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# Looking for LVCAN

## Weather Signs and Wordplay in the *Pharsalia* (5.541–550)

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**Abstract:** Dans le cinquième livre de la *Pharsale* de Lucain, une tempête s'abat sur César. Les signes annonciateurs de ce phénomène météorologique constituent un passage problématique qui recèle de nombreuses incohérences. En effet, ces vers fortement inspirés des *Phénomènes* d'Aratos et des *Géorgiques* de Virgile présentent des divergences significatives par rapport à ces modèles. Ces différences sont généralement considérées comme des négligences de la part du poète. Toutefois, dans la poésie didactique, les pronostics météorologiques sont traditionnellement un lieu propice à la dissimulation d'acrostiches, d'acronymes et d'autres anagrammes. Cet article expose trois cas de jeux de mots cachés dans ces vers dont la présence explique les difficultés du texte.

**Keywords:** Lucain, jeux de mots, pronostics météorologiques, Aratos, Virgile.

Near the middle of the *Pharsalia*'s fifth book, Caesar is in Epirus, waiting for Antony and his troops. He soon grows impatient and decides to fetch them himself. He exits the camp by night and asks Amyclas, a poor fisherman, to take him to Italy on his boat. Amyclas tells Caesar that the conditions are not favorable for sailing and produces a list of weather signs based on the observation of the sun and the moon (Lucan. 5.541–550):<sup>1</sup>

*nam sol non rutilas deduxit in aequora nubes  
concordesque tulit radios: Noton altera Phoebi,  
altera pars Borean diducta luce uocabat.  
orbe quoque exhaustus medio languensque recessit  
spectantis oculos infirmo lumine passus.  
lunaque non gracili surrexit lucida cornu  
aut orbis medii puros exesa recessus,  
nec duxit recto tenuata cacumina cornu,  
uentorumque notam rubuit; tum lurida pallens  
ora tulit uoltu sub nubem tristis ituro.*

The sun did not draw ruddy clouds down to the sea and display concordant rays: with divided light, one part of Phoebus summoned Notos, the other called for Boereas. He also retired faint and hollowed out in the center of his disk, letting eyes look at his weak glow. The moon did not rise shining a slender crescent, or rather, the pure recesses in the center of her disk were worn out, she did not draw out

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<sup>1</sup> Text from D. R. Shackleton Bailey, *M. Annaei Lucani De bello civili libri X* (Stuttgart/Leipzig 1997); translation is my own.

tapered tips in an upright crescent and she reddened – a sign of wind; then pale, she displayed dim features, sad that her face was to go under a cloud.

Commentators generally agree that this passage draws on the weather signs found in Aratus' *Phaenomena* and Virgil's *Georgics*.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, they also highlight a number of problems in these lines. Indeed, compared to its models, Lucan's text is unclear and repetitive; while some signs are not found in the source texts, others openly contradict the didactic tradition. Such inaccuracy in astronomical notions is a recurring problem in Lucan's epic. Poetic license and the influence of rhetorical literary training have been invoked to justify the author's display of incorrect scientific knowledge. However, scholars have also demonstrated that some of these apparent inconsistencies are not mistakes but significant features of the text.<sup>3</sup> Along the same line of interpretation, the purpose of this article is to explain the passage by replacing it in the literary tradition to which it belongs. Indeed, descriptions of weather signs, especially those depending on moon observations, are a favored place for ancient authors to conceal acrostics, acronyms and other kinds of wordplay. Therefore, my argument is that most of the oddities in this passage can be explained by the presence of the poet's name concealed twice in these lines. Before exposing the puns in Lucan's text, it will prove useful to review a few important precedents for wordplay in weather signs.

### Wordplay in weather signs

The tradition of wordplay in weather signs appears to start with Aratus' ΛΕΙΠΤΗ acrostic in the *Phaenomena* (Arat. *Phaen.* 783–787):<sup>4</sup>

Λεπτὴ μὲν καθαρὴ τε περὶ τρίτον ἡμᾶρ εὐῶσα  
 εὐδιδὸς κ' εἴη, λεπτὴ δὲ καὶ εὖ μάλ' ἐρευθῆς  
 πνευματὴν, παχίων δὲ καὶ ἀμβλείῃσι κεραίαις  
 τέτρατον ἐκ τριτάτοιο φῶως ἀμενηνὸν ἔχουσα  
 ἢ νότῳ ἀμβλυνεταὶ ἢ ὕδατος ἐγγυὺς ἐόντος.

2 On this passage, see P. Barratt, *M. Annaei Lucani Belli Civilis Liber V. A Commentary* (Amsterdam 1979) 177–180, M. P. O. Morford, *The Poet Lucan. Studies in Rhetorical Epic* (Oxford 1996) 35, 38–39 and M. Matthews, *Caesar and the Storm. A Commentary on Lucan De Bello Civili, Book 5 lines 476–721* (Oxford 2008) 114–127.

3 Regarding astronomical inconsistencies, see Fr. Barrencea, "The Star Signs at Brundisium: Astral Symbolism in Lucan 2.691–692", *ClQu* 54 (2004) 312–317 and J. Tracy, "Fallentia sidera: The Failure of Astronomical Escapism in Lucan", *AJPh* 131 (2010) 635–661.

4 Discovered by J.-M. Jacques, "Sur un acrostiche d'Aratos", *REA* 62 (1960) 48–61, named by G. Morgan, "Nullam, Vare ... Chance or Choice in *Odes* 1.18?", *Philologus* 137 (1993) 143; for further occurrences of the word λεπτὴ in this passage, see M. Hanses, "The Pun and the Moon in the Sky: Aratus' λεπτὴ Acrostic", *ClQu* 64 (2014) 609–614, J. Danielewicz, "One Sign after Another: The Fifth λεπτὴ in Aratus' *Phaen.* 783–784?", *ClQu* 65 (2015) 387–390 and St. M. Trzaskoma, "Further Possibilities Regarding the Acrostic at Aratus 783–787", *ClQu* 66 (2016) 785–790; text and translation from D. Kidd, *Aratus. Phaenomena* (Cambridge 1997).

If slender and clear about the third day, [the moon] will bode fair weather; if slender and very red, wind; if the crescent is thickish, with blunted horns, having a feeble fourthday light after the third day, either it is blurred by a southerly or because rain is in the offing.

The word ΑΕΙΤΗ can be read horizontally and vertically as well as diagonally. Aratus also includes hints in his text to signal the presence of the acrostic. The adjective is repeated twice in the passage (vv. 783–784) and its opposite occurs once (v. 785: παχίων). In addition, the poet invites the reader to search for this verbal pun by telling him to look at the moon's edges (v. 778: σκέπτεο δὲ πρῶτον κεράων ἐκάτερθε σελήνην), that is, the sides of the poem.

In the *Georgics*, Virgil transposes some of the weather signs provided by Aratus and adapts the acrostic by concealing his signature in the passage (Verg. *Georg.* 1.427–435):<sup>5</sup>

*luna reuertentis cum primum colligit ignis,  
si nigrum obscuro comprehenderit aëra cornu,  
maximus agricolis pelagoque parabitur imber:  
at si uirgineum suffuderit ore ruborem,  
uentus erit; uento semper rubet aurea Phoebe.  
sin ortu quarto (namque is certissimus auctor)  
pura neque obtunsis per caelum cornibus ibit,  
totus et ille dies et qui nascentur ab illo  
exactum ad mensem pluuiā uentisque carebunt*

Soon as the moon gathers her returning fires, if she encloses a dark mist within dim horns, a heavy rain is awaiting farmers and seamen. But if over her face she spreads a maiden blush, there will be wind; as wind rises, golden Phoebe ever blushes. But if at her fourth rising – for that is our surest guide – she pass through the sky clear and with undimmed horns, then all that day, and the days born of it to the month's end, shall be free from rain and wind.

The two first letters of every other line starting at 429 (v. 429: *MAximus*; 431: *VENtus*; 433: *PVra*) correspond to Virgil's *tria nomina* in reversed order: *PV(blius) VE(rgilius) MA(ro)*. The poet signals the acrostic with a number of hints: the reader is told to look back at the beginning of the verse (v. 427: *reuertentis cum primum*) and to consider the letters in reversed order (vv. 424–425: *sequentis/ordine respicies*). Furthermore, the word *uirgineum* (v. 430) alludes to the author's name and the phrase *is certissimus auctor* (v. 432) tells the reader what to look for.

5 Discovered by E. L. Brown, *Numeri Vergiliani. Studies in "Eclogues" and "Georgics"* (Bruxelles 1963); see also D. Feeney/D. Nelis, "Two Virgilian Acrostics: *certissima signa*?", *ClQu* 55 (2005) 644–646, T. Somerville, "Note on a Reversed Acrostic in Virgil *Georgics* 1.429–33", *ClPh* 105 (2010) 202–209 and J. Danielewicz, "Vergil's *certissima signa* Reinterpreted: The Aratean *Lepte*-Acrostic in *Georgics* 1", *Eos* 100 (2013) 187–295; text and translation from H. R. Fairclough, *Virgil. Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid I–VI* (Cambridge/London 31999).

Further instances of acrostics are found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Grattius' *Cynegetica*, Manilius' *Astronomica* and Silius Italicus' *Punica*, in passages involving the moon, though not in relation to weather signs.<sup>6</sup> Given this literary context, ancient readers of Lucan's storm portents would have expected some kind of wordplay in these lines. And indeed, as I would like to suggest, the signs do not disappoint.

### LVNA/LANV

There is no straightforward acrostic in Lucan's weather signs, only what may be termed an "anagrammatic gamma acrostic" at the beginning of the lunar portents (vv. 546–549). Indeed, the first letters of lines 546 to 549 (L-A-N-V) can be rearranged to spell out the word *LVNA* which also reads horizontally at the beginning of line 546. While this may very well be coincidental, considering the literary tradition surrounding moon observations – and the prominent Aratean and Virgilian intertexts in particular – such a signal is enough to attract the reader's attention and encourage further investigation of this section. Moreover, following J. Katz's interpretation of a similar case,<sup>7</sup> the anagrammatic form of the acrostic can be explained by the troubled state of the moon due to the forthcoming storm.

Furthermore, the presence of the acrostic is signaled by the phrase *uentorumque notam rubuit* (v. 549). A red moon certainly is a sign of windy weather (Arat. *Phaen.* 784–785, Verg. *Georg.* 1.430–431), but the "sign of the winds" (*uentorumque notam*) can also be what has been written in the winds of the previous didactic tradition, i.e. the wordplay in the *Phaenomena* and the *Georgics*. Indeed, in both texts the first letter(s) of the words Πνευματή (Arat. *Phaen.* 785) and *VEN-tus* (Verg. *Georg.* 1.431) are part of the acrostics. In Lucan's text as well, the first letter of the word *Ventorum* is part of the anagrammatic acrostic. This brings forth one of the meanings of *nota* which is "written characters, lettering"<sup>8</sup> and raises the question of the rubrification of wordplay. Although this practice is only attested in

<sup>6</sup> On these acrostics, see Gr. Damschen, "Das Lateinische Akrostichon. Neue Funde bei Ovid sowie Vergil, Grattius, Manilius und Silius Italicus", *Philologus* 148 (2004) 102–110; for similar wordplay in Lucretius, see Kronenberg, "The Light Side of the Moon: A Lucretian Acrostic (*LUCE*, 5.712–15) and its Relationship to Acrostics in Homer (*LEUKĒ*, *Il.* 24.1–5) and Aratus (*LEPTĒ*, *Phaen.* 783–87)", *CIPh* 114 (2019) 287–292; for cases of acrostics and acronyms in Valerius Flaccus, see Cr. Castelletti, "Aratus and the Aratean Tradition in Valerius' *Argonautica*" in A. Augoustakis (ed.), *Flavian Poetry and its Greek Past* (Leiden 2014) 49–72; on the reception of Aratus' acrostic in subsequent literature, see L. Kronenberg, "Seeing the Light, Part II: The Reception of Aratus's *LEPTĒ* Acrostic in Greek and Latin Literature", *Dictynna* 15 (2018); for a wider context and further bibliography on wordplay in Greek and Latin poetry, see J. T. Katz, "The Muse at Play: An Introduction", in J. Kwapisz/D. Petrain/M. Szymański (eds.), *The Muse at Play. Riddles and Wordplay in Greek and Latin Poetry* (Berlin/Boston 2013) 1–30.

<sup>7</sup> See J. T. Katz, "An Acrostic Ant Road in Aeneid 4", *MD* 59 (2008) 77–86 on Verg. *Aen.* 4.399–402: *FRO-MI-AC*.

<sup>8</sup> *OLD* s. v. 6.b.

Late Antiquity, it is by no means impossible that acrostics were sometimes written in red ink already in earlier texts.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the message in this sentence is that the moon is red because the letters in the anagrammatic acrostic spell out her name in lines 546 to 549. After that, the moon suddenly turns pale (v. 549: *tum lurida pallens*), because the acrostic ends in line 549.

### LV-CA-NV

The anagrammatic gamma acrostic highlights one of the striking features of this passage: the repetition of words beginning with the syllable *lu-* (v. 543: *luce*; 545: *lumine*; 546: *luna, lucida*; 549: *lurida*).<sup>10</sup> This focus on luminosity may be interpreted as an invitation to look for the author's *cognomen*,<sup>11</sup> just as the adjective *uirgineum* (Verg. *Georg.* 1.430) hinted towards Virgil's name. Indeed, the syllabic acronym LV-CA-NV is spelled out in lines 546 to 550: *Lv*cida (v. 546) *CA*cumina (v. 548) *NV*bem (v. 550). It reads diagonally from right to left, every other line, starting with the penultimate word of verse 546.<sup>12</sup>

This might seem complicated and farfetched, but it is no more elaborate than the cases mentioned previously: a syllabic skipped-lined acrostic occurs in the *Georgics*; Aratus also composes a diagonal acronym; Virgil's name reads in reversed order; spelling out the author's *cognomen* is a matter of choice.<sup>13</sup>

9 On rubrication, see W. Levitan, "Dancing at the End of the Rope: Optatian Porphyry and the Field of Roman Verse", *TAPA* 115 (1985) 254–255, 265, Th. Habinek, "Situating Literacy at Rome" in W. A. Johnson/H. N. Parker (eds.), *Ancient Literacies. The Culture of Reading in Greece and Rome* (Oxford 2009), 131 and Hanses, *loc. cit.* (n. 4) 612–613.

10 The fact that such repetition does not occur in Virgil's description of the same phenomena argues in favor of a deliberate choice of words in this passage.

11 Priscian connects Lucan's *cognomen* with the word *lux*; see R. Maltby, *A Lexicon of Ancient Latin Etymologies* (Leeds 1991) 347 s. v. *Lucanus* and Kronenberg (2019), *loc. cit.* (n. 6) 279–280, 286; on the relevance of light in connection with Aratus' *AEIITH* acrostic and its reception by later poets, see Kronenberg (2018), *loc. cit.* (n. 6).

12 Acrostics, acronyms and anagrams are not auditive but visual puns meant for the reader; they cannot be detected by the listener. Therefore, the arrangement of the syllables LV-CA-NV in the lines is not determined by metrical patterns (although each syllable of LV-CA-NV is one half-foot further back) but by their distance from the beginning of the line. Indeed, if the text is written in capital letters with no spacing or punctuation (as it would have been), the syllables in lines 546 to 550 form a neat diagonal line; on the importance of acrostics in relation to ancient reading practices, see J. D. Hejduk, "Was Virgil Reading the Bible? Original Sin and an Astonishing Acrostic in the *Orpheus and Eurydice*", *Vergilius* 64 (2018) 73–74.

13 Ovid spells out a verb (Ov. *Met.* 15.194–198: C-A-N-E-S), Grattius names Hesiod's birthplace (Gratt. 494–498: A-S-C-R-A) and Silius alludes to Aratus' writings (Sil. 15.559–563: A-R-A-TE-A); see Damschen, *loc. cit.* (n. 6) 102–110. Besides, the *cognomen* being the distinctive part of Lucan's name, he might have chosen it to differentiate himself from another member of his family that was also involved in literary activities, namely his uncle Seneca (*Lucius Annaeus Seneca*). LV-CA-NV is not an exact match for Lucan's name, but see E. Lobel, "Nicander's Signature", *CIQu* 22 (1928) 114 for an inexact anagram (Nic. *Alex.* 266–274: σ-I-κ-K-N-Δ-P-O-Σ).

Of course the letters and syllables composing Lucan's name occur many other times in this passage, but a number of hints in lines 547 to 550 point toward the reading of this acronym in particular. Their presence in these lines explains some of the details that seem awkward or wrong in Amyclas' forecast:

1. Lucan indicates how to read: *aut orbis medii puros exesa recessus* (v. 547). This sentence refers to the hollow cavity between the moon's horns in an unusual way.<sup>14</sup> It is better understood as an allusion to the skipped line.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the verses 546 and 548 both end with the mention of the moon's crescent (*cornu*), a conspicuous repetition. Therefore, the reader is told to look at one line out of two, since what is between them (*orbis medii*) has been "eaten out" (*exesa*). In addition, the prefix *re-* in the word *recessus* might be an indication that the name reads from right to left, just as the verbs *respicies* (Verg. *Georg.* 1.425) points out that Virgil's acrostic runs upwards.

2. Lucan alludes to the orientation and location of the acronym: *nec duxit recto tenuata cacumina cornu* (v. 548). The information contained in this line is incorrect. Although the detail does not occur in the *Georgics*, a moon with an upright crescent is a sign of storm in the *Phaenomena* (Arat. *Phaen.* 792–793). Therefore, its negation in line 548 should forecast good weather, contrary to Amyclas' conclusion. By altering the information transmitted in the didactic tradition, the poet draws attention to the fact that the acronym is not vertical (*nec [...] recto [...] cornu*) but diagonal. Besides, the phrase *nec duxit [...] tenuata cacumina* appears to unnecessarily repeat the same idea as *gracile [...] cornu* in line 546.<sup>16</sup> It makes more sense as an indication of where to look for the acronym. Indeed, it does not start from the side of the poem, as expected. Thus, removing the tapered extremities of lines 546 and 548, in other words the repeated *cornu*, leads the reader to the words *lucida* (v. 546) and *cacumina* (v. 548), which contain the two first syllables of the acronym. In addition, the choice of the word *cacumina*, the first occurrence of the term referring to the moon's horns, can be attributed to the necessity of supplying the syllable -CA-.

3. Lucan tells his reader what to look for: *ora tulit uoltu sub nubem tristis ituro* (v. 550). Although clouds obscuring the moon are an obvious sign of bad weather, this particular portent does not occur as such in Virgil's or Aratus' poems. This sign can be explained by reading the line as an incentive to look for the author's name. Indeed, it is Lucan's identity (*uoltu*) that is concealed in this passage, and the syllable -NV is literally "hidden" in the cloud (*sub NVbem*).

<sup>14</sup> *Exedo* is an odd verb to describe the crescent shape of the moon (*ThLL* s. v. 5.2.1318.3–4); see Matthews, *loc. cit.* (n. 2) 123–124 s. vv.

<sup>15</sup> As the meaning of this sentence is similar to that of line 428 in the first *Georgic* (Verg. *Georg.* 1.428: *si nigrum obscuro comprehenderit aëra cornu*), I would like to suggest that Virgil's verse alludes to the skipped line in his acrostic as well.

<sup>16</sup> See Matthews, *loc. cit.* (n. 2) 124–125 s. vv. and Shackleton Bailey's comment in his apparatus, *loc. cit.* (n. 1): "versum neque intellectu facilem et post 546 inconcinnum abiectum velim."

## AN LV

Considering the very remarkable parallel between the two sections of these weather signs, it is no surprise that Lucan also concealed a pun on his name in his solar portents.<sup>17</sup> It can be spotted in the lines describing the divided rays of the sun (vv. 542–543). Indeed, the poet provides his reader with a superfluous explanation involving the winds Notos and Boreas, a detail that does not occur in the *Georgics* – although Virgil alludes to these lines in more general terms (Verg. *Georg.* 1.445–446: *sese/diuersi rumpent radii*) – but appears in the *Phaenomena* (Arat. *Phaen.* 829–830: ὁπότ’ ἀκτίνων αἱ μὲν νότον αἱ δὲ βορῆα/σχιζόμεναι βάλλωσι). By restoring this piece of information in his text, Lucan gives a twofold illustration of the non-concordant sunrays (vv. 541–542: *non [...]concordesque [...] radios*). The light is divided between the two directions and so is the author’s name: *BoreAN diducta LVce* (v. 543), with AN standing for *ANnaeus* and LVC for *LVCanus*.

A signature covering the end of one word and the beginning of the next is a subtle form of wordplay paralleled at the opening of the *Georgics*. Indeed, Virgil encrypts his *gentilicium* *VER(gilius)* and his *cognomen* *MAR(o)* in the phrase *ter-RAM/VERtere* (Verg. *Georg.* 1.1–2).<sup>18</sup> Just as the verb *uertere* alludes to the enjambment or “turn” from the end of verse 1 to the start of line 2, Lucan’s split name reflects the divided sun light, with the word *diducta* (v. 543) separating his *nomen* *AN(naeus)* from his *cognomen* *LVC(anus)*. Besides, as in the section devoted to the moon, Lucan signals his wordplay with a set of hints:

1. The reader’s attention is attracted by the verb *uocabat* (v. 543), which is an odd way to say that the sun is shining in two directions but appropriate for calling someone’s name.<sup>19</sup>

2. As for the moon, a hollow center indicates that part of the text must be left out: *orbe quoque exhaustus medio languensque recessit* (v. 544). In this case, it is not a whole line but only the center of the verse that fades away (*orbe [...] exhaustus medio*). Indeed, the word *diducta* in the middle of line 543 must fall out in order to read the signature. The poet also indicates that the syllables of his name read backwards from the middle of the line, as the sunlight wanes and retreats (*languensque recessit*).

3. Lucan concludes the section on the sun by commenting on his wordplay: *spectantis oculos infirmo lumine passus* (v. 545). Looking directly at the sun when its light allows it is a token of reliability in the *Phaenomena*, not a weather sign (Arat. *Phaen.* 832–833). Lucan turns this phrase into a pun on his wordplay, telling

<sup>17</sup> Virgil also includes wordplay in the section devoted to the sun; see Danielewicz, *loc. cit.* (n. 5) 291–292 on Verg. *Georg.* 1.439–443: *S-C-I-E-S*.

<sup>18</sup> See J. T. Katz, “Vergil Translates Aratus: Phaenomena 1–2 and Georgics 1.1–2”, *MD* 60 (2008) 115.

<sup>19</sup> *OLD* s. v. 1.c.



the reader that it is easy to see: it is visible even with little light (*infirmum lumine*), if only he looks at it (*spectantis oculos*).

Many verbal puns concealed in Lucan's weather signs have been exposed in the previous pages; the following text shows all the elements discussed in this article.<sup>20</sup>

*nam sol non rutilas deduxit in aequora nubes  
concordesque tulit radios: Noton altera Phoebi,  
altera pars Borean diducta luce uocabat  
orbe quoque exhaustus medio languensque recessit  
spectantis oculos infirmo lumine passus.  
lunaque non gracili surrexit lucida cornu  
aut orbis medii puros exesa recessus.  
nec duxit recto tenuata cacumina cornu.  
uentorumque notam rubuit, tum lurida pallens  
ora tulit uoltu sub nubem tristis ituro.*

Just as many signs prevent Amyclas from trusting the sea (v. 540: *multa quidem prohibent nocturno credere ponto*), many objections can be voiced against these findings. Nevertheless, the intertextual background as well as the intratextual hints argue in favor of such wordplay in this passage. In addition, the puns hidden in these lines provide an explanation for some otherwise obscure features of the passage. None of these arguments rules out the possibility that the presence of Lucan's name in these lines is a coincidence, but combined, they make it very unlikely: the established tradition of concealing wordplay in weather signs is a reason to look for verbal puns in this part of the text; the hints in the passage point specifically to Lucan's acronymic signatures; overall the wordplay makes sense of this difficult passage. So, just as the fisherman agrees to set sail because the stakes are high (v. 557: *magnarum poscunt discrimina rerum*), the wordplay should be taken into consideration because it significantly improves our understanding of this passage.

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<sup>20</sup> The keen reader will have spotted an additional telestich in lines 546 to 549: V-S-V-S. This wordplay could be a comment on the tradition, indicating that verbal puns are a common feature in weather signs. However, in the absence of further hints pointing towards this wordplay, it will remain a conjectural footnote.