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Review

Reviewed Work(s):

La poétique des éléments dans La Pharsale de Lucain

by A. Loupiac

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A. LOUPIAC: *La poétique des éléments dans La Pharsale de Lucain*. (Collection Latomus 241.) Brussels: Latomus, Revue d'Études Latines, 1998. Paper. ISBN: 2-87031-181-8.

The past decade has seen a growing interest in Lucan. Many studies explore new dimensions of his disharmonious epic *Bellum civile*, e.g. its relations with Neronian tastes and themes, or its Roman preoccupation with 'spectacle'. Surprisingly, nothing of this is reflected in the new monograph by Loupiac, a reworked French thesis.

L.'s purpose is first to study the rôle of the elements (earth, fire, water, and air) in the poem and then to establish their symbolic value or significance. The former task is simple enough: in separate chapters, the occurrences of each element are listed and commented upon. This philological work is done with great precision, though in these chapters secondary literature (other than a few titles) is only sparingly referred to; not even L.'s own earlier article on the elements is mentioned: 'La poétique des éléments dans la Pharsale', in *BAGB* (1991), 247–66. As a whole it does not make very inspiring reading, but it may be called useful. The symbolic analysis, however, relies heavily on a handful of psychoanalytic studies and does not yield significant results. On the one hand, it hardly surpasses the fairly widespread notion that the elements exemplify the cosmic dimensions of the civil war as it is illustrated and amplified by the poet. On the other hand, L. enters a more dangerous field by speculating about the personal anxieties of the poet, who is argued to be obsessed with 'images of death'.

In classical studies, this biographical and psychological approach was not uncommon after World War II, but nowadays it looks decidedly outdated. Surely, we no longer need to refer to psychological characteristics such as a haunting fear of decomposition, if we wish to explain graphical descriptions of death and destruction. Lucan's poem by its very theme focuses on the disruptive effects of civil war: so how could the poet have avoided the motif? Nor does the generalizing assumption that Lucan has the typically 'Andalusian' taste for the horrific and violent (p. 210) satisfy any more. Lucan is also seen by L. as a sensitive, fragile person having to

live in sombre days, a man captured by a lofty ideal, which led to his death. Such views turn back the clock in Lucanean scholarship.

But whatever one's starting point and approach, be it trendy or traditional, it is imperative to take notice of recent discussions. In this respect, L.'s study is most disappointing. With few exceptions, the Lucanian studies in its bibliography are well-known items from the sixties and seventies, such as M. P. O. Morford's *The Poet Lucan* (Oxford, 1967) and F. Ahl's *Lucan: an Introduction* (Ithaca, 1976). Other items include French dissertations, and studies on psychoanalysis. Generally speaking, French contributions greatly outnumber the rest, and many relevant studies are missing. It is, to put it mildly, astonishing to find the important British study of Jamie Masters, *Poetry and Civil War in Lucan's Bellum Civile* (Cambridge, 1992), not even mentioned. There must have been sufficient time for L. to discuss some of Masters's thought-provoking ideas, e.g. his view that on a metapoetical level 'civil war' itself is a metaphor determining the composition of the poem. (A minor caveat: L. states as a fact without discussion that Lucan's 'last words', alluded to by Tacitus, were his own lines 3.635–46; see, however, my contribution to that question in Carl Deroux [ed.], *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History VI* [Collection Latomus 217, Brussels, 1992], pp. 390–407.) As L.'s book stands, it would have been welcomed thirty or twenty years ago. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said nowadays.

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