

Latin Advanced Poetry 2012/13

Getting to grips with Lucan

Reading Lucan

- Silver Latin epics not highly thought of until the past couple of decades – currently a boom in studies on imperial (although especially Flavian) epic
 - Cf. the number of items on the bibliography from the past 20 years!

Rhetoric in Lucan

- One reason for this attitude is the influence of rhetoric on Lucan's text
 - 'their general characteristic is formality: they are set harangues, without individuality or spontaneity.' (Heitland)
 - '*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
- ...another is the preference for Homeric and Vergilian epic – relatively little interest in how the epic genre renews itself until recent years

Rhetoric in Lucan

- We will see
 - Stylised speeches
 - Preference for paradox
 - Sententiae
- ... but as we do so, we shall also consider how such features are present already in Lucan's intertexts and how they allow him to engage with epic and historiographical tradition

‘It doesn’t read like an epic’

How do we define ‘epic’?

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
- 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)

An example of how Lucan deviates from the handbook definition of epic

- On *aristeiai* in epic: '[F]rom Homer onward the essential moment of the *aristeia* is the killing of a named warrior by another named warrior: the act of naming the participants – victim as well as victor – is integral to the poetic act of epic itself, for only in this way is the accumulated *arete* of the victim transferred gloriously to the victor and the *kleos* of both made immortal in epic tradition.' (Gorman, 2001, 266)
- Lucan's battles cannot bestow glory on their participants:
 - 'wars which would bring no triumphs' (1.12)

Epic features found?

- As a consequence, Lucan's texts contains very few scenes that can be construed as *aristeiai*
- The attention is instead concentrated, as in the sea battle of Massalia, on the mass conflicts of the battle
 - The mess of it all
 - Individual heroes replaced by anonymous weapons and wounds:
 - De-personified killing Book 3.652-661
- NB: the detail of Lucan's descriptions both hammer home the brutality of the war **and** play on the epic tradition of giving a blow-by-blow account of death

Philosophical differences

- Lucan's text is vastly influenced by stoic philosophy
 - Cf. the emphasis on Fortuna
- Absence of any involvement by the gods
 - Cf. Lucretius *De Rerum Natura*
- But also providing the paradigm against which Lucan's main characters are measured

Relating to power

- What does it mean to be writing of the civil war – and including a rather unflattering portrayal of Caesar in the text – under Nero?
- How do we deal with the proemium of Book 1, which at first glance appears to flatter the emperor?
- How do we deal with the apparent inconsistencies in Lucan's attitude to 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)*

Lucan and Nero

- 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?*