsequent entries. This raises two questions: whether Vacca's ultimate source is likely to have used punctuation and whether *epigrammata in aliquem et pro eo* is so likely a phrase that a reader would need to be prevented from extracting it from the sequence of words. (1) It is not to be assumed without question that punctuation would not have been employed in the list when it was first drawn up. While *scriptura continua* becomes customary in the course of the second century A.D. and punctuation begins at the same time to be employed very sporadically, there did exist in late antiquity, according to the grammarians Dositheus and Cassiodorus, a system of punctuation which was capable of preventing ambiguity, but which is admittedly not widely attested in extant manuscripts (H. Keil, *Grammatici Latini*, 7.428, 145–46; E. Otha Wingo, *Latin Punctuation in the Classical Age* [The Hague 1972] 20–28). If the list therefore was put together in late antiquity, its structure could have been clarified by the use of punctuation. If on the other hand it derives from one made much closer to the Neronian age (say in the late first or early second century), the existence at that time of a lucid system of punctuation could have made it unnecessary to take precautions against ambiguity of the kind envisaged. On the history of punctuation in Latin see Revilo P. Oliver, "The First Medicean MS of Tacitus and the Titulature of Ancient Books," *TAPA* 82 (1951) 242; Wingo, *op. cit.*, 16–17, 20–28, 42–43. (2) The idea that *epigramma in* could mean "an epigram against" perhaps springs from the connotation of hostility which the English word "epigram" frequently possesses. But even Martial, whose epigrams are often aggressive, never uses *epigramma* with any preposition signifying opposition or hostility. The preposition *in* occurs from time to time in association with *epigramma* (never in Martial), but always with the sense of "about;" cf. Cic. *Arch.* 25; *Tusc.* 1.84; Plin. *epi.* 7.43. *Epigramma pro* seems, not surprisingly, to be nowhere attested. Clearly *epigrammata in Octavium Sagittam et pro eo* is an extremely improbable phrase. The supposition that *prosa oratione* was inserted in order to prevent *epigrammata* being taken with *in* . . . should be regarded as gratuitous.

poems "in the style of the *Epistulae ex Ponto*."⁵ If this were so, *prosa oratione* would not describe the whole group, and the case for believing the *De incendio urbis* to be in prose would be seriously undermined. Most ancient collections of letters are unified simply through being the work of a single author. To others like Cicero's *ad Atticum* and *ad Quintum fratrem* and Seneca's *ad Lucilium* a further unity has been imparted by the letters all having the same addressee. Another possible source of unity is to make a collection of letters all of which were written by the same author from the same place. The only examples of such collections known to me in ancient literature are Ovid's *ex Ponto* and Lucan's *ex Campania*. Does it then follow that Lucan's collection was "in the style of" Ovid's? This is not the only possibility. Rose suggested that Lucan's letters were Senecan in character,⁶ and this may give us a key to the significance of the title. Recommendations of a life of philosophic withdrawal, which may involve an actual shunning of the city in favour of the country, are frequent. In Seneca's *De tranquillitate animi* there is a quotation from the Stoic Athenodorus of Tarsus, in which it is shown that a man who leads a life of withdrawal need not, and should not, be self-regarding: *ita tamen delituerit, ut ubicumque otium suum absconderit, prodesse velit singulis universisque ingenio, voce, consilio; nec enim is solus rei publicae prodest, qui candidatos extrahit et tuetur reos et de pace belloque censet, sed qui iuventutem exhortatur, qui in tanta bonorum praeceptorum inopia virtutem instillat animis, qui ad pecuniam luxuriamque cursu ruentis prensat ac retrahit et, si nihil aliud, certe moratur, in privato publicum negotium agit* (3.3).⁷ I would suggest that by writing from a Campanian retreat letters like those of Seneca to Lucilius Lucan attempted *prodesse singulis universisque ingenio . . . consilio*. Only a hypothesis admittedly, but it fits Lucan's Stoic interests and is perhaps more plausible than Ahl's, which involves the young Stoic equating himself with the disgraced author of the *Ars Amatoria*. The case for regarding the *Epistulae ex Campania* as Ovidian is not proven, and the point made above may be repeated: the presence of *prosa oratione* in Vacca's list is fully comprehensible only if it serves to introduce a group of prose works.

⁵ Ahl, *op. cit.*, 24.

⁶ Rose, *op. cit.*, 391.

⁷ See my *Studies in Horace's First Book of Epistles* (Brussels 1969) 24–28.

The members of that group are perhaps arranged chronologically with the speeches for and against Octavius Sagitta belonging to 58 or soon afterwards, the *De incendio urbis* to 64 and the *Epistulae* to 64 or 65.⁸ The juxtaposition of the works about Octavius Sagitta, written when Lucan was about twenty years old, with writings composed as much as six or seven years later perhaps suggests that Vacca's list concludes with the titles of a group of works which possess some common characteristic.⁹ What that characteristic was seems to be indicated by the words which introduce the group: *prosa oratione*.

Certainty in this matter is out of the question. Although Ahl's arguments fall short of proving that Statius' reference must be to a poem, we must be grateful to him for directing our attention to the ambiguity in Vacca. It is my opinion that the balance of probability appears still to lie with a prose *De incendio urbis* and that to remove the ambiguity from Vacca a semi-colon should be placed after *epigrammata*.

⁸ There is no hard evidence about the date of the *Epistulae*, but a withdrawal to Campania after the Great Fire seems not unlikely. Ahl has made some interesting suggestions about Lucan's presence there, most of which are independent of his belief that the *Epistulae* were Ovidian, *op. cit.*, 22-24.

⁹ Rose, *op. cit.*, 386 note 20.