Lucanian Pragmatism and the Manilian Cosmos

Celestial Aspect and Positioning in Lucan’s Invocation to Nero

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Abstract

Lucan’s invocation to Nero (1.33-66) is notorious for its seemingly contradictory praise and condemnation of the emperor. While analyses of this passage often turn to Virgil’s Georgics (1.24-28, 489-497, 500-515) to begin to explain this inherent paradox, Grimal (2010) has demonstrated the importance of Manilius’ Astronomica as a cosmological framework for these lines which invites a more positive reading of Nero’s presentation here. By examining the presence of two Manilian models in Lucan’s invocation to Nero, their contributions to the Lucanian cosmos, and their consequences for our understanding of the options laid out for the emperor’s heavenly future, this study argues for a more pragmatic—even hopeful—reading of Nero’s apotheosis and the implications of this for Lucan’s commentary on the Neronian present.

Keywords

Lucan – Nero – Manilius – cosmos – celestial bodies – axis

Lucan’s invocation to Nero (Luc. 1.33-66)—sandwiched between a visceral survey of the horrors and costs of civil war (1.1-32) and an extensive catalogue detailing the conflict’s causes (1.67-182)—appears to simultaneously proclaim both lavish praise and scathing mockery of the emperor. Within this episode, Lucan’s comments on Nero’s apotheosis and the role he will assume in the heavens (1.46-62) have been read as either a genuine declaration of praise within the
extravagant conventions of ancient panegyric,¹ or as a series of thinly-veiled insults which mock Nero and frame him as a source of unmitigated disasters in a tirade of ‘safe’ criticism.² However, neither of these approaches are entirely unproblematic. The former reading—which frequently draws upon the close parallels with Virgil’s ‘praise’ of Octavian (Verg. G. 1.24-42)³—does not fully consider the ambiguities around Octavia n’s route to and readiness for divinity already present in the Virgilian model (G. 1.24-28, 489-497, 500-515) which complicate Lucan’s evocation of these lines.⁴ The latter reading depends upon us understanding references to the ‘slanted’ perspective from which Nero will view Rome (Luc. 1.55) and the ‘weight’ with which he risks unbalancing the cosmos (1.56-57) as insults to the emperor’s alleged poor eyesight and physique which follow and compliment his seemingly unflattering comparison with the reckless Phaethon (1.48-52).⁵ Yet these assumptions regarding Nero’s body are not really supported by the extant biographical and historiographical tradition,⁶ and as Nauta has shown, Nero’s position in the heavens is closer to that of Ovid’s Sol (Ov. Met. 2.131-132, 137; Luc. 1.53-54, 58), suggesting that the emperor can avoid Phaethon’s fate if he follows the correct advice.⁷ We are thus denied the reassuring irony which would confirm this passage as an uncomplicated denunciation of a (now) notorious emperor and as a prelude to Lucan’s subsequent comments on the flaws of the Principate.⁸

Lucan does not just draw on Virgil and Ovid here: as studies such as those of Grimal and Milić have shown,⁹ Manilius’ Astronomica represents another

¹ See, for example, Grimal 2010, 62-64; Thompson 1964; Dewar 1994, 199; Konstan 2018a, 146-147. For catasterism and ancient rulers, see Whitcomb 2018, 413-414.
² See, for example, Fantham 2011, 9; Kessler 2011, 129, 142; Bernstein 2018, 257; Karakakis 2018, 372. On ‘safe’ criticism, see Ahl 1984, Strunk 2010. For awareness of this ‘ironic’ approach in antiquity, see the glosses at 1.55, 57 with the Adnotationes super Lucanum and Esposito 2013, 202-204.
⁷ Nauta 2019, 138-139. Cf. Kimmerle 2015, 9, 13-17, 32-59, 85, 268-269, who notes the epic’s broader concern with inconsistency and the ambivalence of Lucan’s Alexander and Caesar and the implications for their function as foils for Lucan’s Nero as a contradictory figure.
⁸ See, for example, Ahl 1976, 35; Martindale 1984, 67-68; Hinds 1998, 87-88; Holmes 1999, 75; Nelis 2011, 255-256; Kimmerle 2018, 14-15; Konstan 2018b, 344-351; Rolim de Moura 2020, 73.
significant model for the invocation to Nero. Despite both acknowledging the passage’s Manilian influences, Grimal and Milić arrive at starkly contrasting conclusions regarding the implications of this relationship for the invocation’s overall tone. Milić reads Lucan’s evocation of Manilius here as an inversion of the Astronomica’s imperial invocation and discussions of post-war peace (Man. 1.7-10, 922-926), and as a recasting of Manilius’ account of bloody civil conflicts which itself casts an uncomfortable shadow over his mention of the Battle of Teutoburg Forest (1.896-922). Nero’s role as a muse for a poem of civil war nefas (Luc. 1.6, 63-65) and the invocation’s placement between descriptions of ruined Italy and universal chaos (1.24-32, 70-80) appear to spell only disaster. However, while (as this article will go on to show) there is undoubtedly ambivalence to be found in Lucan’s nods to the Astronomica, Milić does not fully consider another of the invocation’s major debts to Manilius: the specifics of Nero’s celestial context.

By contrast, Grimal offers a more hopeful ‘way in’ to the invocation which is grounded in the Manilian roots of the episode’s astronomical symbolism. Assuming that Nero’s soul will rise to the Milky Way, a region long-associated with Greco-Roman mythological and historical heroes (Man. 1.762-808, Luc. 9.5-11), Grimal suggests that Nero will settle in the region occupied by the zodiacal sign Gemini (Man. 1.695). Since Nero was born (on December 15th 37 AD) under Sagittarius—the sign positioned opposite Gemini in Manilius’ zodiacal map (Man. 2.408)—his placement at the centre of the heavens (Luc. 1.53-59) would represent a “full flowering of his destiny”. Through Phoebus’ influence, Gemini may banish war and strife (Man. 4.152-161), meaning that Nero will oversee peace at Rome (Luc. 1.60-62). Furthermore, Sagittarius’ associations with chariot racing (Man. 4.230-232) prevents us from reading too much into Lucan’s earlier comparison of Nero and Phaethon (Luc. 1.47-50),
a comment long-supposed to connect Nero’s reign with catastrophe.\textsuperscript{19} For Grimal, the astral symbolism here, illuminated through recognition of Lucan’s debts to Manilius, appears to advocate for a more nuanced and hopeful reading of the apotheosis.

This article further explores the importance of Manilius’ \textit{Astronomica} for appreciating the nuances of Lucan’s description of Nero’s apotheosis, and in widening the focus on Manilian resonances here, demonstrates the value of reading the \textit{Bellum Civile} with an eye to the \textit{Astronomica}. Following in the wake of the realistic and moderate readings of Nauta and Kimmerle,\textsuperscript{20} I propose a more nuanced and pragmatic reading of these lines, acknowledging the risks and rewards which Lucan’s Manilian models suggest for Nero and the quasi-Virgilian ambivalence which characterises Lucan’s discussion of the emperor’s future. In doing so, by demonstrating the striking parallels between the terms and imagery used to describe Nero’s celestial aspect relative to Rome and position within the cosmos (Luc. 1.53-58) and Manilius’ discussions of zodiacal interactions (Man. 2.385-289, 579-576) and the universal axis (Man. 1.275-293; 3.356-361) I suggest that Lucan links the emperor with two lofty and powerful cosmic features which are both also associated with danger and jeopardy. Lucan’s comments here may appear somewhat noncommittal, flitting between possibilities of glory and peace or chaos and ruination, but this does not mean that he is indecisive in his vision for the future. Rather, this outline of what \textit{might} be demands a suitably flexible interpretation eschewing the binaries of ‘optimism’ and ‘pessimism’ to embrace the implications of its ambiguities and contradictions and recognise the pragmatism—the determination to adopt a practical and ultimately realistic attitude towards ambivalent and uncertain circumstances—which informs these lines and indeed the rest of the \textit{Bellum Civile}.

1 \hspace{1cm} \textbf{Nero’s Celestial Aspect}

After suggesting that Nero may become whatever deity he desires following his apotheosis, Lucan moves to consider where Nero may establish his kingdom, \textit{quis deus esse velis, ubi regnum ponere mundi} (Luc. 1.52), and begins by outlining the heavenly areas the emperor should avoid lest he view Rome from a sidelong angle:

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\textsuperscript{19} Penwill 2010, 215-216. See n. 5 above.

\textsuperscript{20} Kimmerle 2015; Nauta 2019.
Sed neque in arctoo sedem tibi legeris orbe,
nec polus aversi calidus qua vergitur austri,
unde tuam videas obliquo sidere Romam.21

Even setting aside claims that Lucan sought to mock the emperor’s alleged squint,22 these lines are still largely assumed to cast Nero in a problematic light. Allusions to the slanting eye of Ovid’s Invidia, *illa deam obliquo fugientem lumine cernens* (Ov. *Met.* 2.787),23 and Phaethon and Icarus who eschew the ‘spatial moderation’ recommended here with disastrous ends (*Met.* 2.130-137, 8.203-206) seem to align the apotheosised Nero with dangerous exempla.24 In addition, as Kessler has shown, the subsequent appearance of *obliquus* in Phoebe’s ‘sun substitution’—*obliquum bigas agitare per orbem* (Luc. 1.78)25—an event listed as a symptom of cosmic dissolution and collapse (1.70-81),26 casts retrospective doubt on the legitimacy of Nero’s position (1.55) and connects the young emperor with notions of chaos and rebellion.27

However, there is another dimension to the ‘sidelong’ aspect that Nero is urged to avoid which encourages another reading of these lines. Lucan’s statement that this ‘vision’ is achieved via a *sidus obliquum* (*obliquo sidere*, 1.55) establishes Nero as a cosmic entity with specifically ‘stellar’ qualities through the term *sidus* which denotes celestial bodies with powers over terrestrial affairs,28 powers recognised by Nigidius Figulus, Pompey’s unnamed helmsman, and the Egyptian Acoreus (Luc. 1.651-665, 8.159-201, 10.199-214),29 and in Lucan’s explanations of the motion of waves (1.413-414, 6.479),30 abrupt changes in or threats to the status quo (1.529, 5.203-205, 7.301),31 and the length

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21 Luc. 1.53-55.
22 See n. 5 and n. 6 above.
23 Roche 2009, 141; Keith 2011, 119.
24 Kessler 2011, 133.
26 Lapidge 1979, 360-3; Roche 2005, 59-63, 64-71; 2009, 31-36, 152-158. For *obliquus* and improper movement of heavenly bodies, see Luc. 9.533-537.
27 Kessler 2011, 132-134.
28 *OLD* s.v. *sidus* 6. This equation of leaders (Caesars) with stars reappears in Cleopatra’s claims that Caesar is a ‘star’ well-disposed towards her people: *tu gentibus aequum | sidus ades nostris* (Luc. 10.89-90). Cf. Holmes 1989, 43-44, 76.
30 For tidal control and magic at Luc. 6.479, see Tesoriero 2000, 94. Roche 2009, 286 notes wider uses of *sidus* in relation to the moon (as opposed to stars) including Luc. 10.204. Cf. Holmes 1989, 134-135.
31 Barratt 1979, 66-67; Roche 2019, 140. For a similar discussion of comets and fear, see Sen. *Nat.* 7.1.5, Roche 2009, 322.
of men’s lives (6.608-610). Furthermore, by using *videre* to indicate that Nero shall specifically see or perceive Rome from his cosmic vantage point, Lucan evokes a wider tradition ascribing the influence of cosmic bodies to their powers of ‘sight’ noted in Manilius’ *Astronomica: et propius terras accedit visus eorum | aeraque infectum nostras demittit ad auras* (Man. 2.356-357). This framing of the signs’ ‘vision’ functions not only as a “playful metaphor”, but “as a way of conceiving of the physical reality of astral influence” based on ancient theories of vision and the “flow of an actual physical substance in and out of the eye”.

This passage’s debts to the *Astronomica* do not end here. In characterising Nero’s influential celestial aspect as ‘sidelong’ (*obliquo sidere*), Lucan recalls Manilius’ explanation for the animosity between certain zodiacal signs:

*iam vero nulla est haerentibus addita signis / gratia; nam consensus hebet, quia visus ademptus. / in seducta ferunt animos, quae cernere possunt.*

Manilius claims that neighbouring signs are unable to see one another properly (*visus ademptus*) and are thus denied genuine mutual friendliness in contrast to signs positioned further apart or opposite one another (Man. 2.371-373). Manilius’ subsequent discussion of this kind of stellar acrimony details the specific

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32 Tesoriero 2000, 162.
33 Cf. Luc. 7.425. For the nature of the *errantes stellae* here, see Housman 1926, 203; Kidd 1966; Gain 1967; Holmes 1998; Roche 2019, 168.
34 Colborn 2015, 28, invites comparison with Man. 1.18. For stellar legitimisation of Augustus’ reign, see Schmid 2020, 404. Cf. Man. 4.741-3, Housman 1912, 36; 1920, x-xii, 97; Goold 1977, xc-xci.
35 Volk 2009, 65. On haptic theories of sight and gaze and their exploration in ancient epic, see Lovatt 2013, 310-346. For anthropomorphism and sign-sign interactions, see Man. 2.466-480, Volk 2009, 83; Gladhill 2016, 107-108.
36 For *obliquis* and glances lacking ‘frankness’, see *OLD s.v. obliquis* 4. While Manilius uses *obliquis* throughout the *Astronomica*, it appears to denote primarily direction or position without inherently negative implications (e.g. Man. 1.210, 666, 2.255, 3.225, 319, 5.80), except, perhaps, in his description of poor crops resulting from the Sun’s slanting rays at the Tropic of Capricorn (Man. 1.582-585) and the malign courses deriving from ‘slanted’ star-groups (Man. 3.338-340).
37 Housman 1912, 39. For *discordia concors* (Man. 1.142) as the logic behind the cosmos’ “cycles of alliance and enmity”, see Gladhill 2016, 102-103.
38 Man. 2.385-387.
39 Goold 1977, xliii-xliv. For the Varronian origins of Man. 2.386, see Gruppe 1876, 239. For ancient criticisms of this ‘denial of sympathy’, see Housman 1912, xiv-xv; Feraboli, Flores, and Scarci 1996, 324. For other determinants of these zodiacal interactions, see Man. 2.270-432, Housman 1912, xv-xv; Beck 2007, 62-67; Volk 2009, 61-65, 76-94.
circumstances by which signs ‘sight’ may be problematised, *sed plerumque manent inimica tertia quaeque* | *lege, in transversum vultu defixa maligno* (Man. 2.572-573), inviting comparison with Man. 2.607. On possible contradictions between Man. 2.385-387, 572-573, and 2.685-686, see Brakman 1922, 78.

According to Manilius’ cosmic model, such enmity is unavoidable and immovable. Since the character and quality of a sign’s ‘field of vision’ have a bearing on the effects of this ‘vision’, a hostile ‘sidelong’ aspect such as that experienced by neighbouring zodiacal signs could surely result in disastrous consequences for the earth below.

The dangerous aspects of Manilius’ zodiacal interactions appear to cast a dark shadow over Nero’s apotheosis. Having established Nero as a quasi-stellar entity with affective powers of vision akin to those exercised by Manilius’ zodiacal signs, Lucan’s use of *obliquus* to describe how Nero ‘looks’ upon Rome from his lofty vantage point (Luc. 1.55) seems, at first glance, to present the emperor as a fundamentally hostile star or sign with the potential to provoke disaster for Rome. After all, in addition to describing Phoebe’s route to replace her brother (1.78), Lucan also uses *obliquus* of the lightning metaphorically linked with Caesar and the comet heralding civil war (1.154, 529), the snake’s head which ensnares its prey (4.726), and the thrusts of the weapons which destroy Curio’s men (4.774). As such, the Manilian models which inform Lucan’s outline of Nero’s celestial aspect seem to only strengthen the condemnatory potential of these lines. However, the dangerous aspects of the fate which Lucan contemplates for Nero here—aspects underscored by the evocation of a Manilian model (Man. 2.385-387)—do not occur in isolation. The lines immediately following and preceding this short passage complicate what might initially be accepted as an uncomplicated declaration of the poet’s lack of faith for the Neronian imperial regime.

Nero’s problematic celestial placement relative to Rome is floated as a hypothetical consequence of the question *quis deus esse velis, ubi regnum ponere mundi* (Luc. 1.52), an eventuality which exists only in the realm of abstract possibility at this stage. Moreover, we cannot forget that this comment represents a course of action which Lucan warns Nero *against* taking (1.53-54), meaning that the hostility towards Rome suggested here is not an unmovable future endpoint for the emperor, but rather what may come to pass should Lucan’s advice be ignored. As in Virgil’s comments on Octavian’s future divinity (Verg. G. 1.24-28, 489-497, 500-515), the uncertainty around whether Nero will heed these warnings renders the passage’s outlook ambivalent and
ambiguous.\textsuperscript{42} Even so, this still leaves a possibility for the dangers alluded to in Lucan’s ‘Manilian’ framing of Nero’s positioning and influence to be avoided altogether. As we have seen, Lucan links Nero with other authoritative cosmic entities whose powers are not necessarily hostile, and which may lead to favourable outcomes such as the imposition of peace and harmony upon the world (Luc. 1.60-62).\textsuperscript{43} After all, Lucan outlines an alternative heavenly abode for Nero with a safer vantage point (1.56-59), one which must be approached with care but which, as we shall now go on to see, offers great rewards (as well as great risks) for whoever manages to secure it. This alternative leaves the door open for a less damning reading of his commentary on Nero. Having recognised the value of Manilius’ \textit{Astronomica} for the character of Lucan’s cosmos here, we are primed to acknowledge further Manilian influences on this passage which demand that we adopt a more nuanced, charitable, and ultimately pragmatic approach to Lucan’s vision of Nero’s celestial future(s).

2 Nero’s Cosmic Positioning

After specifying how Nero might avoid a ‘sidelong’ aspect in his ‘vision’ of Rome, Lucan proposes a second location for Nero’s celestial kingdom. Lucan again outlines what Nero should not do and the disagreeable consequences of such actions: \textit{aetheris immensi partem si presseris unam, | sentiet axis onus} (Luc. 1.56-57). The mention of weight (\textit{onus}) has prompted assumptions that these lines are inherently critical of the emperor, either amounting to a joke about his alleged poor physique,\textsuperscript{44} or connecting this passage with Lucan’s wider “obsession with \textit{onus, pondus, and moles}” and cosmic collapse.\textsuperscript{45} However, both interpretations run into difficulties: as we have already seen, the alleged mockeries of Nero’s body are not supported in the extant biographical and historiographical tradition,\textsuperscript{46} while this one-dimensional understanding of \textit{onus} ignores the divine qualities of ponderousness and the impact of new

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{42} Cf. Nauta 2019, 138-139, on Luc. 1.53-54, 58.
\item \textsuperscript{43} For Virgilian models for these sentiments (e.g. G. 1.5-42, A. 1.291-294), see Holmes 1999, 97; Gee, 2000, 188-190; Roche, 2009, 143-144; Penwill, 2010, 214-215.
\item \textsuperscript{44} Penwill 2010, 216.
\item \textsuperscript{45} Johnson 1987, 121-122. Kessler 2011, 136 invites comparison with Luc. 1.1-72, suggesting that it is “counterintuitive to read these two weights as coincidental”. For the “balance of the Eudoxan centripetal universe at Ov. \textit{Fast.} 6.269-276” and its ability to take Nero’s weight (Luc. 1.45-59), see Gee 2000, 188-189. Cf. Lapidge 1979, 344-370; Roche 2009, 142 on Luc. 1.57.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Dewar 1994, 200; Roche 2009, 142.
\end{itemize}
celestial bodies upon the balance of the heavens (Ov. *Met.* 9.273, Man. 4.933-935, Claud. *III Cons. Hon.* 106-110, 170-174).\(^{47}\) The disastrous suggestions regarding Nero’s impact on the world implied in these readings do not align with the more balanced understanding of the preceding lines (Luc. 1.53-55) which we have just established or the hopeful potential in the auspicious proposition for Nero’s cosmic role which follows (1.57-59).

Lucan recommends that, rather than pressing upon one isolated area of the firmament (1.56), Nero ought to position himself in the middle of the universe so that he may control the balance of the heavens:

\[
... Librati pondera caeli
orbe tene medio; pars aetheris illa sereni
tota vacet, nullaeque obstent a Caesare nubes.\(^{48}\)
\]

Lucan’s advice (*orbe tene medio*) recalls the position of Virgil’s Jupiter at the pinnacle of the sky, *sic vertice caeli | constitit* (Verg. *A.* 1.225-226), and presents a “compressed variation” of Virgilian comments on Augustus’ future zodiacal position between Virgo and Scorpio (Verg. *G.* 1.32-35).\(^{49}\) These nods to Virgil could invite a more hopeful reading of Lucan’s Nero, particularly when taken alongside the echo of Ovid’s Venus and her effect on the heavens, *risit et aether | protinus ex illa parte serenus erat* (Ov. *Fast.* 4.5-6), in Lucan’s hope for clear skies around the sidereal Nero (Luc. 1.57).\(^{50}\) Could Nero, as Thompson suggests, be a “kind of Augustus par excellence”, able to be a “more just emperor because he always enjoyed the *pax Augusta*” and had avoided the taint of internecine strife?\(^{51}\) We should not be too hasty to assume a wholly optimistic tone here in light of this link between Nero and apparent Augustan positivity. Lucan’s apparent glorification of Nero presupposes the fulfilment of earlier Virgilian prophecies regarding Augustus’ successes (Verg. *G.* 1.503-504),\(^{52}\) a model which—as we have already noted—is itself ambiguous.

However, we can explore the significance of these lines from another angle. *Orbis*, used here to denote the wider firmament within which Nero will be positioned, is associated with circular forms, structures, and movements, and thus

\(^{47}\) Duff 1926, 6 n. 1; Thompson 1964, 150; Dewar 1994, 203-204; Gee 2000, 145; Roche 2009, 142.
\(^{48}\) Luc. 1.57-59.
\(^{49}\) Roche 2009, 142; Reed 2011, 30. Cf. Gee 2000, 201 n. 23.
\(^{50}\) Roche 2009, 143.
\(^{51}\) Thompson 1964, 151.
\(^{52}\) Brena 1988, 140; Dewar, 1994, 199.
establishes the spherical character of the *Bellum Civile's* universe here.\(^{53}\) Nero’s placement in the middle of this heavenly sphere, when considered alongside the great responsibility and powers which come with such a position—*librati pondera caeli* (Luc. 1.57)—implies that he will become a crucial balancing point at the heart of the cosmos.\(^{54}\) Given Lucan’s earlier engagement with the *Astronomica’s* descriptions of zodiacal influences and interactions when outlining the cosmic route Nero should avoid (1.53-55), we are primed to expect similar debts to Manilius here. Even a brief examination of Manilius’ description of the universal axis and its fundamental characteristics yields compelling parallels with Lucan’s picture of Nero as a cosmic balancing force which invite a more generous reading of these lines. Let us return to the *Astronomica*.

After discussing the signs of the zodiac, Manilius describes the universal axis around which the cosmos’ outer sphere revolves:\(^{55}\)

\begin{quote}
 at qua fulgentis caelum consurgit ad Arctos, 
 omnia quae summo despectant sidera mundo 
 nec norunt obitus unoque in vertice tendunt. 
 in diversa siti caelumque et sidera torquent, 
 aera per gelidum tenuis deductur axis 
 libratumque regit diverso cardine mundum; 
 sidereus circa medium quem volvitur orbis 
 aetheriosque rotat cursus, immotus at ille 
 in binas Arctos magni per inania mundi 
 perque ipsum terrae derectus constittit orbem. 
 nec vero solidus stat robore corporis axis, 
 nec grave pondus habet, quod onus ferat aetheris alti, 
 sed cum aer omnis semper volvatur in orbem 
 quoque semel coepit totus volet undique in ipsum, 
 quodcumque in medio est, circa quod cuncta moventur, 
 usque adeo tenue ut verti non possit in ipsum 
 nec iam inclinari nec se convertere in orbem,
\end{quote}

\(^{53}\) OLD s.v. *orbis* 3, 5, 7, 9, 10, 11, 14. For the “fundamental assumption” of the heavens’ sphericity in Hellenistic astronomy, see Montelle 2020, 9-10. For spheres and circles in the *Bellum Civile’s* universe and Lucan’s engagement with broader traditions of the sphericity of the earth, see Raschle 2007, 59, 69-75; Domenicucci 2013, 11, 16-17, 65.


Manilius notes the axis’ position between the two poles and its balancing function (Man. 1.275-280), states that the heavens turn around this pivot (1.281-284), stresses its incorporeality and immobility relative to the surrounding cosmos (1.285-291), and provides a concise aetiological summary of the term *axis* (1.292-293). While Manilius follows in the wake of Aratus in highlighting the axis’ immobility, αὐτὰρ ὅ γ᾿ οὐδ᾿ ὀλίγον μετανίσσεται, ἀλλὰ μάλ᾿ αὔτως ἐξισορροπησθεὶς ἐξὶ ἄξων αἰὲν ἄρηρεν, ἔχει δ᾿ ἀτάλαντον ἁπάντη | μεσσηγὺς γαῖαν, περὶ δ᾿ οὐρανὸν αὐτὸν ἀγινεῖ (Arat. 21-23), he deviates from this account in his extensive focus on the axis’ physical nature, claiming that the heavens—rather than the axis (Arat. 23)—are responsible for their own rotation (Man. 1.278). Manilius’ axis is immaterial, lacks the weight or substance expected of an object which supports the entire universe (1.285-286), and is thus prevented from turning along with the rest of the heavens (1.290-291). A fundamental paradox appears at the heart of this passage, in that “the equilibrium of the cosmos and its movement are guaranteed by an object that has no form or weight but is nevertheless capable of supporting an enormous mass of matter”.

Manilius discusses the axis again during a larger exposition on calculating the rising of zodiacal signs (Man. 3.301-384) in which he imagines an observer at the north pole who experiences the universe rotating around him like a spinning top (3.356-384).

si vero natura sinat sub vertice caeli,
quem gelidus rigidis fulcit compagibus axis,
There is a distinct contrast between the axes presented here and in *Astronomica* 1: Manilius’ first major discussion of the axis emphasises its immateriality, whereas its subsequent presentation features ‘whimsical metaphors that require us to imagine it as an actual physical object’ (Man. 1.375-376, 444, 3.356-357). While Manilius’ description of the axis as being icy (*gelidus*) with firm structures (*rigidis ... compagibus*) implies its corporeality and therefore appears to invalidate his prior claims, the suggestion of the axis’ material consistency here complements his comparison of the moving cosmos to a spinning top (*laterumque metu | turbinis in morem recta vertigine curret*) and could thus serve as an invitation to conceive of the axis in sensory rather than purely geometric terms. Despite this apparent contradiction, the earlier emphasis on the axis’ immobility is still implied here through Manilius’ account of the heavens’ movements relative to the—presumably still (*stantis*)—axis/observer.

Against this Manilian backdrop, Lucan’s instructions that Nero should position himself at the centre of the heavens appear to equate the young emperor with the lofty stabilising force of the cosmic axis. Lucan’s claim that, once in place, Nero will hold the weight of the balanced heavens, *librati pondera caeli* (Luc. 1.57), suggests that he will be responsible for establishing and maintaining universal equilibrium, a mighty task indeed given the long-established association of *librare* with cosmic order. As we have seen, Manilius presents the axis as a powerful ‘agent of Providence’ on account of its balancing role: *libratumque regit diverso cardine mundum* (Man. 1.280). Lucan evokes Manilius’ presentation of the axis as a powerful agent in his use of *libratus* to describe the cosmos Nero will control (*librati pondera caeli*, Luc. 1.57), and

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64 Man. 3.356-361.  
67 For Nero’s cosmic placement as a literal manifestation of a metaphorical ‘balance of power’, see Bexley 2009, 460.  
68 For *librare* and celestial equilibrium in the Roman imagination, see Rossetti 2020, 220. For Libra as Rome’s ‘foundation sign’ (Man. 4.769-777), see Abry 1988; Gee 2003, 231; Fratantuono 2012, 97. For Lucanian discussions of Libra and its effects (Luc. 4.56-59, 8.467-470), see Earnshaw 2009, 88.  
in his framing of Nero’s sidereal fate (*quīs deus esse velis, ubi regnum ponere mundī*, 1.52).⁷⁰ Here, Lucan suggests that Nero will enjoy heavenly dominion through his ‘kingdom of the cosmos’ in terms akin those used by Manilius to indicate that the axis ‘rules’ the ‘balanced cosmos’ which surrounds it.

The precise spatial and ‘material’ details of Nero’s cosmic positioning suggest similarities between the emperor’s lofty station and Manilius’ universal axis. Nero is located at the cosmos’ centre (*orbē...mediō*, Luc. 1.58)—the same place as the axis (Man. 1.281-282, 289)—and should presumably remain here (*aetherīs partem si presseris unam, | sentīet axis onus*, Luc. 1.56-57) in a state of immobility akin to that of the axis itself (Man. 1.282, 290-293, 3.360-361).⁷¹ The axial implications of Nero’s representation here prompt a more generous reconsideration of *onus*, the second core quality of Manilius’ cosmic axis (Man. 1.285-286, 290). While the axis has no weight of its own, it nonetheless carries the weight of the cosmos, *nec grave pondus habet, quod onus ferat aetheris altī* (1.286). If Lucan’s apotheosised Nero is to successfully embody the universal axis, he must not contradict its fundamental qualities. He must therefore avoid burdening or destabilising the heavens and instead become the powerful balancing force upon which the cosmos depends. Given the parallels between his cosmic role, positioning, (recommended) stillness and the powers and qualities of Manilius’ axis, Nero’s sidereal capabilities assume impressive and reverential status. We are thus presented with a tantalising possibility: that Lucan forecasts a potentially prestigious future for Nero, at least at this stage of the *Bellum Civile*.

Such a reading of this section of Nero’s apotheosis stands in stark contrast to the alleged insults and threats of disaster typically associated with the imperial invocation. Lucan appears to grant Nero the ultimate cosmic responsibility of overseeing not just Rome (*tuam ... Romam*, Luc. 1.55), but all of the heavens (*librati ... caeli*, 1.57), suggesting, by extension, that the young emperor is up to the challenge. However, just as we saw in the case of Nero’s celestial aspect, the praiseworthy elements of these lines are not wholly straightforward. By elevating the act of balancing the heavens—and, by extension, preventing the cosmic

⁷⁰ I am indebted to Julene Abad Del Vecchio for highlighting significant overlaps in the character of the axes of Manilius (1.275-93) and Germanicus (Arat. 17-21), and the striking parallels between Germanicus’ axis and the balancing role Lucan ascribes to Nero—particularly their uses of *pondus, caelum, teneō*, and *libratus* (Germ. Arat. 17, 20; Luc. 1.57-58). Although the precise dating of both the *Astronomica* and *Aratea* is difficult to pin down (on this issue, see, for example, Gain 1971, 28-30; Colborn 2013; Stiles 2017, 878-881), we can nonetheless trace a broader tradition associating these terms and cosmic power and responsibility in the early Imperial period.

⁷¹ For *axis* as synecdoche for the heavens, see Hardie 1983, 220, on Verg. A. 4.481.
dissolution Lucan will later describe (1.70-82)\textsuperscript{72}—to such an extent, Lucan also stresses the intense difficulty of this endeavour, and in doing so hints towards the catastrophic consequences of failure.\textsuperscript{73} As Kessler has pointed out, one cannot help but recall the “weighty threat that Nero was just admonished to avoid” when Lucan begins his subsequent account of universal collapse, *stare diu nimioque graves sub pondere lapsus | nec se Roma ferens* (1.71-72),\textsuperscript{74} and even once installed in this revered position, Nero is still tainted by the risk of danger and disaster. However, we should not jump to label Lucan’s engagement with the Manilian axis as having entirely condemnatory implications for the emperor. Just as we saw in the details of Nero’s celestial aspect relative to Rome, Nero’s equation with the universal axis is described in the realm of possibility, events which might or might not come to pass in answer to the question, *quis deus esse velis, ubi regnum ponere mundi* (1.52).\textsuperscript{75} Once again, we are left to grapple with the tension between the contrasting yet persistently concurrent possibilities of Neronian greatness and Neronian catastrophe, of Lucanian optimism and Lucanian pessimism.

3 Lucanian Pragmatism and the Manilian Cosmos

Lucan’s engagement with these two Manilian models—the dynamics of zodiacal interactions and the universal axis (Man. 1.274-293, 2.385-289, 570-576, 3.356-384)—falls within a larger passage which is itself already inextricably related to earlier imperial encomia. On the surface, Lucan’s evocation of these Manilian discussions—with their jarring implications of lofty power and high-stakes liability—might at first appear to contravene any chance of finding even tentative hopefulness for the Neronian age in these lines. Acknowledgement of Manilius’ zodiacal precedents (Man. 2.385-289, 570-576) for Nero’s celestial view of Rome (Luc. 1.53-55) compels us to recognise a far more sophisticated and challenging character to Lucan’s heavens and the interactions of its component parts here. The coupling of risk and reward in Lucan’s evocation of Manilius’ cosmos need not require us to assume that Lucan takes a wholly condemnatory approach towards Nero here. We can unpack this commentary more fully by considering Lucan’s presentation of Nero’s heavenly

\textsuperscript{72} Lapidge 1979, 344-370.

\textsuperscript{73} Roche 2009, 142.


\textsuperscript{75} Cf. n. 42 above.
destiny alongside his wider approach to notoriously tricky topics such as the central subject of his epic—civil war—and his (in)famous remarks on the enduring state of the Roman world following the conclusion of this conflict and the establishment of the Principate.

Lucan's opening survey of civil war's violence, carnage, and chaos of civil war (Luc. 1.8-23, 38-44), connects this kind of conflict with mythological and historical periods of turbulence and unrest such as the conflicts with Pyrrhus and Hannibal (Luc. 1.30-32) and the Titanomachy and Gigantomachy (Luc. 1.33-38).76 So far, so bleak. Yet we could approach such incidents from another perspective. The wars with Pyrrhus and Hannibal, while deadly and costly to Rome, tested and ultimately strengthened the Roman spirit which weathered these challenging storms.77 Gigantomachic imagery, undeniably laden with notions of danger and instability, could also be associated with Jovian (and indeed Imperial) success and order,78 as Valerius Flaccus would go on to demonstrate (V. Fl. 1.563-565).79 Lucan also acknowledges that these conflicts—civil, external, and universal—were eventually followed by periods of peace (Luc. 1.33-38) which the apotheosised Nero may continue from his heavenly seat (1.60-62).80 Furthermore, through Lucan's frequent references to the ages following civil war (including the Neronian era) and abundant apostrophes to present (and indeed future) audiences beyond his epic's internal universe,81 we are reminded that, despite the seemingly hopeless violence of civil war in progress, the Roman world ultimately endures (1.33-34).82 Lucan thus positions the events of the Bellum Civile “within wider cycles of prosperity and degeneration”,83 and in citing Nero as an outcome or reward for civil war (1.44-45), establishes the emperor within this same cycle of catastrophic violence, eventual recovery, and hoped-for prosperity.

We can also use this more measured, pragmatic, approach to briefly (re)consider Lucan's ardent comments on the 'slavery' experienced by generations of
Romans under the Principate (e.g. Luc. 4.575-581, 808, 7.432-459, 641, 695-697), comments often assumed to indicate striking anti-Neronian and anti-Imperial sensibilities.\textsuperscript{84} However, this interpretation is somewhat reductive, and there are some nuances which we need to unpack in order to fully understand these remarks. First, we should note that while the absence of \textit{libertas} during the Imperial period is frequently interpreted as evidence of terrible servitude,\textsuperscript{85} Lucan discusses two types of \textit{libertas} in the \textit{Bellum Civile}: the political \textit{libertas} which represents the Republican constitution and a philosophical type found in the spiritual freedom of the Stoic \textit{sapiens}.\textsuperscript{86} While the former may have perished at Pharsalus (7.432-436, 578-581),\textsuperscript{87} the latter endures, offering any generation an escape from tyranny by suicide.\textsuperscript{88} The post-civil-war \textit{status quo} of a ‘devoted service’ to a sole ruler may be here to stay, but there is still scope for some degree of self-determination within this broader framework for private citizens and emperors alike.\textsuperscript{89}

Second, we must appreciate the multiple shades of meaning in \textit{servio}—a term associated primarily with enslavement, but also with devotion, gratification, and service\textsuperscript{90}—which Lucan uses to describe the condition of the Roman world following Caesar’s victory (Luc. 7.444-445, 641). Although \textit{servio} appears in broader discussions of slavery (e.g. 6.790, 7.228, 439, 8.341, 356, 9.194, 254) and remarks on the possibility of defeat in the civil war (7.382, 9.28), it also denotes the relationship between the heavens and Jupiter following his victory over the giants in Lucan’s proem, \textit{caelumque suo servire Tonanti | non nisi saevorum potuit post bella gigantum} (1.35-36).\textsuperscript{91} While Roche proposes that Lucan establishes a condition of slavery through the analogy between Jupiter and Nero (1.35),\textsuperscript{92} this does not fully account for the broader tradition of using \textit{servio} to

\textsuperscript{84} See, for example, Lounsbury 1976; Martindale 1984, 74-75; Dinter 2013, 181-182; Esposito 2013, 206-207, Kimmerle 2015, 14. For Senecan influences on Lucan’s discussions of autonomy under the Principate, see Roche 2020.

\textsuperscript{85} The fate of \textit{libertas} in the \textit{Bellum Civile} is a vast topic beyond the scope of this piece. On \textit{libertas} under the Principate, see Kimmerle 2015, 287-290. On \textit{libertas} in Lucan more broadly, see, for example, Ahl 1976, 23, 35, 45, 55-57, 278-289; Roche 2009, 4-7, 149; Kimmerle 2015, 292-298.

\textsuperscript{86} Lintott 1971, 499-500, 503; Lounsberry 1976, 221-222, 232-234; Martindale 1984, 71; Roche 2019, 170, 197-198.


\textsuperscript{88} Martindale 1984, 71. We see an exaggerated (and misguided) attempt at this exit strategy at Luc. 4.573-581.

\textsuperscript{89} For Senecan influences on Lucan’s discussions of autonomy, see Roche 2020.

\textsuperscript{90} \textit{OLD} s.v. 1, 1b, 2, 3; \textit{L&S} II.

\textsuperscript{91} For Lucan’s adaptation of Hor. \textit{Carm.} 3.5.1-2 at 1.35, see Roche 2009, 132.

\textsuperscript{92} Roche 2009, 8. Cf. Feeney 1991, 297, 299. For a similar parallel between Jupiter and Imperial rulers, see Germ. \textit{Arat.} 1-3: \textit{ab love principium magno deduxit Aratus | carminis at nobis, genitor, tu maximus auctor, | te veneror}. 
indicate submission and a degree of devotion to a god (Ov. Met. 1.515-516, Sen. Prov. 1.5.6, Stat. 4.474-475). The use of servio in this way is also extended to other divine powers—namely apotheosised or to-be-apotheosised rulers (Verg. G. 1.29-31, Ov. Met. 15.831, Tr. 5.9.37-38).93 Lucan's comments on the deification of the Caesars and their replacement of the traditional Olympian deities who have forsaken the Roman people may seem scathing (Luc. 7.445-459),94 but they nonetheless establish the emperors as quasi-divine figures for whom this balance between subservience and reverence is not entirely inappropriate.

In fact, Nauta has proposed that, given the close structural parallels and intratextual links between the Bellum Civile's proem and his excursus on the effects of civil war during the Pharsalus narrative (Luc. 7.385-459), these two episodes inform one another.95 Although Nauta does not specify the implications of such an endeavour,96 his recommended strategy invites us to re-examine the details of the Caesars' deification with an eye to the powers, risks, and warnings outlined in Nero's apotheosis and through the episode's nods to Manilius (Luc. 1.45-59). In supplanting (negligent) traditional deities (7.457),97 the deceased Caesars assume certain elements which allow them to exert numinous powers: fulminibus manes radiisque ornabit et astris (7.458).98 Radiis and astris recall the ‘starry’ qualities which allow the apotheosised Nero to influence affairs on earth (1.53-59) and the more characteristic qualities and behaviours of powerful celestial phenomena described by Manilius.99 As we have seen, such cosmic entities may affect the world in different ways, with the scale of their potential impact equal to that of the dangers associated with some of their inter-siderial interactions. If Lucan's Caesars are numinous beings (or soon-to-be numinous beings) capable of exerting formidable celestial influences over the world in the same manner as his Nero, then we may assume that the same uncertainty hangs over their powers—will their influence bring glory or ruin to the world? Given this ambivalence, the significance of Lucan using servio regarding Rome's endurance under the Principate (7.444-445, 641) becomes clear: the ultimate fate of the Roman world—whether it endures

93 Lucan's Massilians make a similar suggestion regarding Caesar at 3.315-320.
94 Especially given the earlier comparison between Rome and other ‘servile’ nations (Luc. 7.442-445) and the implication that these deified Caesars will not reach the same lofty heights as the defeated Pompey (Luc. 6.809, 9.4-14). For condemnatory readings of these lines, see Williams 2017, 104-105; Nauta 2019, 141-142. Cf. O'Higgins 1988, 221; Feeney 1991, 281-282, 288, 297; Roche 2009, 5.
95 Nauta 2019, 142-143.
97 Cf. Luc. 1.59-51 on Nero's own experience.
98 Roche 2019, 175.
slavery or enters into respectful and devoted service—depends entirely on the whims of its rulers.

The pragmatic attitude which runs through Lucan’s discussions of perilous moments in Roman history, civil war, and the wider circumstances of the Principate continues in the invocation itself as Lucan muses on whether Nero would wield Jupiter’s sceptre or take a Phaethon-esque joyride in Phoebus’ chariot (Luc. 1.47-50). While the latter scenario is frequently thought to indicate Nero’s limited abilities as a ruler, Lucan does not follow Ovid’s version of the myth (Ov. Met. 2.31-328) to show this undertaking ending in catastrophe. In fact, as Nelis has shown, these lines owe much to Virgil’s equation of internal conflict with the dangers of an uncontrolled chariot and Octavian’s political skill with that of a capable charioteer (Verg. G. 1.40, 489-490, 500-514). This allusion, positioned within Lucan’s programmatic alignment of civil war with broader cycles of change, suggests a “more ambivalent but nonetheless more realistic” and ultimately pragmatic attitude towards Nero and his capabilities. If Nero follows the advice offered regarding his celestial aspect and cosmic positioning having assumed power and responsibilities similar to those of influential zodiacal signs and the universal axis, then he may oversee an age of peace, tranquillity, and prosperity for Rome (Luc. 1.60-62). However, in stressing the mighty and elevated character of this role, Lucan indicates that there is a long way to fall from such a position. By outlining the dangers of ignoring this advice through his nods to Manilius’ extensive discussions of both these cosmic entities, Lucan also implies that such a failure will have potentially catastrophic—but only temporary—consequences. Even if Nero’s celestial reign should result in disaster, this will “merely herald the advent of a new era for the Roman world”.

From this, we may also offer some tentative hypotheses on Lucan’s attitudes towards and hopes for the Neronian present. While the possibilities around Nero’s role in the heavens are clearly framed as guidance for after the emperor’s

100 See nn. 5, 12 above.
102 Sanderson 2020, 234. For Lucan’s engagement with judgements of Augustus at Sen. Clem. 1.9, 11 and the implications of Nero’s moderation here, see Domenicucci 2013, 76.
103 Nauta 2019, 138-139.
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death, Lucan goes on to state that Nero is already god-like in his eyes: sed mihi iam numen (Luc. 1.63). As such, we may wonder whether Lucan is suggesting that the living Nero is as capable of either greatness and glory or disaster and ruination while he lives and rules as he will be following his ascent to the skies. We are thus left with an aura of uncertainty hanging over Lucan’s invocation to Nero. Just like the close of Georgics 1, this passage is “rather ambiguous, evoking both danger and safety, war and peace, chaos and order.” Lucan presents “two incompatible attitudes” here, but it is for Nero, rather than us as readers, to choose between them and determine his place and power on earth and in the heavens. All we—and Lucan—can do is place our hopes in Nero to choose wisely, with no guarantee of safety for the Roman world and no security in this hope, save for the pragmatism and wisdom to recognise—as Lucan does—that even the greatest disaster will ultimately yield to some kind of brave new world.

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