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A PERFECT STORM? CAESAR AND HIS AUDIENCES AT LUCAN 5.504–702

*In memory of Vic Pitcher (*obiit *12.10.2006)*

Scholars have looked at the storm scene in Lucan Book Five from a number of different angles. Some have considered it in the light of earlier traditions of storm-literature and moralising about the sea.[1] A perceptive recent reading has examined how Lucan's deviation from epic models for the exchanges between Caesar and Amyclas brings out the general's arrogant lack of concern for the norms of acceptable behaviour.[2]

This article seeks to supplement previous work on the scene by examining one of its more neglected aspects: the dynamic that Lucan establishes between Caesar and his bemused soldiers. Interpreters have mostly seen here just a simple antithesis between the superhumanly transgressive anti-hero and his very human, slumbering men.[3] This paper will show, however, that Lucan frames the scene to bring Caesar's men into prominence. An attempt will then be made to tease out the more subtle implications of the relationship between Caesar and his men in this passage. This relationship, it will be argued, takes on an additional significance when read in the context of the larger thematic concerns which Lucan weaves into his poem.

I. THE FRAMING OF THE NARRATIVE

soluerat armorum fessas nox languida curas,
parua quies miseris, in quorum pectora somno
dat uires fortuna minor; iam castra silebant,
tertia iam uigiles commouerat hora secundos:
Caesar sollicito per uasta silentia gressu
uix famulis audenda parat, cunctisque relictis
sola placet Fortuna comes. tentoria postquam
egressus uigilum somno cedentia membra
transsiluit questus tacite, quod fallere posset,
litora curua legit… (Lucan 5.504–13)[4]

Scholarship on this passage has explored its creative rewriting of other 'night-scenes', particularly that involving Nisus and Euryalus in *Aeneid* 9, and has noted its sympathetic regard for Caesar's soldiery.[5] More perhaps remains to be said, however.

[1] E.g. M.P.O. Morford, *The Poet Lucan: Studies in Rhetorical Epic* (Oxford, 1967), 37–44.

[2] E. Narducci, *Lucano: Un' epica contro l'impero* (Roma, 2002), 247–61.

[3] E.g. Morford (n. 1), 38: 'Lucan lays emphasis on the contrast between Caesar's destiny and that of humbler beings.' Narducci (n. 2), 249: 'La scena si apre con un "notturno" dove il riposo di cui gli umili possono godere è contrapposto alla bramosia di azione che spinge irrequietamente Cesare ad inseguire la propria *Fortuna*.'

[4] The text of Lucan used in this article is A.E. Housman's 1926 Oxford edition unless otherwise stated.

[5] Narducci (n. 2), 249: 'Il lessico di questo "notturno", col suo patetico "penetrare" nei sentimenti dei soldati di Cesare, costituisce un tratto di scoperto avvicinamento allo stile virgiliano…tra gli esempi che si potrebbero richiamare, uno appare (e lo vedremo) particolarmente calzante: il "notturno" che fa da sfondo alla sortita di Eurialo e Niso…'.

This is particularly true of the ways in which the very end of this episode explicitly recalls the opening.

Lucan makes much of Caesar's success in slipping past his own guards, and of his irritation at the ease with which this feat is achieved: *questus tacite, quod fallere possit* (512). The expression, as so often in Lucan, is memorable in itself for its mildly paradoxical flavour: *queror* is usually used of complaining *aloud*, but if Caesar were to do that, then his expedition would be over before it began. It is equally notable, however, that at the end of the scene, the narrator goes to some pains to point the contrast between this unobserved departure and his very public return: *sed non tam remeans Caesar iam luce propinqua / quam tacita sua castra fuga comitesque fefellit* (678–9).

The scene is explicitly framed, then, in terms of the response (or lack of it) from Caesar's men to their leader's actions. Moreover, this framing is not limited to lines 678–9 alone. The soldiers themselves look back to their own somnolence while berating their general: *cum te raperet mare, corpora segnis / nostra sopor tenuit* (689–90). Though the narrative focus is upon Caesar and Amyclas for much of the scene, the place of the soldiery in this picture is not allowed to escape the reader. The soldiers do more here than just provide a slumbering backdrop and a distressed reception, however. Closer reading reveals that they are, in fact, engaged in a debate of sorts with their leader.

Lucan highlights this debate by means of a pair of deft allusions. It has long been recognised that Caesar's epigrammatic declaration at the climax of the storm – *sat magna peregi* (660) – seems to derive from a saying of his historical counterpart.[6] The epigram in question is recorded in Cicero's speech *Pro Marcello*.[7] It has also long been acknowledged that part of the response from Caesar's men to the safe return of their captain

> cum tot in hac anima populorum uita salusque
> pendeat et tantus caput hoc sibi fecerit orbis,
> saeuitia est uoluisse mori. (685–7)

likewise bears strong affinities to a passage from the same speech of Cicero.[8] Indeed, the *Commenta Bernensia* itself already comments on the similarity.[9]

What has not been brought out in studies of this scene, however, is that in Cicero's speech, the passages to which Lucan seems to be alluding at these two points not only come immediately after one another, but are presented in such a way that the second is a direct refutation of the first. This can be seen if the original section of the speech is quoted in full:

> Saepe enim uenit ad auris meas te idem istud nimis crebro dicere, *tibi satis te uixisse*. Credo: sed tum id audirem, si tibi soli uiueres, aut si tibi etiam soli natus esses. *Omnium salutem ciuium cunctamque rem publicam res tuae gestae complexae sunt*. (Cicero, *Marcell.* 25).

There is, to be sure, a temptation to write off either or both of these apparent intertextualities as mere *topoi*, the result of the influence upon Lucan of the rhetorical schools. 'That influence may be well illustrated by comparing…V 682–99

[6] Narducci (n. 2), 256: 'l'espressione *sat magna peregi* lascia probabilmente trasparire il ricordo di una frase che Cesare avrebbe effetivamente pronunciato…'

[7] Cic. *Marcell.* 25.

[8] Cic. *Marcell.* ibid.

[9] *Commenta Bernensia* f. 74u on Luc. 5.687.

with Curtius IX 6 §§ 6–15…it will be felt that these passages (and scores of others, no doubt) are merely school commonplaces'.[10] Curtius' soldiers certainly meet a commander similarly heedless of his personal safety with much the same rejoinder, decrying Alexander as *oblitus tot ciuium animas trahere te in casum*.[11]

None the less, the parroting of one particular piece of Ciceronian argumentation in two passages of the poem so close together is surely suggestive. The extended allusion to Cicero heightens the sense that the soldiers are directly answering their commander's prior proposition, even though they were not there to witness it.[12] Lucan, as often elsewhere, borrows a technique from historiography. The phenomenon of a speech in a text that 'replies' to one delivered earlier in the narrative, but on a different occasion, is familiar from the historians.[13] One might compare, for example, Phormio's speech in the second book of Thucydides,[14] which addresses point by point the one made by the Peloponnesian generals stationed miles away which immediately precedes it in the narrative.[15]

Caesar's soldiers do not, then, merely top and tail the scene. They play an integral part in it, supplying an attempted rebuttal to their leader's grandiloquent claims. Is there a further point to this exchange, however? What place does this scene hold within the larger economy of Lucan's poem?

Light is shed, perhaps, by comparison with the parallel scene in Plutarch's *Caesar*,[16] and the place which this scene holds in the biographer's larger narrative. In Plutarch, the story of the sea-voyage immediately follows complaints from the soldiers that Caesar is not making any allowance for their mortal frailty: *οὐδ' ἀπὸ τῶν τραυμάτων ἄρα λογίζεται Καῖσαρ, ὅτι θνητῶν μὲν ἄρχει, θνητὰ δὲ πεφύκαμεν πάσχειν καὶ ἀλγεῖν;*[17] When they find out about the enterprise, they are upset at the lack of faith in themselves which it seems to demonstrate: *δυσπαθοῦντες, εἰ μὴ πέπεισται καὶ σὺν αὐτοῖς μόνοις ἱκανὸς εἶναι νικᾶν, ἀλλ' ἄχθεται καὶ παραβάλλεται διὰ τοὺς ἀπόντας, ὡς ἀπιστῶν τοῖς παροῦσιν.*

In Plutarch, therefore, it is clear that the sea-voyage arises against a background of military unrest, and the biographer then portrays the men as perceiving it a sign of want of faith in their own capacities. Is any such dynamic observable in Lucan's handling of the sequence?

A more detailed reading of the surrounding text suggests that previous soldierly discontent is indeed an important factor in Lucan's treatment of this scene and its aftermath. As one might expect, however, there is a twist. We shall see that the very terms in which the men argue against the bravado of their leader in this scene demonstrate their failure to grasp the realities of their situation, and so doom them to an ongoing role in the bloody downfall of the Republic.

[10] W.E. Heitland *ap.* C.E.Haskins (ed.), *M. Annaei Lucani Pharsalia* (London, 1887), lxxi.
[11] Curt. 9.6.9.
[12] This unconscious telepathy lends a particular irony to Caesar's confidence at sea that his ambitions of kingship are a secret he will take to his grave (665–8).
[13] Cf. S. Hornblower, *Thucydides* (London, 1987), 59–60, on such 'responsions' in Thucydides.
[14] Thuc. 2.89.
[15] Thuc. 2.87.
[16] Plut. *Caes.* 38.
[17] Plut. *Caes.* 37.

II. *SCIT NON ESSE DUCIS STRICTOS SED MILITIS ENSES*

The Caesar of the opening books of the poem is presented as well-nigh unstoppable, a force of nature. In the comparison with Pompeius at the beginning of Book One, he is famously likened to a thunderbolt (1.151). His progress is rapid and ferocious, admitting of neither let nor hindrance. It is an achievement that the Massilians manage even to delay him (3.88–92).

In Book Four, however, the narrator begins to stress that matters are more complicated than that. Caesar, as the narrative voice repeatedly reminds the reader, is only formidable while people follow him. The key passage to consider here is the moment at Ilerda when his men start fraternising with their opponents and consider laying down their arms:

> hospitis ille ciet nomen, uocat ille propinquum,
> admonet hunc studiis consors puerilibus aetas;
> nec Romanus erat, qui non agnouerat hostem.
> arma rigant lacrimis, singultibus oscula rumpunt,
> et quamuis nullo maculatus sanguine miles
> quae potuit fecisse timet. quid pectora pulsas?
> quid, uaesane, gemis? fletus quid fundis inanis
> nec te sponte tua sceleri parere fateris?
> usque adeone times quem tu facis ipse timendum?
> classica det bello, saeuos tu neclege cantus;
> signa ferat, cessa: iam iam ciuilis Erinys
> concidet et Caesar generum priuatus amabit. (Lucan 4.176–88)

The careful reader notes a tension here. On the one hand, the narrator's epigrammatic point has an undeniable logic; it is Caesar's men that makes the general feared. On the other hand, the reader has already encountered the narrator's penchant for exhorting the players in his narrative, as he does at 186–7. This has come before with the appeal to Jupiter and Neptune to obliterate the horrors of civil war with flood only fifty lines earlier at 4.110–20. In both places, the reader of Lucan's time or later knows that these exhortations are doomed to failure. Paradoxically, the very fact that Lucan's narrator comments upon the power of Caesar's soldiers to stop him, and his exhortation to make use of this power, carry with them the assurance that this power will not be put into operation.

In Book Five, only a few hundred lines before the abortive voyage, there is another eruption of discontent (5.242–373). Once again the narrator is at pains to note that Caesar's power is dependent upon the goodwill of his men*: scit non esse ducis strictos sed militis enses* (5.254). Once again, the narrator exhorts the characters to make use of this to bring about an end to the conflict: *sic eat, o superi: quando pietasque fidesque / destituunt moresque malos sperare relictum est, / finem ciuili faciat discordia bello* (5.297–9). Once again, the exhortation is doomed to failure.

How does all this impact upon the storm-scene, which follows not long after the quelling of this insurrection? It means that the *Pro Marcello*'s argumentation now stands against a very different backdrop. Cicero's original point that Caesar contains within himself the fate of so many rings hollow when redeployed in a poem where it has been repeatedly hammered home that what makes Caesar special is the men at his command. When it is *these very men* who assert that the fate of the world hangs upon that of their leader – *cum tot in hac anima populorum uita salusque / pendeat et tantus caput hoc sibi fecerit orbis* – the irony is complete. The soldiers have comprehensively

missed the point: that if the fate of the world lies with Caesar, the fate of Caesar lies with themselves. This failure of apprehension dooms the Republic.

Indeed, the narrator highlights this irony. Even before the soldiers greet their crestfallen commander, the narrative voice has anticipated their response. It is handled, however, in an unmistakeably satirical vein, as the bedraggled leader is deposited on the shore where he started: *pariter tot regna, tot urbes / fortunamque suam tacta tellure recepit* (5.676–7).

When read with due regard to the ongoing concerns of the poem, then, the response of Caesar's men to their general's return exemplifies some of the most important themes of the poem: power, where it is vested, and the mortal short-sightedness with which it is used, or not used. This is not the only irony of this deeply ironical passage, however. Who currently has responsibility for the state of the world is not the only topic which Caesar's men have failed to understand.

III. CAESAR'S VOYAGE AND THE RAFT OF VULTEIUS

Caesar's men, like the Cicero of the *Pro Marcello*, tax him with his selfish willingness to die: *saevitia est uoluisse mori* (5.687). Unlike Cicero, however, they have rooted their objection in a misunderstanding. Caesar's voyage is not undertaken because of his willingness to die. Instead, he embarks convinced of his own indestructibility. Witness his words to the timid helmsman Amyclas: *sola tibi causa est haec iusta timoris, / uectorem non nosse tuum, quem numina numquam / destituunt…* (5.580–2).

Caesar does, indeed, issue the dictum *sat magna peregi* (660). He does not enunciate it, however, as the tranquil expression of a philosophical position, which is the state of affairs implied in the *Pro Marcello*. Rather, this is the climax of an exultant rant, drawn from him when it already looks as though his destruction is inevitable. The soldiers have in fact misread not only the nature of their leader's importance, but that of his intentions as well.

Once again, the irony is strengthened by attention to the place of this scene within the larger structure of the poem. In some ways, Book Five is a replay with variations of Book Four. Just as the present book treats of a sea-voyage weighted with important thematic freight about five hundred lines in, so did the one before it. This was the famous incident of the raft of Vulteius (4.474–581).

Ironies accumulate when one considers the differences and similarities between these two projects. Where Vulteius' last stand is emphatically a communal activity – *uiscera non unus iam dudum transigit ensis* (4.545) – Caesar's is just as markedly solitary. Where Caesar's voyage is defined from the outset by stealth, that of Vulteius, as several scholars have noted,[18] draws its force from the fact that it is visible to all:

> nos in conspicua sociis hostique carina
> constituere dei; praebebunt aequora testes,
> praebebunt terrae, summis dabit insula saxis,
> spectabunt geminae diuerso litore partes. (4.492–5)

The episodes also share a thematic link, in that both touch upon the willingness to die, and the failure of spectators to interpret correctly what they have witnessed. Once again, however, the two passages come at these themes in different ways.

[18] So, for example, C. Saylor, 'Lux Extrema: Lucan Pharsalia 4.402–581', *TAPhA* 120 (1990), 291–300, at 297: 'the suicide is bright, conspicuous, visible to all'. Cf. also M. Leigh, *Lucan: Spectacle and Engagement* (Oxford, 1997), 183.

Caesar, as we have seen, displays no settled willingness to die in his solitary voyage, but that voyage is misinterpreted by his men as though it did. By contrast, it is Vulteius' stated intention to be seen to be willing to die: *non cogitur ullus / uelle mori* (4.484–5). Here, however, it is the *narrator* who endows his action with a significance that was not originally intended. As a perceptive recent study has put it: 'The problem for Vulteius, of course, is that Luc. 4.573–81 will recognize the exemplarity of his deed, but interpret it in a rather different light.'[19] The suicide is interpreted by the narrator as a lesson to all that there is always the possibility of displaying that *libertas*, which Vulteius' general is in fact engaged in denying to others: *datos, ne quisquam seruiat, enses* (4.579). Moreover, not only does the narrator derive from Vulteius' death a moral different from that which Caesar's man intended, but he shows no confidence that even this moral will in fact find a receptive audience:

> non tamen ignauae post haec exempla uirorum
> percipient gentes quam sit non ardua uirtus
> seruitium fugisse manu, sed regna timentur
> ob ferrum et saeuis libertas uritur armis (4.575–8)

Indeed, the Vulteius episode is riddled with references to the failure of the sort of exemplarity which he is setting out to achieve. The similes which his action evokes from the narrator are an obvious case in point:

> sic semine Cadmi
> emicuit Dircaea cohors ceciditque suorum
> uolneribus, dirum Thebanis fratribus omen;
> Phasidos et campis insomni dente creati
> terrigenae missa magicis e cantibus ira
> cognato tantos inplerunt sanguine sulcos,
> ipsaque inexpertis quod primum fecerat herbis
> expauit Medea nefas. (4.549–56)

In fact, of course, both of these mythological omens were ignored by their audiences. Medea *did* become a kin-killer, and Eteocles and Polynices *did* go on to kill one another (and, in so doing, became an *exemplum* themselves for civil war and the killing of brother by brother; compare, for example, the omen reported at 1.551–2). Vulteius' enterprise slips from the outset into a tradition of cautionary narratives which fail to be read as they should be. That this voyage is, as it were, inverted in the very next book by the leader of his own cause, whose deed is then likewise subjected to misreading, confirms the universal failure of insight which is the hallmark of Lucan's narrative vision.

Our previous attempt to set the response of Caesar's men in context convicted them of impercipience. This observation of the ways in which Caesar's voyage echoes that of his partisan in the previous book, by contrast, mitigates the offence. If the soldiers fail to understand the significance of what they are seeing, they are by no means alone in their failure. In Lucan, such want of vision is all but universal.

IV. CONCLUSION

We have seen, then, that our reading of the storm-scene in Lucan Book Five is enriched by attention to two factors: first, the crucial role played in it by Caesar's

[19] Leigh (n. 18), 183, n. 36.

audience, his men, and their (mis)understanding of what he is about, and second, the ways in which this episode draws upon its relationship with episodes elsewhere in the poem. It has been demonstrated that Caesar's abortive journey and the reaction which it then elicits exemplify, in an understated fashion, some of the key themes of the poem: the fragility of human power, and the failure of human insight to avert destruction. Caesar's men, through their willing immersion in a vision of their leader's personal importance which their narrator does not altogether endorse, lose their opportunity to wield the power that is in fact theirs. Because they do so, the doom of the Republic is assured. In failing thus, though, they are merely part of a larger pattern, since exemplary stories in Lucan rarely find the reader they deserve: Vulteius' sacrifice, for example, will not inspire future generations to the defence of liberty, as it should. Their blindness is not a unique failing.

This episode is also useful, perhaps, as a test case for the reading of other narratives about Caesar. It is notable how many such texts – from the opening of Plutarch's biography[20] to the first act of Shakespeare's play[21] – focus as much upon how the dictator is perceived by others as on what he himself is. Such speculations, though, are for another day, and a longer piece.[22]

Durham University L.V. PITCHER
l.v.pitcher@dur.ac.uk

[20] Cf., e.g., Plut. *Caes.* 4.5.

[21] This technique of 'indirect characterisation' is not, however, limited to Caesar alone in Shakespeare (or, indeed, elsewhere). Cf. A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, and Macbeth* (London and New York, 1905), 32 and L.V. Pitcher, 'Characterization in ancient historiography' in J. Marincola (ed.), *A Companion to Greek and Roman Historiography* (Oxford, 2007), 102–17, at 107–10.

[22] This article is indebted to Matthew Leigh for his guidance on the bibliography of Lucan, and to the editors and anonymous referee of *CQ* for suggestions and corrections.