
Review
Reviewed Work(s): Poetry and Civil War in Lucan's 'Bellum Civile' by Jamie Masters
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JAMIE MASTERS, *Poetry and Civil War in Lucan's 'Bellum Civile'*. (Cambridge Classical Studies). Cambridge University Press, 1992. 271 pp. Pr. £ 35,—.

In recent years, the Roman poet Lucan has gained new popularity among scholars. His bizarre, radical epic *Bellum Civile* (*BC*) seems particularly suited to be studied using modern critical methods. However, most of this scholarly attention has remained fragmentary, scattered in countless articles and notes in various journals. Dr. Masters' new book, a revised Cambridge thesis, is the first comprehensive study of Lucan after W.R. Johnson's *Momentary monsters: Lucan and his heroes*, which appeared in 1987.

It may rightly be called a deconstructionalist view of *BC*, though Masters carefully avoids this term. Starting from the idea that 'civil war' is the main theme and basic metaphor of the poem, he pro-

ceeds to analyse all the paradoxes, absurdities and contradictions within the text resulting from it. These are not, as so often, harmonized and solved, but rather highlighted and acknowledged as being of central interest in the poem. Lucan emerges as a highly unconventional, creative and critical author preoccupied with literary issues, commenting upon his own text and even undermining it. Here, we are far removed from 'the republican politician Lucan' as he was seen by earlier generations of scholars (F.M. Ahl's book on Lucan of 1976 being a late example), a view explicitly rejected in this book (p. 87-8).

Masters has not attempted to write a full commentary or complete study on all parts of the text, but has selected some major episodes from books 1-6. Hardly surprisingly, conventional epic elements, such as catalogues, battle scenes, scenes of dreams or storms are not particularly focused on, although Lucan may be shown to be innovative in these elements as well. The first six chapters deal with the scene of Caesar at the Rubicon (bk. 1); the siege and naval battle of Massilia (bk. 3); the scene of Ilerda (bk. 4); Appius and the Delphic oracle (bk. 5); the Thessalian excursus (bk. 6) and the Erictho episode (bk. 6). The concluding seventh chapter discusses the end of the poem as it is now. A good bibliography and a rather meagre index complete the volume.

A great advantage of Masters' position is that it allows for the inconsistency and disharmony which make up much of the tension in *BC*. It is amusing to read his discussion of Ahl's strained attempt to prove that Lucan is consistent after all (p. 79-82). I can also fully agree with Masters' rejection of the biographical, historical and political interpretation of Lucan's work. Indeed, it seems to be more fruitful and relevant to study the poem's literary themes and rhetoric. It is on this level that Masters' book proves to be the most useful. His discussions of Lucan's way of adapting historical material are lucid, and his notes on literary echoes and recurrent motifs are often acute and even brilliant. In addition, the book provides an excellent access to much of the vast literature on Lucan, with convenient surveys of many *status quaestionis* in the footnotes.

Let me give some examples from the discussion of the Massilia scene from book 3. (Regrettably, Masters' book was published simultaneously with my own commentary on Lucan's third book (Gieben, Amsterdam 1992). Consequently, neither of the two has been able to refer to the other.) It is shown clearly by Masters, on the basis of earlier work by Opelt and Oliver, how Lucan has fused

two historical sea battles into one large battle, and how he has wilfully distorted events as told by Caesar in his *commentarii*. Several recurrent motifs are acutely pointed at, such as funerary connotations (p. 26); the deliberate confusion of Greeks and Romans (p. 40); the image of men as trees (p. 41); and the paradox of civil war made concrete in strange, cruel types of death inflicted upon soldiers during the sea battle (p. 42). In addition, the complex problem of Lucan's impossible polyreme ships discussed subtly and succinctly. Masters (p. 36-7) explains the Lucanean ships as the result of literary *aemulatio* with Vergil rather than as archeological realities, which seems to be a good solution, though it is not the only possible one (see further my commentary on lines 529, 530 and 536). All this is very sensible.

But in many instances, it seems as if Masters wants to be controversial and different at all costs, which might well be seen as a result of *imitatio* and *aemulatio* of Lucan himself. His contention in chapter 7 that *BC* is complete as it is now, provokes and contradicts all of modern Lucanean scholarship, except for a commonly rejected article of 1957 by H. Haffter. I cannot find Masters' arguments any more convincing than Haffter's.

Often the book goes well beyond what may seem reasonable to most scholars. There are implausible analyses of word play (e.g. on p. 24), perhaps inspired by Masters' supervisor John Henderson, whose bizarre article 'Lucan/The word at war' (first published in: Ramus 16, 1987, 122-164) is riddled of this type of analysis; there are discussions of what Lucan might have done; conclusions based on the absence of what might be expected; strong personal judgements (a medieval biographer is called 'a convicted liar' on p. 233 and to Lucan himself the term 'schizophrenia' is applied on p. 90) and irritatingly idiosyncratic language ('more Lucanean than Lucan'). Readers who do not share Masters' evident enthusiasm for Lucan, may find all this pretty hard to swallow.

But more serious objections may be raised. Masters states that 'civil war' functions as a metaphor determining the way the story itself is told, that is, on the metapoetical level. *BC* then would be a poem commenting upon its own composition, and, analogous to its theme, an inner contradiction, a *concordia discors*, an impossibility, a 'civil war' by itself. Interesting as this theory may be, it produces absurd results when applied too fanatically, as in Masters' case. Let me give some examples again from the Massilia scene in Lucan's book 3. It is argued that "the events narrated in Lucan's text themselves symbolize the process of creating that text"

(p. 25). Thus, the desecration of a grove near the town by Caesar is said to be a metaphor for "the plundering of poetic material" from the epic tradition (p. 27); old boats taken from the docks are seen as symbolizing "the resurrection of epic style and epic subject-matter" (p. 28); the compressed structure of a rampart suggests "the compression that the literary material has undergone in Lucan's poem" (p. 36); whereas two sizes of ships reflect "two kinds of poetic vision in conflict, audacity battling with monstrosity" (p. 39).

This seems wildly exaggerated. While it is commonly acknowledged that poets do write indirectly about composing poetry in programmatic passages and specific allusions, it seems decidedly too modern, or, if I may use the word, postmodern, to assume sustained metapoetic reflections on this scale in an ancient epic. Surely, trees, boats and ramparts are first and foremost trees, boats and ramparts, which function within the story. They may be said to symbolize the participants and forces of the civil war in which they play a role, but it seems hazardous to take this further step away from the text itself.

In connection with what has been observed above, it may be said that Masters, while doing away with the 'serious' politician and historian Lucan, has in fact created another 'serious' Lucan: a mature poet, obsessed with literary themes and semantics, caught in inextricable knots of composition, meaning and language. Personally, I tend to regard Lucan as a great verbal artist, who uses all available means to create a great show, a rhetorical spectacle without any deeper significance whatsoever, whether political, historical *or* metapoetical. The elements of cheerful humor, satire and youthful game, which had been given attention to a certain extent in Johnson's inspiring book, are nearly absent here. It may be a matter of personal taste, but to me Masters' Lucan seems far too 'serious' to be true.

To sum up, the book often breaks fresh grounds and sheds new light upon this fascinating Silver Latin poet. It contains much valuable material and will surely be a great help to any future research on Lucan. However, it shows a tendency to fanaticism and imbalance, especially in overemphasizing any metapoetical dimensions of Lucan's text. In this respect, it should be used with much caution. But whether one agrees with Masters or not, his book is always stimulating and may be welcomed as an important contribution to Lucanean studies. It is well printed and bound, in the best Cambridge tradition. This too makes it a pleasure to read.

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