

Classical Mythology in Roman and Medieval Times

Assessment 1: Write a Critical Commentary of 1500 words on Lucan's *Pharsalia/De Bellum Civile* 10.1-40.

Introduction

This is a brief critical commentary of Marcus Annaeus Lucanus' (Lucan, from hereon in) *Bellum Civile* or *Pharsalia* 10.1-40.¹

Due to the restrictive guidelines for this assessment (namely the word count), biographical details of the characters within the poem, those predominant during the time in which the poem was composed, and of the author himself have been kept to minimum. Those that are included are so because they are deemed pertinent to this commentary. For additional biographical information on these personalities the reader is directed to consult the works listed in the bibliography.

Lucan was born in A.D. 39, he was nephew of Seneca the Younger who was tutor to a young Nero.² Lucan's lineage led to him coming into contact, and striking up a friendship, with Nero.

Nero, born Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus A.D.37, the last of the Julio-Claudian dynasty (that which began with Julius Caesar, the main protagonist in Lucan's epic), reigned over the Roman Empire from A.D. 54 till his death in A.D. 68.³

A turbulent relationship with the emperor Nero led to Lucan's life being cut short.⁴

Whether genuine, or not, Suetonius represents a serious breakdown of the relationship between the poet and the Emperor by stating that Lucan exclaimed to his friends that he would bring them the gift of Nero's severed head.⁵ Lucan is proffered by Suetonius in his *Vita Lucani* as being a leading member of the Piso conspiracy: a plot to remove Nero (via assassination) from power, and replace him with Gaius Calpurnius Piso.⁶ Tacitus suggests that Seneca the Younger was also believed to be involved in some way, though Seneca managed to deflect the accusation.⁷ Seneca is, however, still removed by Nero in the aftermath of the failed conspiracy.⁸

¹ Luc.9.985; Sue.Vit.Luc; ed. Roche, 2021, p.7.

² Hardie, 2014, online; Reynolds et al., 2014, online.

³ Sue.Nero.57; Barrett et al., 2016, pp.xi-xvii.

⁴ Tac.Ann.15.70.

⁵ Sue.Vit.Luc.

⁶ Sue.Vit.Luc; Tac.Ann.15.48-74; Rogers, 1955, pp.206-209.

⁷ Tac.Ann.14.65.

⁸ Tac.Ann.15.60-64.

It should be noted that the plot against Nero would have only brought about a change in governor, and not a change in style of government, the style of government Lucan is so critical of in the *Pharsalia* (see below).

Initially, epic poetry such as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* would have served, to some extent, as an historical record, or at least an 'historic' past for its listeners to cling to. Then, '...in the Greek world, histories replaced epics as a way of giving an account of the past'.⁹ Lucan completes the circle, by combining the two disciplines of poetry and history, with his *Pharsalia*, creating an historical epic. Lucan's settings are geographically concrete and his characters familiar to his contemporary audience. Although the otherworldly, or magical, elements are not entirely absent from the *Pharsalia*, Lucan is very much dealing with the historic past and not the mythical.

To some extent Nero should be credited with the literary boom that accompanied his reign as Emperor. Nero's love of the arts, and his idiosyncratic rule, arguably encouraged a whole raft of writers who would go on to create works of history and philosophy, and poetry of all types from epic to satire. Nero can often be found in these works both lauded and attacked, both subtly and not so subtly (see Morford 1973 and below).

Commentary: Lucan's *Pharsalia*/De Bellum Civile 10.1-40.

Pompey, fleeing to Egypt from the disaster (for Pompey) which had been the Battle of Pharsalus (Luc.7.), hoped for, and sought, sanctuary from the son of Ptolemy XII Auletes, Ptolemy XIII Theos Philopator (the King of Egypt).¹⁰ Though through fear of Caesar's might, Pompey is brutally murdered and beheaded as soon as he steps ashore from his boat.¹¹ Lucan alludes to this event in 10.1-6. Caesar moves to Egypt, following Pompey. Specifically, Pompey's head which has been separated, or severed, from Pompey's body via the neck (**collum**). Lucan describes the land of Egypt with the use of a form of the verb **noceo**, in this instance meaning 'guilty'.¹² Lucan's description suggests the beheading of Pompey by the Egyptians was an unlawful act, and a crime against the Roman Republic.

Throughout the *Pharsalia* Lucan compares Rome (the Republic and its constitutions) to the beauty, function, and ability of the human body. The poem contains numerous acts of actual dismemberment (one such example is above) and metaphorical self-annihilation, war against oneself (referring to civil war), for example Luc.1.2-3.¹³ The image, or images, are that the process of civil war, brought on by Caesar's actions, is dismembering (destroying) the ideals of the Roman Republic.

The beginning of Book 10 also sees Lucan directly and explicitly comparing, and stressing the resemblances (both in attitude and action), between Caesar and Alexander.

⁹ Berrera, 2005, p.182.

¹⁰ Collins, 1953, pp.105-106; Thompson and Bosworth, 2012, online; Mebane, 2016, pp.191-192.

¹¹ Collins, 1953, pp.105-106; Mebane, 2016, pp.191-192.

¹² Luc.10.3.

¹³ Mebane, 2016, pp.191-192.

Roman writers, when discussing political philosophy, governance and conquest, often used Alexander the Great as a comparison to their chosen subject, and in particular those who were eminent during the period when Roman rule shifted from Republic to Empire.

For example, the historian Titus Livius (Livy) writing earlier than Lucan (during the shift from Republic to Empire) used Alexander as a benchmark. Though Livy lauds Alexander's character and success, he cannot compete against certain nobles of Roman history (one of those being Caesar Augustus, 1st Emperor of Rome).¹⁴ Additionally, Livy suggests the unforgivable, that Alexander's actions risked the existence of the state.¹⁵

Plutarch (a contemporary of Lucan's), in *On the Fortune of Alexander*, sets side by side Plato's theories of governance (as laid out in *Laws*) and Alexander's actions in conquest and rule, and which had the greatest beneficial impact on humankind, in terms of civilising the uncivilised. Plutarch commends Alexander's 'philosophy' and deems Alexander to have had a greater influence with regards to the mentioned aim than Plato.¹⁶ Plutarch offers a vastly alternative, positive, character and image of Alexander, than the one the reader finds in Luc.10.1-40. Plutarch's Alexander gave the gift of civilisation, a great benefit to the people Alexander came into contact with. Lucan's Alexander brought destruction to those he conquered, and should by no means be seen as an example (**exemplum**) to be followed.¹⁷ Caesar is not the only character in the *Pharsalia* who Alexander could have been compared to, due to their destined paths having had certain similarities. For example, Frederick Ahl states that Lucan avoids comparing Cato's character and journey (journeys being a key theme of Lucan's epic), with that of Alexander's, though the opportunity in Book 9 clearly presents itself.¹⁸ However, Lucan's Cato is the counter to his character of Caesar.¹⁹

Of course, Caius Julius Caesar reportedly measured himself against Alexander and all that Alexander achieved.²⁰

Lucan's characters, that of Caesar included, are complex. Luc.10.34-36., sees Lucan describe Alexander as 'lightning'/'thunder' (**fulmen**) and 'a comet unfair to the nation' (**et sidus iniquum gentibus**). The description, 'lightning', awakens in the mind of the reader ominous and unfavourable omens. Yet, Luc.10.34-36., in total, seemingly suggests that Lucan's Alexander wielded godlike power over men. The reader of Lucan's epic will of course remember Caesar's actions (as well as Pompey's and Cato's) being likened to 'lightning' and the fear it induces, earlier in the work (Luc.1.151-157). The two men (Alexander and Caesar) are being cast in the same light. Though Lucan damns Alexander, the description found amongst Luc.10.1-40 has Lucan (or the narrator of the poem) expressing a strange sort of reverence toward Alexander, and in turn Caesar. It is not the only occasion in the poem that Lucan applies this godlike description to Caesar (see Nix, 2008).

¹⁴ Livy.9.18.

¹⁵ Livy.9.18.

¹⁶ Plut.Alex.328.5.

¹⁷ Luc.10.24-25.

¹⁸ 'Alexander...was not a very popular figure with the Stoics. He [Alexander] came closer to being the antithesis of the wise man than the exemplar, and it is hard to see how Lucan could possibly have used any direct comparison between Alexander and Cato without harming Cato's image.' Ahl, 1976, p.273

¹⁹ Ahl, 1976, pp.273-274.

²⁰ Plut.Caes.11.3; Sue.Jul.7.

Fate is a major theme throughout the epic.²¹ Whilst almost entirely destructive, Lucan's characters are on predestined journeys, though how can they not be? Lucan and his audience know what is going to happen, it is, after all, near history. Of course, Caesar's actions (and Fate) will set in motion events which will eventually lead to Nero's reign. In Luc.1.33-45, and seemingly genuine, Lucan suggests all the chaos and destruction caused by the Civil War is a worthwhile sacrifice if in the end it offered Rome the reign of Nero (suggesting this section of the Lucan's *Pharsalia* was completed before their relationship broke down).

Paul Roche highlights the fact that Book 10 also sees a different Caesar to that which has been seen before in the epic.²² Caesar for the first time showing fear, wondering whether he is destined for the same fate as that which Pompey met upon his arrival in Egypt. These conflicting character traits and shifts within the physical conflict at state level, of Rome at war with Rome, and at family level between Caesar and Pompey (kin through marriage) litter Lucan's epic.²³

Conclusion

Even given the often-conflicting representations (something that has been touched on above) Lucan's comparison between Alexander and Caesar is key to how Lucan wants the character of Caesar to be perceived by his audience. With regards, specifically, to the selected passage (Luc.10.1-40.) Caesar is clearly meant to be viewed negatively. The characterisation of Caesar is indicative of the philosophical and political ideology Lucan hoped to impress on his audience: a damning indictment of tyrannical rule. Lucan, with regards to his own time and situation, evidently saw no easy or immediate alternative to tyranny which would fast-track a return to a Roman Republic. On weighing the evidence, it is difficult, especially when taking into account Lucan's personal history, to see past Lucan's Caesar ultimately being a negative expression towards the rule of Nero, which is, yet again, somewhat conflicting.

word count 1652

²¹ ed. Roche, 2021, p.21-22.

²² ed. Roche, 2021, p.180.

²³ Nix, 2008, p.281.

Bibliography

Ahl, F. M. (1976) '*Lucan: An Introduction*', Cornell Studies in Classical Philology Vol. 39, Cornell University Press.

Appian. '*Roman History, Volume IV: Civil Wars, Books 1–2*', Edited and translated by Brian McGing, Loeb Classical Library 5, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, (2020).

Barrera, J. C. B. (2005) 'On History Considered as Epic Poetry', *History and Theory*, Vol.44, N°2, pp.182-194, Wiley for Wesleyan University, JSTOR online (Accessed 5th May 2022).

ed. Barrett, A. A. et al. (2016) '*The Emperor Nero: A Guide to the Sources*', Princeton University Press, New Jersey.

Bosworth, A. B. and Thompson, D. J. (2012) 'Ptolemy (Ptolemaeus)', *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* 4th ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford Reference online (Accessed 13th May 2022).

Bruère, R. T. (1950) 'The Scope of Lucan's Historical Epic', *Classical Philology*, Vol.45, N°4, pp.217-235, The University of Chicago Press, JSTOR online (Accessed 5th May 2022).

Caesar. '*Civil War*', Edited and translated by Cynthia Damon, Loeb Classical Library 39, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, (2016).

Cicero. '*Letters to Atticus, Volume III*', Edited and translated by D. R. Shackleton Bailey, Loeb Classical Library 97, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, (1999).

Cicero. '*Letters to Atticus, Volume IV*', Edited and translated by D. R. Shackleton Bailey, Loeb Classical Library 491, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, (1999).

Collins, H. P. (1953) 'Decline and Fall of Pompey the Great', *Greece and Rome*, Vol.22, N°66, pp.98-106, Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Classical Association, JSTOR online (Accessed 7th May 2022).

DeWitt, N. J. (1942) 'Caesar and the Alexander Legend', *The Classical Weekly*, Vol.36, N°5, pp. 51-53, The Johns Hopkins University Press, JSTOR online (Accessed 8th May 2022).

Ferrero, G. (1933) '*The Life of Caesar*', Translated by A. E. Zimmerman, George Allen & Unwin LTD, London.

Gruen, E. S. (1995) '*The Last Generation of the Roman Republic*', The University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles.

Hadas, M. (1936) 'Later Latin Epic and Lucan', *The Classical Weekly*, Vol.29, N°20, pp.153-157, The Johns Hopkins University Press, JSTOR online (Accessed 5th May 2022).

Hardie, P. R. (2014) 'Lucan (Marcus Annaeus Lucanus)', *The Oxford Companion to Classical Civilisation 2nd ed.*, Oxford University Press, Oxford Reference online (Accessed 7th May 2022).

Hopkins, G. M. (2000) 'Comments on Lucan', *The Hopkins Quarterly*, Vol.27, N°3/4, pp.19-50, International Hopkins Association, JSTOR online (Accessed 5th May 2022)

Livy. '*History of Rome, Volume IV: Books 8-10*,' Translated by B. O. Foster, Loeb Classical Library 191, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, (1926).

Lucan. '*The Civil War (Pharsalia)*', Translated by J. D. Duff, Loeb Classical Library 220, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, (1928).

Mayer, R. (1978) 'On Lucan and Nero', *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, N° 25, pp.85-88, Oxford University Press, JSTOR online (Accessed 16th May 2022).

Mebane, J. (2016) 'Pompey's Head and the Body Politic in Lucan's 'De bello civile'', *TAPA*, Vol.146, N°1, pp.191-215, The Johns Hopkins University Press, JSTOR online (Accessed 7th May 2022).

Morford, M. (1973) 'The Neronian Literary Revolution', *The Classical Journal*, Vol.68, N°3, pp.210-215, The Johns Hopkins University Press, JSTOR online (Accessed 17th May 2022).

Nix, S. A. (2008) 'Caesar as Jupiter in Lucan's 'Bellum Civile'', *The Classical Journal*, Vol.103, N°3, pp.281-294, The Johns Hopkins University Press, JSTOR online (Accessed 17th May 2022).

Plutarch. '*Lives, Volume V: Agesilaus and Pompey. Pelopidas and Marcellus*', Translated by Bernadotte Perrin, Loeb Classical Library 87, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, (1917).

Plutarch. '*Lives, Volume VII: Demosthenes and Cicero. Alexander and Caesar*', Translated by Bernadotte Perrin, Loeb Classical Library 99, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, (1919).

Plutarch. '*Lives, Volume VIII: Sertorius and Eumenes. Phocion and Cato the Younger*', Translated by Bernadotte Perrin, Loeb Classical Library 100, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, (1919).

Plutarch. '*Moralia, Volume IV: Roman Questions. Greek Questions. Greek and Roman Parallel Stories. On the Fortune of the Romans. On the Fortune or the Virtue of Alexander. Were the Athenians More Famous in War or in Wisdom?*', Translated by Frank Cole Babbitt, Loeb Classical Library 305, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, (1936).

Reynolds, L. D. et al. (2014) 'Seneca (Lucius Annaeus Seneca), (Seneca the Younger)', *The Oxford Companion to Classical Civilization 2nd ed.*, Oxford University Press, Oxford Reference online (Accessed 7th May 2022).

ed. Roche, P. (2021) '*Reading Lucan's Civil War: A Critical Guide*', Oklahoma Series in Classical Culture 62, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.

Rogers, R. S. (1955) 'Heirs and Rivals to Nero', *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, Vol.86, pp.190-212, The Johns Hopkins University Press, JSTOR online (Accessed 17th May 2022).

Sallust. '*The War with Catiline. The War with Jugurtha*', Edited by John T. Ramsey Translated by J. C. Rolfe, Loeb Classical Library 116, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, (2013).

Steele, R. B. (1924) 'Lucan's Pharsalia', *The American Journal of Philology*, Vol.45, N°4, pp.301-328, The Johns Hopkins University Press, JSTOR online (Accessed 8th May 2022).

Suetonius. '*Lives of the Caesars, Volume I: Julius. Augustus. Tiberius. Gaius. Caligula.*', Translated by J. C. Rolfe (Revised by Donna Hurley) with Introduction by K. R. Bradley, Loeb Classical Library 31, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, (1998).

Suetonius. '*Lives of the Caesars, Volume II: Claudius. Nero. Galba, Otho, and Vitellius. Vespasian. Titus, Domitian. Lives of Illustrious Men: Grammarians and Rhetoricians. Poets (Terence. Virgil. Horace. Tibullus. Persius. Lucan). Lives of Pliny the Elder and Passienus Crispus.*', Translated by J. C. Rolfe (Revised by Donna Hurley), Loeb Classical Library 38, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, (1997).

Tacitus. '*Annals: Books 13-16*', Translated by John Jackson, Loeb Classical Library 322, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, (1937).