CHAPTER TWO

CAUSATION IN POST-AUGUSTAN EPIC*

Bruce Gibson

Introduction

Quite rightly, the Aetia of Callimachus have played a large part in the understanding of Roman poetry. The desire to explain origins, though itself dating back in Greek literature before Callimachus in such places as the aetiologies of cult that are sometimes found at the end of tragedies,¹ has been identified as having a large part to play in the mechanics of Roman poetry. Recent work, such as Sara Myers’ 1997 monograph, Ovid’s Causes, has emphasised not only a Callimachean aetiological element in Ovid’s Metamorphoses, but also a link with cosmogony as well. Myers also considers more historical features of Ovid’s poem, and suggests, for example, that the switch to Italian subject matter with the beginning of the retelling of the story of the Aeneid in Met. 13 intersects with the kind of material found in authors such as Varro and Nepos.²

If one turns from Ovid to later epic, Myers’ two main areas of concern, Callimachean aetiology and cosmogony, provide useful means for thinking about some aspects of causation in post-Augustan epic. From the Callimachean perspective, one might note for instance what is in effect the massive aetion of the Nemean games provided in Thebaid 6, with its account of the funeral of the child Opheltes, and the subsequent games, which have received attention in the work of scholars such as Joanne Brown, Helen Lovatt, and Charles McNelis.³ And for what might be termed scientific interest in causation, compare for example the

---

* I am indebted to audiences in Charlottesville, Manchester and Liverpool for their observations and discussion.
1 See e.g. Oedipus’ exposition of the future cult in his honour at Colonus (S. OC 1518–1555), or the cult of Medea’s dead children foretold at E. Med. 1382.
³ On the Nemean episode in the Thebaid, see e.g. Brown (1994); McNelis (2007) 76–96; on the games, see Lovatt (2005).
multiple possible explanations for the descent of Amphiaraus into the underworld at the end of Statius, *Thebaid* 7 (809–816), or Lucan’s discussion of tides in Book 1 (409–419), where the multiple explanations of causation might be felt to recall Lucretian techniques of explanation.4

But in this chapter I wish to concentrate on a different aspect of causation in epic poetry after Augustus, and to consider the topic in the light of historiography. Concern with the origins of events is a major feature of historiographical texts: why did a particular event, or series of events, take place? One can consider for instance the way in which Herodotus opens his *Histories* with the aim of explaining why it was that the war between Greeks and barbarians took place (δι’ ἣν αἰτίην ἐπολέμησαν ἀλλήλους, “through what reason they fought a war against each other”),5 or the famous discussion of the origins of the Peloponnesian War at Thucydides 1.23.5–6.6 Similarly, we can note Polybius’ extensive discussion of causation at 3.6–7 where Polybius draws a careful distinction between aitiai ‘causes’, prophasis ‘pretext’, and arche ‘beginning’.7 It has well been observed that this kind of concern with causes in Greek historiography draws on poetic interest in causation,8 which goes right back to Homer: compare, for instance, the *Iliad*’s interest in the god whose anger caused the conflict between Achilles and Agamemnon (*Iliad* 1.8). Anger also has a role to play in examples of historiographical causation such as the anger (*thumos*) of Hamilcar, one of the causes of the Second Punic War (Plb. 3.9.6), and the anger (*orge*) of the Aetolians, said to have been the reason for the war between Antiochus III and Rome at Plb. 3.7.1.

---

4 For multiple explanation as a specifically Epicurean mode, see e.g. Hankinson (2001) 221–223; for multiple causation in historiography, see the discussion and bibliography at Oakley (1997–2005) II.441. There is of course a substantial range of *philosophical* interest in causation in the ancient world. From the post-Augustan period, Seneca, *Ep.* 65 is a classic treatment of philosophical causation, presenting a range of previous views (including those of Plato and Aristotle), but subordinating them to a Stoic scheme of causation; for a full treatment, see Inwood (2007) 136–155.


6 On this passage, see e.g. Hornblower (1991) 64–66; Derow (1994) 80.


8 See e.g. Marincola (2001) 10, who suggests that historiography subsequently “moved in its own direction, especially in regard to causation and explanation,” 84 n. 105, 142, 146 n. 139; cf. Woodman (1988) 2.