

The Muses' Playground: Lucan's *Civil War*

A) background

▪ Marcus Annaeus Lucanus, born Corduba in 39 AD; joins Nero's imperial retinue, 60 AD; literary triumph awarded for his *Laudes Neronis* at the Neronia festival (60 AD); starts work on *Civil War* (pub. 3 books by 63 AD; 7 more books unfinished); part of failed Pisonian conspiracy of 65 AD=> suicide (*Civil war* unfinished: 8000 lines)

▪ *Civil War*: on conflict in 49 BC between Caesar (energetic, dynamic, destructive) and Pompey (pictured as ageing, though only 6 years older, basking in reputation, weak)

1) "The mere shadow of a mighty name he stood" (Luc. 1.135: Pompey the Great)

2) "the roots [the oak tree] clings by have lost their toughness ... though it totters doomed to fall at the first gale, while many trees with sound timber rise beside it, yet it alone is worshipped" (Luc. 1.138-43, of Pompey: venerated but weak)

3) "rejoicing to clear the way before him like destruction. Even so the lightning is driven forth by wind through the clouds: with noise of the smitten heaven and crashing of the firmament it flashes out" (Luc. 1.150-3, of Caesar)

4) "A thunderbolt, without noise or any clouds, gathered fire from the North and smote the capital of Latium" (Luc. 1.534, portent of civil war, hinting at destruction Caesar will bring)

▪ attitude to Nero? Invoked and praised in Book 1 (circulated when he was in favour). Veiled criticism in Book 1? Certainly, emperors denounced in later books

5) "Still, if Fate could find no other way for the advent of Nero; if an everlasting kingdom costs the gods dear and heaven could not be ruled by its sovran, the Thunderer, before the battle of the Giants, - then we complain no more against the gods (Luc. 1.33-6)

6) "And yet, for this disaster, we have all the revenge that Gods can rightly grant to Earth: civil wars will make deified men equal to deities; with thunderbolts, haloes, and stars, Rome will bedizen her dead and, in the Gods' own temples, swear her oaths by their shades!" (Luc. 7.455-9)

B) Development of epic

▪ Critical of principate (contrary to normal epic practice)

▪ Horrors of civil war: internal destruction not external expansion; conquests vulnerable; soldiers engaged in civil war so no further conquest possible

7) "I tell of how an imperial people turned their victorious right hands against their own vitals" (Luc. 1.2-3: suicide/self-cannibalism)

8) "The soldiers also set to keep the long-haired Cayci away from the Belgae, left the savage banks of the Rhine and made for Rome; and the empire was left bare to foreign nations" (Luc. 1.463-5, Caesar's catalogue)

9) "That Caesar, favoured by Fortune, might win all at a single cost, Pharsalia presented him the whole world to conquer at once." (Luc. 3.296-7, Pompey's catalogue, includes men from Ganges and Africa)

▪ no glory (killing citizens); where are the heroes?; warping of heroism (e.g. Scaeva); paradoxically

civil war better than end (principate)

10) "Ready for any wickedness, he knew not that valour in civil war is a heinous crime"
(Luc. 6.147-8, Scaeva, soldier of Caesar)

11) "the might of the sword will confound all right by main force, unspeakable crimes will go by the name 'courage' and this madness will last for years" (Luc. 1.666-9 Nigidius Figulus' prophecy)

12) "and it is useless to pray Heaven that it [civil war] may end: when peace comes, a tyrant will come with it" (Luc. 1.669-70, Nigidius Figulus)

- civil *and* kin strife (Pompey= Caesar's son-in-law): cosmic order upset (>images of chaos). General lack of the decorum and order typical of epic

13) "Of wars I sing, wars worse than civil" (Luc. 1.1)

14) "Even so, when the framework of the world is dissolved and the final hour, closing so many ages, reverts to primeval chaos.." (Luc. 1.72-4, collapse of Rome like chaos)

- despite mentions of gods, fate, fortune etc, there is a lack of active divine machinery and gods appear to favour the forces of wickedness (Erichtho, Caesar) => bleak, lack of reassurance. Ignorance and uncertainty from narrator (link to Nero as "Muse"?)

15) "if the victor had the gods on his side, the vanquished had Cato" (Luc.1.128, Caesar favoured by gods)

16) "Which of the immortals is hidden here?" (Luc. 5.86, unclear which of gods is at Delphi)

17) "if my breast receives you [Nero] to inspire my verse, I would not care to trouble the god who rules mysterious Delphi ..." (Luc. 1.63-5: no superhuman knowledge from Muse)

C) Lucan and Vergil's *Aeneid*

- anti-*Aeneid* in fall of Rome; Pompey/Aeneas (stable oak *A.* 4); Pompey flees East, away from Rome (contrast Aeneas); Julia's ghost (3.8- 35), signifying death/defeat: cf. appearance of Creusa (*A.* 2.771-95) who predicts success; Rome/Troy parallels (Book 9 Caesar walks through ruins of Troy which serve also as figurative ruins of Rome: see Rossi. Unable/unwilling to rebuild)

18) "him I recognize, that headless corpse lying on the river sands" (matron prophesying Pompey's death, Luc. 1.685: cf. Priam)

19) "His tall body was lying headless on the shore, and by it the head hacked from his shoulders: a corpse without a name" (*A.*2.557-8, of Priam)

20) "The stream trickling through the dry dust, which he crossed without knowing it, was the Xanthus." (Luc. 9.974-5)

21) "As founder of the new dynasty who will rule over the destiny of Rome he will indeed build the walls of Rome, but his Rome will be a new Rome altogether, a Rome whose connection with its past has been irreparably severed. His Rome will be a Julian Rome." (Rossi 2000: 589)

- compare the underworld scenes in *Aeneid/ Civil War* Book 6: fearful Sextus Pompey with Erichtho (resurrected corpse gives prophecy; we mostly hear of villains): compare/contrast brave Aeneas with the Sibyl (goes to underworld following father's orders; meets future heroes, as well as

villains)

22) “I pray you that I may be allowed certain knowledge of the issue which the hazard of war is preparing” (Luc. 6.591-2, Sextus Pompey asks Erictho for information)

23) “Fear urged him on to learn beforehand the course of destiny” (Luc. 6.423, Sextus Pompey)

24) “‘Lay aside,’ she said, ‘the fears which your fluttering hearts have framed. A new life shall soon be restored to him’”(Lucan 6.659-60, Erictho)

25) “I saw the delight of Drusus, the demagogue and rash legislator, and of the Gracchi, whose boldness knew no limit.” (Luc. 6.795-6: happy at forthcoming collapse of republic)

26) “your father himself, a surer prophet, will tell you all in the land of Sicily” (Luc. 6.813: unhelpful/ambiguous prophecy given by corpse)

- Vergil's Sibyl evoked in the Sibyl of Lucan 5 and Erictho Book 6; witch Erictho = anti-Sibyl (e.g. resurrects corpse which had gone down to underworld; necromancy performed in hell-like scene); also looks to Vergilian Allecto (cf. Hardie)

26) “while kissing it, she mutilates the head and opens the closed mouth with her teeth ... biting the tip of the tongue ... she... sends a message ... down to hell” (Luc. 6.564-8, of Erictho)

27) “For, though the Thessalian witch tyrannises over destiny, it is doubtful whether she sees the lost souls because she has haled them to her cave, or because she has gone down to Hell herself.” (Luc. 6.652-4)

28) “she looped up her bristling locks with festoons of vipers” (Luc. 6.656, like a Fury)

- preparations: Sibyl v Erictho. Search for unburied corpse to resurrect (Luc. 6.619-41) = drawing on burial of Misenus and search for golden bough before Aeneas' underworld descent (A. 6.136-235)=> highlights impiety (corpse given burial after being resurrected)

29) “then the witch built up a great pyre of wood” (Luc. 6.824-5, pyre preparations for corpse resurrection)

30) “they raise a huge pyre rich with ... oaken logs” (A. 6.214-15, of Misenus' pyre)

31) “[soul summoned] from the high bank of the silent river” (Luc. 6.778: cf. Palinurus, unburied and not beyond Styx)

32) “if the corpse is Lucan's version of Misenus, then it is doubly an affront to decency and an affront to the Virgilian model that this neo-Misenus should be denied his proper burial but should on the contrary be co-opted into performing a main role in the rest of the episode” (Masters 1992: 195)

D) Lucan and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

- *locus amoenus* => *locus horridus* (e.g. Massilian grove, 3.399ff.: water from dark springs 3.411-2; breezeless, 3.410; barbaric gods)

- Caesar chops down grove (cf. Pompey as oak, Caesar as lightning): shows impiety and violence of his character/the civil war

33) “gods were worshipped there with savage rites” (Luc. 3.402-3)

34) “A grove there was, untouched by men’s hands from ancient times” (Luc. 3.399)

35) “he was the first to snatch an axe and swing it, and dared to cleave a towering oak with the steel” (Luc. 3.433-4, Caesar)

36) “no wind ever bore down upon that wood, nor thunderbolt hurled from black clouds” (Luc. 3.408-10 > destroyed by lightning-like Caesar)

▪Caesar as Callimachean Erysichthon (Callimachus *Hymn* 6) and Ovidian Erysichthon (*Met.* 8.738ff.). Ovidian tree nymph and Massilians warn of divine punishment. Ovidian Erysichthon punished with insatiable hunger leading to self-cannibalism BUT Caesar goes unpunished. Ovid intertext shows Caesar’s impiety and poem’s lack of divine intervention

37) “the Romans consume themselves in an orgy of violence in which Erysichthon becomes a reflexive metaphor for the Roman state turning on itself.” (McIntyre)

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