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978-0-521-04172-0 - Poetry and Civil War in Lucan's *Bellum Civile*

Jamie Masters

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Lucan is the wild maverick among Latin epic poets: sneered at for over a century for failing to conform to humanist canons of taste and propriety, in recent years his work has been gaining in reputation. *Poetry and civil war in Lucan's 'Bellum Civile'* is a book founded on a genuine admiration for Lucan's unique, perverse and spellbinding masterpiece.

Above all, argues Dr Masters, the poem is obsessed with civil war, not only as the subject of the story it tells, but as a metaphor which determines the way that story is told. In these pages, he discusses in detail a number of selected episodes from the poem which illustrate this principle, and on this basis he offers a fresh and challenging perspective on most of the important issues in Lucanian studies – Lucan's political stance and his attitude to Caesar, his iconoclastic relation to Virgil and the epic tradition, his distortion of history and geography, his inconsistency, his self-destructive narrative technique and, finally, the apparent incompleteness of his poem.

This book is a major re-evaluation, provocative and persuasive, of a central figure in the history of Latin epic.

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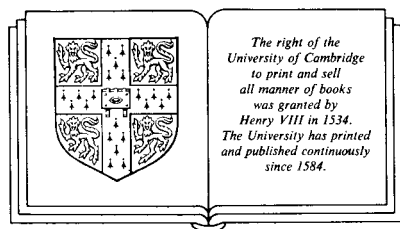
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PREFACE

The appearance of Ahl's *Lucan: an introduction* in 1976 was momentous. His work, eloquent in its presentation, comprehensive in its aspirations, and motivated by a genuine interest in the poem, represented a consummation of all that was good in the critical tradition. At a stroke he made us a generation of post-Ahlians. His faults were many – in particular, his desire to smooth over the difficulties of Lucan's politics – and he will often be the principal target of my attack; but at his best he was admirable, and at his worst could not be ignored.

Johnson's *Momentary monsters* (1987) was about an attitude; rigidly refusing to be drawn into a close reading of the text, but having at his command powers of rhetoric that surpassed Ahl's – and even Lucan's – he brought to Lucanian studies a delirious enthusiasm which, if not quite rescuing the poet from the ranks of the second-rate, at least demanded that he be taken seriously on his own terms.

These two works are high points in Lucanian scholarship. There are others, as important but less obviously monumental. But their impact has only just begun to bring about a Lucanian revolution, and the mainstream of criticism still fails to treat the *Bellum Civile* with much more sympathy than the scholars of a century ago. The ghost of the 'courtisan brilliant' (Pichon), the 'hot-headed Spaniard' (Rose), the 'marvellous boy' (Kenney), has stubbornly resisted exorcism.

The present work is motivated by a deep personal admiration for the poem, and by a desire to see Lucan treated with the same kind of respect and attention to detail that is characteristic of Virgilian criticism. As long as we believe Lucan to have been fallible, we will always find evidence for his fallibility. We confirm traditional literary history (which needs the silver age to protect the value of the golden), but we lose a great poet; and that is an exchange by which I cannot see we gain. I attempt here to reverse it.

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PREFACE

In the course of writing this book, which is a revised version of my PhD dissertation, I have accumulated a fair number of debts. I particularly want to thank Denis Feeney, Stephen Hinds, Philip Hardie and Neil Wright, who have always read my work with great care, and have been unfailing in their encouragement. Alison Sharrock was my amateur mentor; the technical advice of Desmond Schmidt was invaluable at the word-processing stage. I should also like to thank my examiners, Michael Reeve and Don Fowler, whose keen and incisive observations formed the basis for the revision of my dissertation; and similarly Charles Martindale, who read through the dissertation a short time after my examination; I may not always have acted upon their advice, but I have certainly profited from it.

Finally, three special debts: John Henderson (who supervised me), Jaś Elsner, and Emily Gowers. My friends, my anxiety of influence.