

## BOOK REVIEW

*Lucan's Imperial World: The Bellum Civile in Its Contemporary Contexts*  
Edited by LAURA ZIENTEK and MARK THORNE. London, UK and New York,  
NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. Pp. xii + 256. Hardback, \$125.00; Paperback,  
\$40.95. ISBN: 978-1-350-09743-8.

The collection of twelve essays under review has its origins in a conference, “Lucan in His Contemporary Contexts,” held at BYU back in April 2017, “with the goal of approaching the *Bellum Civile* in full engagement with the cultural, literary, and historical environments in which Lucan lived and worked” (2). The editors identify these “contemporary contexts” as “The Annaei: Lucan’s Family,” “Roman Education,” “Roman Politics from Caligula to Nero,” “The Aristocracy and the Emperor,” “Philosophy in Rome during the First Century CE” and “Cultural Memory in the Early Empire”—all important, and complex, topics in their own right, but especially so when considered jointly. Accordingly, the contributors to the volume weave together these various thematic strands in interesting and original ways which demonstrate the value of contextualizing readings of Lucan and his epic of civil war.

“Part I: Lucan and Contemporary Authors and Traditions” includes three papers on Lucan’s engagement with his literary milieu. Roche explores how Seneca’s *Epistulae Morales* “influenc[e] Lucan’s epic on issues to do with personal philosophy, autonomy, resistance and the virtuous death” (17) through case studies on the debate on fate and chance (*BC*2), the speech of Cotta to Metellus (*BC*3) and the speech of Vulteius (*BC*4). (It would be fascinating to extend this analysis to embrace the entirety of the Senecan corpus.) Biggs likewise explores the “literary interaction between the poetry of Lucan and Persius through readings of the *Bellum Civile* and Persius’ third *Satire*” (33), especially in their shared use of the language of Stoic cosmology (e.g., *conpage soluta*). Baertschi undertakes an in-depth analysis of the (unhistorical) speech delivered by Cicero before the battle of Pharsalus (*BC*7): she reads the speech as

a *suasoria* and, at the same time, adduces convincing evidence of “the clear thematic resonances between Cicero’s letters and the [speech in Lucan]” (61).

“Part II: The Natural World and Geography in the Neronian Period” offers three papers in the realm of literary ecology or ecocriticism. Zientek examines the “depictions of landscapes” (73) in the *BC* and in Seneca’s *Natural Questions* and, in particular, identifies “mining ... as a literary and philosophical trope” (74), where “mining is both a symptom and an expression of moral degeneracy” (79), a theme subsequently developed by Pliny in his *Natural History*. Taylor “interprets the two alternative explanations of the Syrtes and their perilous conditions ([*BC*] 9.303–18) as meditations upon th[e] crisis of closure” (91) which pervades the epic as a whole, and concludes with the intriguing suggestion that the passage about the Syrtes tropes the alternative endings of the poem itself, whether the ending we currently have or, perhaps, Cato’s suicide. Serena analyzes how “Lucan ... constructs an image of Parthia as a symbol of Rome’s” (111) imperial failures, and failings—as, ultimately, a condemnation of Caesarism.

“Part III: Cato’s Neronian *Nachleben*” concentrates on the varying receptions of Cato (the Younger) in Lucan and Seneca (again, the Younger). On the one hand, Kaufman argues that “[Lucan’s] portrayal of Cato is better understood as exploring the Stoicism of popular Roman imagination and polemic than of orthodox Stoic theory” (133)—but perhaps Lucan is instead exploring the discursive space between the two? On the other hand, D’Alessandro Behr reads the portrayal of Cato in Seneca and Lucan through “the ... dynamic employment of [Seo’s] ‘exemplary traits’ which mobilize the literary (especially epic) and philosophical tradition of Rome in a rather political direction” (151)—a reading that could be extended to consider both other receptions of Cato in Greek and Latin literature and the reception of other Stoic heroes.

“Part IV: Back to the Future: Republic and Empire” closes the volume with four papers on cultural memories of the Republic, especially the Late Republic, during the Early Empire. Mebane powerfully demonstrates how the figure of Sulla “emerges as a key intermediary between [the] civic violence [of the Late Republic and the Early Empire]” (174): ultimately, she argues that, according to Lucan, Rome will be unable to escape the cycle of civil war “as long as the specter of Sulla lurks in the house of the Caesars” (183). Weiner demonstrates how Lucan’s (anachronistic) reference to the (Augustan) Temple of Palatine Apollo reflects his interest in the contested nature of collective remembering, as well as forgetting—in “the mutability of monuments, memory, and, with them, history” (203). (For meetings of the Roman Senate on the Palatine, see [AJA 85.3 \[1981\]](#):

[335–339](#).) Mulhern applies Bernstein's concept of "backshadowing" (a very useful hermeneutical tool) and the associated concept of "nostalgia" (*avant la lettre*) to "that last rearguard action of principled Republicanism: the glorious failure of Cato" (209) and other *exempla* of the theme of (moral) decline. McClellan likewise applies Mbembe's concepts of "necropolitics" and "necropower" (also very useful hermeneutical tools) to "Lucan's metaphorical portrait of aristocratic life in contemporary Neronian Rome" (229), to the stark contrast between Republican *libertas* and Imperial *servitium*, between the *res publica amissa* and the "living death" of the *res publica restituta*.

The back matter includes an Index Locorum Lucani et Senecae (247–252) and a General Index (253–256): each chapter concludes with its own bibliography (which perhaps could have and should have been consolidated into a single bibliography at the end). More cross-referencing would help the reader make connections between chapters: e.g., pages 37–40, 92, 97–101 and 201–202 need cross-references to each other, as do pages 54–57 and 123–124. Regardless, the collection admirably succeeds in reading Lucan and his *Bellum Civile* in new and creative ways, and should inspire scholars to pursue other contextualizing approaches.

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