Caesar Famulus Fortunae: Fortune’s Dominance in Lucan’s Pharsalia

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While it may be a sacrilege (nefas, 1.127) for Lucan to explain whether it was Caesar or Pompey who entered into the civil war more justly, Lucan has no problem explaining who is responsible for the wars’ events. Fortune is the one who “finds the reasons for battle” (Fortuna... causas inventit armis, 1.264). There seems to be no event in Lucan’s Pharsalia over which Fortune does not exert her power. Her influence in the poem is so strong that it actually eclipses Caesar’s own power, forcing him to become Fortune’s unwitting slave. Whereas Caesar sees the two of them as companions working together (sola placet Fortuna comes [Caesar], 5.510), Lucan reveals that Fortune, ever the fickle force, will ultimately be behind Caesar’s demise ([Caesaris] sanguine... quo Fortuna parat uictos perfundere patres, 10.339).

Lucan’s Caesar should not be faulted too much for thinking that he and Fortune were working together as indeed this seems to be the case for much of the epic. However, it is the great storm scene (5.504-702) that highlights Fortune’s dominance over Caesar. That Caesar regains Fortune only after the storm (Caesar... Fortunamque suam tacta tellure recepit, 5.677) makes clear why Caesar fails to complete the mission: Fortune was not bestowing her blessing on the expedition. Lucan takes this concept one step further by suggesting that Fortune actually causes the storm, apparently offended by Caesar’s insults (de [Caesare] male tunc Fortuna meretur, 5.582). After exposing Caesar’s powerlessness by means of the storm, Lucan allows Fortune one last display of her dominance. For at the end of the scene, Caesar pleads earnestly to the gods and Fortune to let him die, finding some advantage in dying as an unknown at sea and having the world fear that he might one day return (5.671). Even here, as Caesar begs for death, Fortune denies him his wish, thereby forcing him to accept the fate she has already prepared for him. Thus Lucan uses the scene to demonstrate that Caesar, although an undeniable monster, can only be as powerful as Fortune allows him to be.

The Fortune this essay focuses on, and which Lucan invokes in his epic, refers to that specific Roman deity (Fortuna) rather than some abstract concept (fortuna). Since Latin
manuscripts would never have capitalized the $f$ and the difference between *Fortuna* and *fortuna* is so slight, treating both *fortuna* and *Fortuna* as equivalent hardly impacts the reading of the poem. Thus *Fortuna*/*fortuna*, as it appears in Lucan, always refers to that goddess (*Fortuna*) who doles out, not “chance” in the literal sense, but “controlled” chance, administered, however whimsically and erratically.” Fortune does not reside on Mount Olympus, nor does she exist in an anthropomorphized form. Rather she exists as a “quasi-animistic” spirit as Ahl explains. Despite her non-Olympian status, the Romans still considered her so important and powerful that temples were constructed in order to worship her. Even though scholars argue that Lucan’s epic lack any intervention on the part of the Olympian gods, by recognizing Fortune Lucan clearly does not abandon divine intervention altogether. Rather, as Ahl points out, Fortune has been substituted into the role typically assumed by that of the Olympians in epic poetry. For Lucan, “Fortune is a force external to man, which confers its blessings upon individual countries and men.”

So, just as Apollo can directly attack Patroclus in Book 16 of the *Iliad*, Lucan’s *Fortuna* can do much more than merely bestow blessings; she actually directs the events of the war, both on a macro and micro scale. On the macro scale, it was Fortune who decided which spear-throwers would become murderers as missiles flew into the air at the eponymous Battle of Pharsalus (*incerta facit quos vult Fortuna nocentes*, 7.489). Yet, on the micro scale, Lucan shows that Fortune pervades interpersonal interactions. When Caesar presents clemency to Domitius after the siege of Corfinium, it is Fortune whom Lucan blames for the shame that Domitius will now carry, not Caesar. “How much better would Fortune have been able to spare Roman shame if a slaughter had been performed?” (2.517-518) Lucan asks. When Caesar presents this same scene of clemency in his account of the war, he discusses the interaction as a demonstration of his power, devoid of all mentions of Fortune, (*De Bello Civile*, 1.22-23). Lucan, then, uses Fortune to directly undermine Caesar’s own power, allowing her to be the one who really decides Domitius’s fate.

Beyond responding to Caesar’s own depiction of himself, Lucan uses Fortune as a foil to his own depiction of Caesar, especially during scenes where Lucan’s Caesar seems to be at the height of his autonomy. One of the more striking episodes in Lucan’s epic sees Caesar defiling a sacred grove (3.399-452). This grove has never before violated (lucus…
numquam violatus, 3.399), and its very presence causes brave men
to tremble (sed fortes tremuere manus, 3.429). Still, Caesar dared to
be the first to chop down an oak tree. (primus... ausus... aeriam
ferro proscindere quercum, 3.433-434). Some might argue that since
Caesar is the one chopping down the tree, not Fortune, Fortune
does not really have dominance over Caesar here. Yet,

immediately after the episode, Lucan pulls back and explains
that, “Fortune saves many who bring harm” (seruat multos Fortuna
nocentis, 3.448). So while Caesar appears to be acting of his own
free will, he is only allowed to do so because Fortune allows him
to do so.

In a similar vein, Lucan seems to present Caesar at the
height of his agency during the Battle of Pharsalus. He is first
compared to god of war Mars (veluti... Bellonas... agitans Mavors,
7.568-569), and later Lucan writes that Caesar himself (ipse, 7.574)
was managing the battlefield. Even in a passage where Caesar’s
agency seem undeniable, Lucan begins by calling attention to the
land where the battle was taking place, for there “Caesar’s
Fortune clung” (Fortunaque Caesaris haesit, 7.547). To that same
end, at the end of the passage, when it had become clear that
Caesar’s tyranny was imminent, Lucan rebukes Fortune saying,
“If you were giving a master to those born after these battles,
you should have given them wars too.” (7.645-646). Both
references to Fortune, surrounding a scene where Caesar appears
dominant, create the effect that Fortune really was the one
responsible for that day’s disaster, no matter how much it
appears that it was Caesar’s doing. In the end, Fortune created
the tyrant (dominum, 7.645) for Rome; Caesar just happened to be
her choice of puppet.

While anecdotal evidence is helpful, a broader look at
the use of Fortuna would give better insight into its role in the
poem. Although a detailed analysis of Fortune’s role in all of
Lucan is far beyond the scope of this paper, some generalized
statistical evidence can be provided to support the conclusion
that Fortune has agency all throughout Lucan’s poem. The word
Fortuna appears 145 times in Pharsalia, and of those 145 uses,
Lucan uses it 116 times (80%) as the nominative subject of the
sentence. As subjects are grammatically the agents of main verb,
it seems clear from the distribution of case usages that Lucan
views Fortune as being an active, living force within his poem.
That he also uses the vocative form 20 times further supports
the theory that Fortune is a living entity. The opposite case
would be supported if Fortune appeared as an ablative, such as
an ablative of means. This would imply that some other agent,
such as Caesar, could accomplish something by means of Fortune. Tellingly, *Fortuna* never appears as an ablative in the entire poem. While it is clear that Lucan presents Fortune as the powerful agent within his poem, it is not yet clear, from the examples provided, that Fortune’s and Caesar’s motives oppose one another. It is the storm in Book 5 which exposes Fortune as Caesar’s master. The scene takes place after Caesar has already landed in Greece, but while he still needs further reinforcements before beginning his offensive. As his reinforcements are slow in coming, Caesar decides to sail back to Italy, in the hopes of “conquering waves that ought to be feared by fleets” (*fluctusque uerendor / classibus… sperat superare*, 5.502-503). As the word *Fortuna* appears eight times in this passage, it seems clear that the scene is paramount to understanding Fortune in Lucan.

Lucan’s depiction of Caesar throughout this passage, as a small, lowly servant, only solidifies his true relationship with Fortune. For starters, Caesar is not even the captain of his own ship, but rather he is completely dependent on the kindness and knowledge of Amyclas, a local seafarer who has no affiliation with the Roman army. His reliance on Amyclas to accomplish his goal parodies his reliance on Fortune to accomplish nearly anything, for at least Fortune is a powerful goddess whereas Amyclas is a poor man (*pauper Amyclas*, 5.539) who sleeps on a bed of seaweed (*quem dabat alga toro*, 5.521). Furthermore, Caesar does not brave the sea decked out in his best armor, but Lucan writes that he is “covered by a plebeian garment” (*plebeio tectus amictu*, 5.538). He does not even set sail in a “ship” (*navis*), but Lucan only refers to the vessel as “the keel” (*carina*, 5.514; 5.534; 5.641) or “the stern” (*puppis*). The latter form appears eight times in the passage. Although both terms are technically examples of metonymy, using a part of the ship to represent the whole, Lucan seems to be highlighting the ship’s small size by refusing to see it as anything other than just part of a real ship. This is only intensified by the adjectives used to describe it. It is both small (*parua… puppe*, 5.655) and weak (*inualida… puppe*, 5.673). Finally, Lucan’s description of Caesar’s initial departure from camp makes explicit the image of Caesar as servant. Lucan explains that Caesar was setting out and “preparing things that hardly ought to be dared by slaves” (*uix famulis audenda parat*, 5.509). Lucan refuses to celebrate Caesar’s recklessness, and characterizes him as someone even below servants (*famulis*, 5.509).

Even the storm’s description, particularly how it conquers Jupiter, highlights symbolically Caesar’s powerlessness.
Lucan writes that as the storm approaches its climax, lightning ceases to be effective (\textit{nee fulgura currunt / clara}, 5.630-631). Any time Lucan makes mention of Jupiter’s lightning bolts, there seems to be an implicit reference to Caesar. For early on in the epic, Lucan draws a comparison between Caesar’s all-powerful force and the force of Jupiter’s lightning bolt. “Caesar takes delight in making a path through ruin, just like a lightning bolt” (1.150-151). So when Lucan writes of lightning’s impotence, he is only confirming Caesar’s impotence during this storm. That the fearsome light dies (\textit{lux etiam metuenda perit}, 5.630) only spells doom for Caesar.

Despite the weak and servile imagery which surrounds Caesar, some scholars read this passage as an encomium for Caesar’s power and proof of Fortune’s will to save him. M. P. O. Morford argues not only that “his safe return to land is another example of Fortune’s protection of her favourite” but he also states bluntly that, “through it all, Caesar is master.” Morford seems to base his argument on the fact that Caesar believes Fortune is on his side. He says explicitly, “he disdains the power of the sea, for he knows that he is Fortune’s favourite.” Matthews, too, reads the passage as proof of the strong bond between Caesar and Fortune. There is no disagreement that Caesar certainly thinks he is Fortune’s favorite. When trying to console Amyclas’s fears about the coming storm, he tells him that not only do the gods never forsake him (\textit{quam numina / numquam destituunt}, 5.581-582). Further he tells Amyclas that by means of the storm (\textit{pelagi caelique tumultu}, 5.593) “Fortune is seeking out something which she can provide to me” (\textit{quaerit… quod praestet Fortuna mihi}, 5.593-594). The first statement certainly reveals Caesar’s utmost confidence in himself, and, when combined with the second, it reveals his belief that, even in the face of the sea’s terrors, Fortune is always looking to serve him. As Matthews notes, Caesar believes the storm is just a way for Fortune to increase his status (\textit{quaerit… quod praestet Fortuna mihi}, 5.593-594). Thus Caesar’s beliefs are not to be argued against, but rather one can argue whether Caesar is correct in thinking Fortune is truly on his side.

Reading the passage as proof as Fortune’s favor becomes difficult to support on two accounts. For one thing, if Fortune were truly on Caesar’s side it is unlikely that he would fail to reach Italy as he wishes to do. Lucan writes that Caesar “knew from experience that rash actions turn out if a god is well-disposed” (\textit{temeraria prono / expertus cessisse deo}, 5.501-502). Since clearly Caesar’s rash actions do not come to fruition here, it is
only logical to believe that Fortune was not “well-disposed” \((\textit{prono, 5.501})\). Additionally, Morford’s argument stands opposed to Lucan’s statement that when Caesar touches down on land, he “regains so many kingdoms, cities, and his own Fortune” \((\textit{tot regna, tot urbes / Fortunamque suam tacta tellure, 5.676-677})\). If Fortune had always been at his side, why would he gain it back after his ordeal? Matthews tries to argue in favor of Morford’s point by noting that \textit{recipio} in this context can mean something like “still had possession of his own Fortune,” implying that Fortune was there throughout the ordeal. This reading is difficult since \textit{regna, urbes recipit} must translate as “he regains kingdoms and cities,” not “he continued to have possession of kingdoms and cities.” For when he was on the brink of death and powerless, he had command over no one. Matthews attempts to solve this by suggesting that \textit{recipio} simply has two different senses within this sentence, but it is simpler to accept that the one word means the same thing throughout the sentence. Thus the most appropriate reading of this passage is that during the storm, Fortune was not on Caesar’s side.

Ahl argues that the episode presents Caesar with something that is “at worst, a stand-off,” and his assessment approaches the truth. Chiefly, Ahl recognizes that the episode is not an outright victory for Caesar. Still, even his reading fails to make explicit the idea that Fortune forsakes Caesar and even turns against him. That is, Ahl does not recognize that Fortune herself causes the storm. In fact, he and Matthews stand staunchly opposed to the idea. Ahl states that there is no indication that the “tempest arises from the intervention of any deity.” Since Ahl considers Fortune to be a “deity” later on in his book, he makes clear that Fortune is in no way responsible for the storm. Similarly, Matthews argues that Lucan uses the simile from lines 620-626, comparing this storm to a flood caused by Zeus and Neptune, in order to highlight the gods’ “ineffectualness in the actual narrative of his storm.” To be sure, Lucan gives no indication the storm arises from divine inspiration; it is the winds themselves that he chooses to apostrophize rather than the Olympians \((\textit{primus ab oceano caput exeris Atlanteo, / Core, 5.598-599})\).

Even without Lucan’s explicit reference, Fortune’s true role in the storm can be understood by investigating Caesar’s dialogue during the passage. For one thing, although Caesar mistakenly thinks Fortune is causing the storm because she wants to provide for him in some way, he nevertheless admits
that Fortune is seeking something “by means of the tumult of the sky and sea” (pelagi caelique tumultu, 5.593).

Furthermore, even the placement of his two speeches during the storm helps reveal Fortune’s agency. His first speech (5.578-593) sees Caesar insult Fortune twice, and immediately after the speech the storm escalates. The second speech (5.654-671), delivered at the height of the storm, sees Caesar ultimately surrendering to Fortune and accepting death, yet Fortune saves him against his will. The mere structure of the passage, then, seems to indicate that Fortune, offended by Caesar’s words, creates the storm, and only pulls back when Caesar yields to her higher power. That a goddess should decide to inflict punishment because she is offended certainly fits well within the ethos of epic poetry where gods and goddesses frequently harm some heroes to aid whatever hero pleases them the most. Furthermore, there is no question as to whether Fortune could have the strength to conjure up such a storm. Earlier in the epic, a flood so massive that it covers hills (iam tumuli collesque latent, 4.98) plagues Caesar’s forces in Spain, yet Fortune does nothing to stop it. Only after a certain point, “satisfied with his small fear” (paruo Fortuna… contenta pauore, 4.121), does she decide to rejoin Caesar to the fullest (plena redit, 4.122) thereby causing the gods to cease the storm. The episode makes clear Fortune’s considerable power over nature, since her mere presence brought an end to the flood. It also serves as yet another example of Caesar’s utter dependence on Fortune, for without her, he surely would have died in the flood.

It is both Caesar’s inability to realize his dependence on Fortune and his subsequent opinion that she is his servant which prompt Fortune to unleash her power in Book 5. While this irony can be clearly seen when one contrasts Caesar’s arrogant speech against his lowly garb and puny boat, Caesar’s most jarring statement of arrogance comes before he even gets into a boat. Caesar warns Amyclas, “Don’t delay in providing your fates to a god wishing to fill your scanty Penates with sudden riches” (5.536-537). As Matthews rightly identifies, the masculine god (deo, 5.536) to whom Caesar refers cannot be Fortune, but Caesar himself. Fortune, whom at the beginning of the passage was his companion (comes, 5.510) has now been subjugated in Caesar’s mind. Still, up until Caesar’s first speech at sea, storm merely remains a threat (minax, 5.566) and the boat is only troubled by the winds (vexata… puppe, 5.575). It seems as if Fortune was willing to forgive this slight, but this will not hold for long. As the storm looks like it is about to break open,
Caesar tells Amyclas to not worry about the storm for Caesar is someone “from whom Fortune is owed next to nothing when she arrives after my prayers” (5.582-583). He closes his speech by declaring that by this storm “Fortune is seeking something which she can provide for me” (quaerit... quod praestet Fortuna mibi, 5.593-594). Matthews notes that praesto is often used to denote subservience, revealing Caesar's perceived superiority over Fortune. For that matter, Caesar’s belief that Fortune is owed little (male... meretur, 5.582) when she arrives after he summons her (post vota, 5.583) reveals that Caesar views Fortune as merely his slave to be beckoned at any moment's notice. That the storm drastically picks up following line 594 and actually cuts Caesar off from speaking more (non plura locuto, 5.595) seems to indicate that something in his speech caused the storm to escalate. If one agrees with Caesar that Fortune causes the storm, it becomes clear that it is Caesar’s arrogance that drives Fortune to let the storm rage.

Caesar’s final speech at sea also places Fortune at the forefront. Here though, Caesar seems to recognize the goddess as his adversary. Believing that he is about to die (credit iam digna pericula Caesar / fatis esse suis, 5.653-654), Caesar relates his one regret before death: that he dies a mere private citizen (privatum... mori, 5.668). Matthews argues that the privatus here also hints at Caesar’s desire to become a king which will now never come to fruition. He finds some solace, though, in the fact that Fortune alone will know this regret (nec sciet hoc quisquam nisi tu... Fortuna, mori. 5.665-668). W. R. Johnson asserts that this brings him solace, but not because he will die with his “companion” (comes 5.510) knowing of his fate. Instead, Johnson argues that Caesar takes comfort in knowing that only his enemy knows his fate. Thus his one regret “is softened for him because only Fortune who has cheated him of his crown knows of his lust for it.” Whereas Lucan’s assertion that Caesar regains his Fortune after the storm (Fortunam... recepit, 5.677) shows that Fortune, at the least, was not supporting Caesar, Caesar’s apostrophe to Fortune here demonstrates a recognition that Fortune was not merely distant, but the active agent of this deadly storm.

It seems logical that if Fortune creates the storm, it was Fortune too who ultimately ends it. Still, this is by no means an “example of Fortune’s protection of her favourite.” In fact, Fortune’s action in saving Caesar actually subverts his power and his professed will to die. In his final speech, Caesar hubristically says that he has done enough great things (sat magna peregi, 5.660)
and is therefore happy to die knowing that he will always be feared \((\textit{metuar semper}, 5.671)\). As Morford rightly notes, Caesar believes that “his spirit is greater than his body.” By dying at sea, Caesar’s power will transcend even death. As Ahl points out, Caesar seems to think himself so powerful that any adversity can be seen as a way to improve his own status and he suggests that Caesar’s ultimate power lies in making every contest a victory. Yet Caesar’s grand hopes for transcendence do not come to fruition here. This is not a victory for him. Yes, he lives on, but only because Fortune “saves” him, thereby undermining his hopes and designs of haunting the world forever.

Perhaps it is possible that Fortune, offended once again by Caesar’s arrogance, decides to deny his death wish. Morford, however, suggests a more likely motive even though he does not agree that Fortune caused the storm. He argues that Caesar’s death “was being saved for the death he deserved.” This not only echoes Lucan’s later address to Brutus that Caesar does not yet deserve to die \((\textit{poundum… meruit fatis tam nobile letum}, 7.593-595)\), but it also echoes parts of Book 10 where Fortune is actually presented as preparing Caesar’s death. In one instance, Lucan writes about how Pothinus, Pompey’s murderer, also wishes to take Caesar’s life. There Fortune is seen as preparing to avenge fathers of Rome by pouring out Caesar’s blood \(([\textit{Caesaris} \ sanguine…} \ quo \ \textit{Fortuna} \ \textit{parat} \ \textit{uictos} \ \textit{perfundere} \ \textit{patres}, 10.339)\). By the same token, when Pothinus is later executed, Lucan writes that Fortune does not consider his death to be enough vengeance for Pompey \((\textit{ne satis hoc} \ \textit{Fortuna} \ \textit{putat}, 10.525)\). For Fortune, “Magnus will be unavenged until the swords of the city’s fathers go into Caesar’s guts” \((10.528-529)\). It seems clear in the context of the whole epic that Fortune saves Caesar at the storm in order that he may die a death more worthy of his crimes.

No matter why Fortune saves him, the storm scene ultimately highlights how Caesar is powerless in respect to deciding his own fate. Whatever plans Caesar makes, either to traverse the Adriatic or haunt the Earth after death, Fortune ensures that these plans are never accomplished. It is in this light that one must read Fortune’s reunion with Caesar after the storm. It seems clear that she is not acting out of altruism or as a servant to Caesar. Rather she controls him, stringing him along until the day that she can bring about his proper demise. Lucan’s strong contrast between Caesar’s appearance as a lowly passenger during the storm and his hubristic attitude work to reflect the true relationship between himself and Fortune. For
no matter where Caesar goes, he lives in the delusion that he has
the power, while Fortune actually lies beneath even Caesar’s
most audacious actions. When Caesar vowed that he would
follow Fortune throughout the war (te, Fortuna, sequor, 1.126), he
firmly believed he was gaining an ally, a companion (comes,
5.510). In reality, Lucan reveals that all Caesar accomplished in
courting Fortune was becoming her slave, for better and for
worse.

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