

The Muses' Playground 16

Lucan's *Pharsalia*

The proemium

What's going on!?

Lucan. 1.33-66

‘To our mind the extravagance is so patent that there is no question of taking them at face value, i.e. as representing the genuine beliefs and aspirations of the poet who composed them; the tortuous ‘spin’ imposed upon history (at least in Silius’ case) and the assumption that after death the emperor will become so powerful a god as to eclipse all others in the pantheon are just too much to take. So what is going on here?’ (Penwill, 2010, 211)

Lucan and epic

- Penwill's question of 'what's going on' refers specifically to the encomium (praise speech) to Nero in the first section of Book 1
 - We will return to this presently
- However, it can also be applied to Lucan's *Bellum Civile* at large: epic undergoes yet another transformation here
- Cf. common definitions of epic today:
 - Content on a cosmic scale and with a serious purpose
 - Setting in a distant historical past
 - Heroic and supernatural characters
 - Plot focussed on wars and quests
 - Length of poem
 - 'Song style'
 - Highly rhetorical speeches given by characters
 - Opening invocations
 - Extensive similes

Lucan's epic challenge

- Lucan's epic connects to the tradition of historical epic known from Naevius' *Bellum Punicum* and from Ennius' *Annales*
- It does not, however, deal in mythology or high and far off times: the civil war was still present in people's minds
 - Literary treatments
- Lucan is limited by the need to follow a historically recognisable scenario while reaching the style of an epic
 - Cf. the pliability of Vergil's and Ovid's material
 - Cf. Lucan's sources (see Braund's introduction for a quick overview)

Lucan's response to the challenge

- *'Lucan is fiery and passionate and remarkable for the grandeur of his general reflexions, but, to be frank, I consider that he is more suitable for imitation by the orator than by the poet.'*
Quintilian, *Inst.* 10.1.90)

Rhetoric

- Rhetorical set-pieces
traditionally a feature of epic
- ...but also of historiography:
cf. Livy: this means that
Lucan brings in traits of
historical narrative into his
epic
- ...and of rhetorical training,
where exercises commonly
included the task to speak as
if from the point of view of a
historical or mythological
character

*...these are the themes with
which Fronto's plane trees and
marble halls are for ever ringing
until the pillars quiver and quake
under the continual recitations;
such is the kind of stuff you may
look for from every poet, greatest
or least. Well, I too have slipped
my hand from under the cane; I
too have counselled Sulla to retire
from public life and sleep his fill ;
it is a foolish clemency when you
jostle against poets at every
corner, to spare paper that will be
wasted anyhow. (Juv. 1)*

Contemporary reception

- *'Look at that mighty subject, the Civil Wars; anyone attempting it, if not a man of the ripest scholarship, will sink under the burden. It is no question of a string of facts to be catalogued in verse, a task the Historian will perform far better; nay! rather must the untrammeled spirit be hurried along through a series of digressions and divine interventions and all the intricacies of myth and fable. The inspired frenzy of the bard should be more apparent than the tested pedantry of scrupulous precision.'* Petronius, *Satyricon* 118.6
- Who is the speaker?
 - Eumolpus, an old poet, but not a particularly successful one
 - What impact does that have on our appreciation of Petronius' reference to Lucan?

Lucan's response: successful?

- Lucan criticised then and now for
 - not including typical epic features: little divine machinery and a step-by-step beginning
 - Cf. *Iliad*
 - being overly rhetorical
- As with Ovid, we shall view these 'flaws' as deliberate ways of changing the restrictions of the genre

The opening of Book 1

*Of wars across Emathian plains,
worse than civil wars, and of
legality conferred on **crime** we
sing, and of a mighty people
attacking its own guts with
victorious sword-hand, of **kin**
facing kin, and, once the pact of
tyranny was broken, of conflict
waged with all the forces of the
shaken world for universal guilt,
and of standards ranged in
enmity against standards, of
eagles matched and javelins
threatening javelins. What
madness was this, o citizens? (1-
8)*

- ***Bella** per Emathios plus
quam civilia campos*
- Cf. opening of the *Aeneid*;
this is a different war than
the clear-cut one of Aeneas'
 - *Sidestepping the use of arma
in elegy*
- Other genre framings:
tragedy
- Who is absent here?

Nero as the inspiration

- *But already to me you are deity, and if I as bard receive you in my breast, no wish have I to trouble the god who has control of Cirrha's secrets or to distract Bacchus from Nysa: you are enough to give me strength for Roman song. (63-66)*
- Martindale, 1984, 68: The praise for Nero, concluded here, allows Lucan to sidestep the traditional invocation to Muses or gods
- This is done for literary effect: it shows once more that Lucan's won't be an epic of traditional type
- Roman song - rivalry with Vergil?

Lucan's Roman song

- Lucan's juxtaposition of the civil war with wars of conquest also emphasises the difference from Vergil's epic
 - [...] *did you choose to wage wars which would bring no triumphs?* (11f)
- Lucan's trajectory of glory for Rome is not concerned with the war that he sings of, but with events that follow long after...
- ...and to some extent, that, too, is heralded in the *Aeneid*.

*I sing of arms and the man, he
who, exiled by fate,
first came from the coast of Troy
to Italy, and to
Lavinian shores – hurled about
endlessly by land and sea,
by the will of the gods, by cruel
Juno's remorseless anger,
long suffering also in war, until he
founded a city
and brought his gods to Latium:
from that the Latin people
came, the lords of Alba Longa, the
walls of noble Rome* (Verg.
Aen. 1-6)

Lucan and Nero

*But if the Fates could find no other way
for Nero's coming, if eternal kingdoms
are purchased by the gods at great
cost, if heaven could serve its
Thunderer **only after wars** with the
ferocious Giants, then we have no
complaints, o gods; for this reward we
accept even these crimes and guilt;
though Pharsalia fill its dreadful plains,
though the Carthaginian's shade with
blood be sated; though the final battle
be joined at fatal Munda; **though
added to these horrors, Caesar, be the
famine of Perusia and the struggles of
Mutina, the fleets overwhelmed near
rugged Leucas, and the slave wars
under burning Etna**; yet Rome owes
much to citizens' weapons, because it
was for you it all was done. (1.33-45)*

- The passage ostensibly claims that Nero's coming is conditioned by the civil war
- This is of course the passage that scholars have had difficulty to stomach as genuine praise
 - Ironical readings
 - ...but also awareness that it is very easy to demand resistance to tyranny from a safe distance of 2,000 years...
- Even a straight-forward reading encounters problems
 - The aftermath of the civil war highlighted as cruel and unnecessary here: Perusia

Perusia: Prop. 1.22

- *You ask, always in friendship, Tullus, what are my household gods, and of what race am I. If our country's graves, at Perusia, are known to you, Italy's graveyard in the darkest times, when Rome's citizens dealt in war (and, to my special sorrow, Etruscan dust, you allowed my kinsman's limbs to be scattered, you covered his wretched bones with no scrap of soil), know that Umbria rich in fertile ground bore me, where it touches there on the plain below.*

Delineating Nero

*You, when your duty is fulfilled and finally you seek the stars, will be received in your chosen palace of heaven, with the sky rejoicing. [Nero to choose where and what god he wants to be] But choose your seat neither in the northern sphere nor where the torrid sky of opposing south sinks down: from these positions you would view your Rome **with star aslant**. **If you press on either side** of the boundless ether, the sky will feel the weight: maintain the mass of heaven poised [...] Then may humankind lay down its weapons and care for itself and every nation love one another; may Peace be sent throughout the world and close the iron temple-gates of warring Janus. (1.45-62)*

- The subversive reading:
 - Sees here references to a supposed squint and limp of the emperor
 - Probably based on a misreading of medical terminology
 - Not backed up in other sources (e.g. Suetonius)
- The accepting reading:
 - Parallels for katasterized heroes throwing the universe off its axis in Seneca's Hercules Oetaeus
 - Choice of place also ascribed to ascending gods
 - Nero here associated with an age of peace and sensible conquest
 - Stands in contrast with the description of civil war at the opening of the book

Additional problems

- Lucan's biography complicates matters significantly:
 - He was very close, possibly educated together with, the young Nero and active as a poet at Nero's court
 - Known to have produced panegyric works
 - His uncle is the younger Seneca, committing suicide on Nero's orders
 - Lucan himself was involved in the Pisonian conspiracy against Nero and committed suicide under political pressure in 65 AD
- ...or don't they? Current literary scholarship tends to prefer readings focussing stringently on the text rather than drawing on our knowledge of the author's life to support readings

The shape of Lucan's text

- Yet, with Lucan, this too is problematic
- We do not know what shape Lucan had envisioned for the completed *Bellum Civile*
 - *Is it complete?* A broken-off epic an embellishment of the Vergilian unfinished half-lines and a literary topos in and by itself?
 - *What would the finale have looked like? What political messages would have been confirmed or negated there?*

A bigger problem

- ‘The biggest dilemma in considering the *De Bello Civili* is to reconcile Lucan’s denunciation of Caesar’s victory for imposing tyranny on the poet’s own generation, with the adulatory preface.’ (Fantham, 1992, 13)
- Passages later on in Lucan seem to indicate a much more negative view of Nero:
- *[A]nd Liberty, in flight from the crime of civil warfare, has withdrawn [...] never to return[.] Of all peoples who endure tyranny, our situation is the worst: we are slaves, and ashamed. Without a doubt, we have no deities: since human life is swept along by blind chance, we lie that Jupiter is king. (7.432-745)*

Outline of the Lucan lectures

- Monday: Characters: Caesar, Pompey, Cato
- Tuesday: Rhetoric as a way of enhancing the genre of epic
- Thursday: Lucan and late epic, reception in the Middle ages