

As pertains to the analysis of the passage specified (10.20-52 in Book X of Lucan's *Pharsalia*), a long digression upon the career and legacy of Alexander the Great, the most salient detail is less any great insight on the career of the man himself than the exemplification of an Alexander-skeptical tendency in Latin historiography more broadly, the implicit parallels between he and Caesar, and the according conclusions that may be reached regarding Lucan's political situation and disposition at the time of writing. Insofar as it pertains to the Alexander myth, it does so as a near-inversion of many of its defining precepts.

This decidedly unsympathetic approach is established by the use of a succession of variously dismissive and repulsed descriptors – first the “the mad son of Macedonian Philip, that fortunate freebooter”¹, then “a thunderbolt that struck all peoples alike, a comet of disaster to mankind”². There is, particularly as pertains to the latter description, a distinct inversion of more sympathetic treatments of Alexander – the attribute of greatness is still in evidence, *pothos* still implicit, but while Alexander's greatness as a matter of scale is not in doubt, its character is framed as deeply suspect. Where, even to Rufus, Alexander's career was a fall from grace, a “[degeneration] from [a] true self”³ with his conquests being largely laudable barring the unforeseen consequences thereof, to Lucan, Alexander's career was only great in the strictest sense of scale and magnitude, and his conquests' true legacy being to “[expose] the nations to be torn asunder”⁴.

Narratively speaking, the situation (in the temporal and geographic sense) of the passage within the broader course of the poem poses Caesar and Alexander as two sides of the same archetypal coin – both conquerors, both arriving in Egypt at the head of armies, with the tribute paid by the former's pilgrimage to the latter's tomb the connective device establishing the formal narrative parallel (enhanced by the comparison of Alexander to a lightning bolt, which resonates with Caesar's own association with the symbol (“the lightning[...] driven forth by wind through the clouds”⁵)). The comparison, needless to say, is not flattering – while the greatness or singularity as heroic actors (in the classical sense) of both Caesar and Alexander is acknowledged by Lucan, the conquests of both and their consequences for the wider world are portrayed as essentially disastrous, with the sole quality that exalted Caesar's conquests and the Civil War above those of Alexander being that it allowed for “the advent of Nero”⁶ (obvious flattery doubling as a cipher for the political and constitutional settlement of the Principate). The parallel, which would have been high praise from perhaps any other author, thus constitutes an implicit critique of Caesar by the author of rare severity – and, as such, when Alexander is described “mowing down mankind”⁷, inference from the

¹ (Lucan, Duff and H.C. Hofheimer II Family Foundation, 1988)

² (Lucan, Duff and H.C. Hofheimer II Family Foundation, 1988)

³ (Rufus, Crosby & Cellarius, 1968)

⁴ (Lucan, Duff and H.C. Hofheimer II Family Foundation, 1988)

⁵ (Lucan, Duff and H.C. Hofheimer II Family Foundation, 1988)

⁶ (Lucan, Duff and H.C. Hofheimer II Family Foundation, 1988)

⁷ (Lucan, Duff and H.C. Hofheimer II Family Foundation, 1988)

course of the prior ten books allows for scant loss in accuracy were one name to be transposed with another.

This use of Alexander as a cipher for quintessentially Roman contexts and political concerns was not peculiar to Lucan alone such much as a characteristic of much of the Latin tradition dealing with the man – or, at least, the character, especially in the first-century context in which the *Pharsalia* was written. Quintus Curtius Rufus' *Life and Exploits of Alexander the Great*, while adopting a less condemnatory tone in discussing Alexander, frequently frames instances of the titular subject matter in the mode of a moral parable – whether in the case of Bagoas or that of the Gordian knot. Both works, in invoking Alexander and whether consciously or otherwise, are irreducibly products of their time and of their authors' sensibilities.

The precise chronological situation of Rufus is as enigmatic as the rest of the man, barring his writing, but between Augustus and Nerva there were numerous emperors whose styles of rule, personal eccentricities and insecurities, or fondness for the legal instrument of maiestas - often in contrast to a relatively hopeful early rule – would impart to the narrative of a promising ruler and empire 'degenerating' as a consequence of the opulence and sycophancy inevitably generated by uncontested success a certain potency it might lack in earlier years. Similarly, given Lucan's participation in the *Pisonian* conspiracy and eventual suicide, it would, considered fully, perhaps be a stranger state of affairs if the *Pharsalia* were not a subtle commentary on Neronian Rome than the opposite. Indeed, given the patrilineal relation and the events of the author's life, it can fairly be assumed that, if Lucan's meditations on Alexander constitute a critique of Caesar, the criticism was not of the individual alone but of the *gens*, too.

Lucan's fate being ample evidence both of the fate the entertainment of such sentiments netted in Nero's Rome and the man's views on the efficacy of the Principate as a system of government, the extract can be taken too as a meditation on Caesarism, if such a term is useful, as well as Caesars, and of the Empire as a whole. Just as Cato (evidently a definitive moral authority to the author - "each had great authority to support him: if the victor had the gods on his side, the defeated had Cato"⁸) condemned Caesar's conquest, Lucan explicitly links Rome's power to the events of the poem - "a chain of fatal happenings, the swift and painful collapse of excessive weight, a Rome unable to bear her own greatness"⁹. While the corrosive effects of excessive wealth were a long-touted (and longer-flouted) mainstay and cliché of Roman moralism (manifesting in legal precedents such as the sumptuary laws), the parallel between the consequences of Alexander's conquests and the events of the *Pharsalia* (throughout which Caesar is the active force against

⁸ (Lucan, Duff and H.C. Hofheimer II Family Foundation, 1988)

⁹ (Lucan, Duff and H.C. Hofheimer II Family Foundation, 1988)

Pompey much as Alexander was against Darius) is one of implicit censure to each, with foreign conquest (see Caesar in Gaul) as the basis for civil war/disorder in the domestic sphere.

Given the nature of the Pisonian conspiracy specifically, Lucan's lengthy elaboration on the treatment owed to Alexander's corpse and warranted by his deeds as opposed to the actual fate of his earthly remains ("For if Freedom had ever made men their own masters again, his body would have been preserved for mockery—a man who was born to teach this bad lesson to the world, that so many lands may obey one lord"¹⁰), in light of the conspiracy's objectives, seems at once a denunciation and a declaration of intent. The original Latin word used – *libertas* – is further indicative of Lucan's partiality to the ideals of stoic, old-fashioned republicanism exemplified by the lionised figure of Cato, and, for all the mutability and symbolic flux of the figure of Alexander, in truth, a single word sums up his relevance and inherent antagonism to a man of Lucan's convictions in his context – *rex*. To put it another way, Alexander was the first great *imperator*, in the most literal sense of the word, and just as his assumption of that role led to, in Lucan's formulation (and evidently sincere view given he committed suicide as a result of his participation in a conspiracy to unseat the heirs of the gens Julii who were brought to prominence by a similar figure), ruin – a ruin more subtle in the case of the emperor of Pharsalia, Caesar, but no less awful. In essence, therefore, Alexander constitutes Caesar, Augustus, Nero, the primeval kings of Rome, and all besides – an archetype of archetypes, he is whatever Lucan needs him to be, or, rather not to be – he is the *imperator* whose actions create new and lesser *rexes*, just as Caesar's career created Nero.

Bibliography

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¹⁰ (Lucan, Duff and H.C. Hofheimer II Family Foundation, 1988)