

Some Say the World Will End in Fire: Philosophizing Phaethon and the Memnonides in Ovid and His Readers

The cremation of Memnon and the subsequent generation and destruction of the Memnonides, in Ovid (*Met.* 13.600–22), has primarily attracted attention as one modulation of the Homero-Vergilian Trojan cycle in the late books of the *Metamorphoses* and the memorializing functions of poetry and *kleos* (e.g., Johnson and Malamud, Papaioannou 2003, Galasso, Papaioannou 2005:187–97, Papaioannou 2007:253–83). However, Myers (48–49) points out the “scientific terminology” that underlies the scene and, in particular, its debt to one section of Lucretius’ Book 5 cosmogony (*DRN* 5.449–70), although she takes Ovid as “having fun at Lucretius’ expense.” In this paper, I extend the philosophical debts and ramifications of the scene both within the context of the *Metamorphoses* and outside of it, tracing Ovid’s intertexts backward to Vergil as well as Lucretius, and forward to Lucan and Valerius Flaccus.

I focus on three key passages within the scene: the description of Memnon’s collapsing pyre (*Met.* 13.600–1), the formation of the Memnonides from its ash (*Met.* 13.603–5), and their subsequent fight to the death (*Met.* 13.612–16). In particular, I demonstrate how Ovid’s choice of vocabulary in describing the pyre and the Memnonides evokes Phaethon’s near-incineration of the cosmos in *Metamorphoses* 2, Vergil’s eruption of Aetna in the *Aeneid* (*Aen.* 3.571–87), and the generation of bees through *bougonia* in Vergil and Ovid (*Geo.* 4.308–13, *Met.* 15.361–67, *Fast.* 1.379–80), as well as Lucretius’ parallel description of cosmogony and dew (Myers 48n78); while the Memnonides’ battle in turn recapitulates the civil war of Vergil’s swarming “Roman” bees (*Geo.* 4.73–80). I further argue that Ovid’s use of *glomerō* is key (*glomerata corpus in unum / densetur*, *Met.* 13.604–5), picking up on both what may be read as pervasive Empedoclean cosmogonic resonances of *glomerō* and *globus* in Ovid’s writings (Pfligersdorffer, Ham 227; cf. Myers 48, Wheeler 105–6) and what I demonstrate is Vergil’s thematization of *glomerō*, in the *Georgics*, around Phaethon, cosmic collapse, and civil war (cf. Farrell 248–53, Gale 267–69). Through this complex of intertexts and ideas, I propose, the Memnonides become a metaphor for Rome’s birth in fratricide and her resulting cyclical trend of ekpyrotic civil war and rebirth (cf. Morley, Papaioannou 2005:187–97, Nelis, Garani).

Finally, I turn to Lucan’s account of an elemental storm and cataclysmic flood at Ilerda (*BC* 4.48–147; Masters 58–65) and Valerius Flaccus’ description of Phaethon’s death (*Arg.* 5.429–32) to argue that Ovid’s Neronian and Flavian successors are attuned to this reading of Ovid’s Memnonides, in particular the connections he forges between Memnon’s story, Lucretian and Empedoclean cosmogony, and the various ideas of cosmic dissolution that accrue to *glomerō* in Vergil.

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