

2011

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Recommended Citation

Tumasian, Joseph (2011) "PEACEMAKER OR THE NEW HANNIBAL: A Literary Critique of Caesar and Lucan in the Civil War," *Ephemeris*: Vol. 6 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/ephemeris/vol6/iss1/4>

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PEACEMAKER OR THE NEW HANNIBAL: A Literary Critique of Caesar and
Lucan in the Civil War

*Now swiftly Caesar has surmounted the icy Alps and in his mind conceived immense
upheavals, coming war.*

~Lucan's Civil War l. 183-185

INTRODUCTION

“By warfare’s vast commotion Rome is shaken just as though the Carthaginians were crossing the Alps, Hannibal: the cohorts are filled to strength with recruits, every wood is felled for the fleet, the order has gone out: ‘By land and sea go after Caesar.’”(Lucan 1.303-307)⁸ Students of classical history have read G. Julius Caesar’s account of the Roman civil war (49 B.C.) in his book *Bellum Civile* in an attempt to understand Caesar. The story of this war is told by Julius Caesar himself, and must be read carefully because history is written by the winners. It would not be until years after the Roman Civil War, in the 1st century A.D., that Lucan, an intimate of Caesar’s successor Nero, would write a book called *Pharsalia* that told of the events that led to the war and of the war itself. Lucan had the benefit of hindsight, and as A.W. Lintott says:

Lucan represents the views of those who had not only lived under the monarchy which was the final product of the conflict begun in 49 B.C., but had experienced its less agreeable consequences under the later Julio-Claudians. Lucan’s work must in the end be judged as an epic poem, which it was surely meant to be, not a history in verse. However, the literary critic should

¹ All citations from Susan Braund.

not consider Lucan's treatment of history as a side issue; [because] Lucan does from time to time give an adequate account of military operations ...he must have consulted a historical source in order to discover detailed information.⁹

Lucan can be regarded as a reliable source, although not a contemporary of J. Caesar. Lucan should also be seen as an authority that can help students of history to understand the person of Julius Caesar. However, it is important to understand that Lucan subverts the "writing" Caesar's presentation of the "written" Caesar. The writing Caesar is presenting the written Caesar as a peacemaker with the common interest in mind; and Lucan presents the written Caesar as the new Hannibal. Therefore, by using both accounts of the civil war from Lucan's *Pharsalia* and Caesar's *Bellum Civile*, Caesar's own view of himself is brought into a balanced perspective.

Caesar may be read as the savior of the republic and promoter of the common good. After reading Caesar's *Bellum Civile*, it would be easy to believe that Caesar really had Rome's interest in mind, but Caesar shows his cards early in Book 1:

[Caesar's] standing had always been his first consideration, more important than his life. He felt hurt because a favor granted by the Roman people had been insultingly wrenched from him by his enemies; he was being dragged back to Rome with six months of his governorship stolen from him, even though the Roman people had sanctioned his candidature in absence at the next election. [Caesar 1 (9)]¹⁰

Caesar's standing, his *dignitas*, with the people had been his interest. He was insulted. His dignity was called into question in front of the people. After all, he says that the Roman people had sanctioned his candidature in absence at the next election. This had never occurred, but because it happened, he hoped to evince this as proof that the people loved him. Caesar admits his selfishness and that his station was more important than his life. His governorship was ripped from his possession early. He was held in suspicion and then dragged back to Rome. Caesar makes these arguments to incite the reader to anger. Caesar claims these hostile actions work against the common good. This grandiose self-perception would be the impetus to invade Italy.

CAESAR'S PERCEPTION

² Lintott, (1971) 488,490.

³ All citations from John Carter

Caesar cites greed, envy, and jealousy as the basic motives of civil war. Pompey and his cohorts are the pawns in a game that Caesar claims need not occur. He says:

Cato was driven by a long standing enmity to Caesar and the resentment at his electoral defeat. Lentulus was motivated by the size of his debts, by the hope of an army and provinces, and by the prospect of inducements offered by kings who desired recognition; he also boasted to his intimates that he would be a second Sulla, to whom supreme power would fall. Scipio was impelled by the same hope of a province and armies...Pompey himself, spurred on by Caesar's enemies and by his desire that no one should match his own status, had entirely turned his back on any friendship with Caesar and had reestablished cordial relations with their joint enemies. [Pompey] was keen to settle matters by fighting (1.4).

Caesar gives every reason why his enemies were keen to fight. He consistently tries to rely upon is his resolve for peace, but never does Caesar say that he began war for his own glorification. According to Caesar, Lentulus would fight for glory. Never does he say that the invasion was for the purpose of money or position; these are Cato's and Scipio's interests. Never in *Bellum Civile* does Caesar say that he is killing thousands of people for the sake of gaining the position of *Dictator of the Republic*, but he points to Pompey as doing as much. What Caesar does do is accuse Cato of resentment, Lentulus of greed and desire, Pompey of being misguided and wanting the power for himself and Scipio of feeling left out of the Roman elite. It would seem then, that while Caesar is pointing to the greedy mindset of those with power, the real person who is guilty is conspicuously elusive. Caesar does attach himself to the notion of peacekeeper, and says that he only used battle as a last resort. By the time he takes office as *Imperator-Dictator*, the plebeians are calling for his crowning. It is the oligarchic few with whom Caesar is troubled. It is the patrician minority, the loudest voice of power that opposes Caesar, as he says:

Thus the majority, browbeaten by the consul, frightened by an army at the doorstep [Pompey's], and threatened by Pompey's friends, voted unwillingly and under duress for Scipio's motion: that Caesar should dismiss his army before a certain date, and if he did not, he would be judged to be committing an act hostile to the state... stern views were expressed; the bitterer and harsher they were, the greater their enthusiastic approval by Caesars enemies (1.2).

Rome is frightened by an army at its doorstep. Caesar claim's that, if the senate did not approve Pompey's desires, then he, Pompey, would attack Rome with his army's. Caesar response is to protect the people by attacking Rome... for the common good. Rome's enemy was not Caesar the Peacemaker, but Pompey the Instigator. Caesar did not wish to frighten the people that he loved so much, especially since Caesar did not wish to fight, but only to protect a city on the verge of disaster.

Before Caesar would attempt to engage Pompey in battle, he claimed that he first gave Pompey the chance to maintain peace. Caesar was willing, he says, to do anything for the sake of the Republic. He just had a few *modest* demands:

[Caesar] was ready to descend to any depths and put up with anything for the sake of the republic. Pompey should go to his provinces, they should disband their armies, everyone in Italy should lay down their arms, the community should be liberated from fear, and the senate and the people of Rome should be permitted free elections and complete control of the state..., [Pompey and Caesar were to meet so that] all their differences would be resolved by discussion (1.9).

Caesar, ever the peacekeeper, was ready to fight to save the republic. Caesar's perception of himself as peacekeeper is demonstrated again in his writing. The commonly held belief that Caesar refused to give up his legions and go to Rome because of his personal fear of arrest and trial, would seem to be a fair conclusion. Caesar, however, stated that his desire was to maintain peace and because Pompey would not give up his legally sanctioned army. All Caesar could do at this point was to wait for Pompey's reply, but he never had any intention of letting Pompey keep the peace.

Caesar said that he had modest demands to ask of Pompey. If that were the case, then it would be reasonable to suggest Caesar should maintain peace in the Republic. Frederick Ahl writes, "Caesar's genius was founded upon a distorted and self-seeking megalomania and that his military prowess and forcefulness of character were vices not virtues, since they worked against the best interests of the state."¹¹ Pompey's reply to Caesar stated that, "Caesar was to return to Gaul, withdraw from Ariminum, and disband his armies; and if he did this, Pompey would go to Spain; in the meantime, until guarantees had been given that Caesar would do everything that he promised, the consuls and Pompey would go on levying troops" (1.10). While Pompey would go to Spain, he said nothing about disbanding his troops. Caesar realized this and responded:

⁴ Ahl, 191.

It was unreasonable of Pompey to demand that Caesar should withdraw from Ariminum and return to his province, while he himself kept not only provinces but also legions that were not his; to want Caesar's army disbanded, but go on enlisting men himself; or to promise to go to his province but not to specify a date by which he would go, so that if he had failed to start out by the end of Caesar's consulship, he would not appear to be guilty of having broken a falsely sworn oath. Indeed, not to spare time for a meeting nor to promise to attend indicated that the chances for peace were very slender (1.11).

This does not sound like a man who is willing to do anything to maintain peace but a pretext for battle. While Pompey acts within the law, Caesar prepares for battle.

LUCAN'S PERCEPTION

As Julius Caesar made that historical crossing of the Rubicon, the invasion of Italy, Lucan presents a scenario, explicating the events in a literary fashion to stress the significance of what this means: Hannibal crossing into Rome, not Caesar:

Caesar's massive forces with their gathered might made him confident to venture higher: he extends through all of Italy; he occupies the nearest towns. And empty rumour, speedy messenger of quickening war, augmented genuine fears; it invaded people's minds with pictures of calamity... (1.466-471).

Lucan says that Caesar occupies towns and spreads fear before him and destruction behind. Caesar invaded Italy from across the Alps, like Hannibal, and the people are afraid. Long gone are the days that Caesar was viewed as the Gallic conqueror. He is viewed differently now. Lucan says, "They picture him not as they remember him: in their thoughts he seems greater, wilder, more pitiless from the conquest of the enemy" (Lucan 1. 378-380). He is now a caricature of himself. Caesar *-imperator*, incapable of demanding anything modest, fights for pride and refuses to maintain peace as promised. Hubris! Of course the literary significance of the crossing itself is important, and in line 204 of Lucan's *Pharsalia*, Caesar is the first to cross the Rubicon, like Hannibal was the first to cross the Alps. Jamie Masters says, "It [the Rubicon] is a boundary that Caesar is trying to break through... [Lucan] imposes boundaries that Caesar must cross."¹² By

⁵ Masters, 3.

creating these boundaries for Caesar to cross, Lucan gives the impression that Caesar was bringing a foreign army, made up of Roman soldiers from Gaul, into Rome. Lucan does this in order to stress both the illegality and his actions and to draw the analogy of Hannibal crossing into Rome. Lucan says that Caesar was changed by years of war leading a Roman army comprised of soldiers that were truly Gallic. Hannibal was the last to bring a foreign army into Rome and Lucan tries to draw that correlation. Lucan continues, (*Roma*, on the far side of the Rubicon): “Where further do you march? Where do you take my standards, warrior? If lawfully you come, if as citizens, this far only is allowed” (Lucan 191-193). Lucan is stressing the point that if Caesar had the interest of Rome in mind, then he should have followed the law of the land and disbanded his army before he was to enter into Italy. By not doing so, he is making a formal act of aggression upon his country. He seemed like a foreign ruler with a foreign army. Caesar responds:

O Rome, the equal of the highest deity, favour my plans. Not with impious weapons do I pursue you- here am I, Caesar, conqueror by land and sea, your own soldier everywhere, now too if I am permitted. The man that makes me your enemy, it is he will be the guilty one. (1.200-203).

Lucan shows that the pleading of the goddess herself is not enough. Caesar is not declaring war on Rome but on the people of Rome that make Caesar their enemy. It is Caesar that subjugates Rome to himself, no longer as citizen soldier, but ruler.

Lucan writes of Caesar as he crossed the Rubicon, “here I abandon peace and desecrated law; fortune, it is you I follow. Farewell to treaties from now on; I have relied on them for long enough; now war must be our referee” (1.225-227). Lucan wished to emphasize that this precedent of Caesar is both aggressive in nature –*now war must be our referee*– and that there cannot be peace –*farewell to treaties*.

Caesar points to Pompey’s so called greed in keeping his legions as justification for his actions. Pompey kept his army. Not only kept it, but was asked by the Senate to raise more troops. Lucan clarifies this reaction of Caesar’s when he says, “As long as earth supports the sea and air the earth, as long as Titan revolves in his lengthy toils and the sky night follows day through all the constellations, there will be no loyalty between associates in tyranny and no power will tolerate a partner” (1.89-93). Caesar was too powerful, and this was a contest of wills that went too far because each party, out of arrogance, refused to cede to the other. But Lucan says:

Rivalry in excellence spurs them on. That fresh exploits will overshadow former triumphs and victory over pirates gives place to Gallic conquests, this, Magnus, is your fear; Caesar, you are roused by your long chain of tasks, experience of toil and your fortune not enduring second place; Caesar cannot bear anyone ahead nor Pompey any equal. Who more justly took up weapons is forbidden knowledge: each has on his side a great authority: the conquering cause of the gods... (1.120-127).

The favor that Pompey did for Rome of course has become almost legendary. The defeat of the pirates in the Mediterranean, and the short amount of time in which it occurred, was enough to give Pompey the title "Magnus." Caesar was hero of the wars in Gaul, a résumé that was impressive in any age; the new Alexander, the new contender for the position of hero. And while Pompey was married to Caesar's daughter before her untimely death, the separation of their houses with her death may have been the impetus that was needed for the two of them to decide who deserved to be at the top of the Roman pecking order. Caesar would have used any reason to keep his army, but under pretensions of peace.

Caesar, tried to persuade his reader that he was the beloved hero of the Republic, yet Lucan turns him into Hannibal, invader of Rome. "Lucan is more concerned with undermining Caesar's claim to moral justification for his own actions than he is with disputing the actions themselves."¹³ Fear is his vanguard and the people are driven to madness, as Lucan says:

The multitude is not alone in panicking, struck by empty terror, but the senate, too, yes even the fathers leapt up from their seats, as they flee to the consuls, the dreaded declaration of war. Then, uncertain where to go for safety, where to run from danger, wherever impulse of flight sweeps them on, they drive the peoples rushing headlong, breaking out in hoards who stick together in a long chain (1. 486-494).

The man who claimed to be the hero of the republic sent the senators running, impelled by an empty terror. This is not how Caesar wished to be viewed. Lucan would have the reader believe that it was terror and fear that impelled them to flee for their lives. Lucan has subverted Caesar's view of Caesar.

All the while the Senators were fleeing, the people as well felt a particular fear at the coming of Caesar. Caesar says in 1.13 that, "the townsmen at Auximum could not tolerate it if Gaius Caesar *Imperator*, was kept outside the walls of the town." Granted, but they did not want

⁶ Ahl, 191.

him inside the town either, for as Lucan says, "Rome, a city teeming with peoples and with conquered nations, large enough (should they mass together) for all humankind, was abandoned at Caesar's coming by cowardly throngs, easy prey" (1.511 -513). This is not the sort of welcome that Caesar presents in his writings. Lucan continues, "Yet such great panic we must pardon, we must pardon: they fear since Pompey flees" (1.521-52). And while Caesar admits an emptying of the city in 1.14, he attributes it to a false rumor of his armies being outside of the city. Caesar, the invader of Rome, has become Hannibal at the gates.

The city is changed, the people are afraid, the invading Caesar is coming. "The Caesar of the *Pharsalia* is endowed with superhuman vigor and energy, but it is energy used to attain ends dictated by narrow self interest, culminating in a destructive rather than a creative victory."¹⁴ Caesar is the cause of the ruin, as Ahl says. The great Pompey fled his friendship, and all Caesar touched turned to ruin. In Lucan's words, what madness was this? A narrow self-interested megalomaniacal act of madness:

Of wars across the Emathian plains, worse than civil wars, and of all legality conferred on crime we sing, and of a mighty people attacking its own guts with victorious sword hand, of kin facing kin, and, once the pact of tyranny was broken, of conflict waged with all the forces of the shaken world for universal guilt, and of standards ranged in enmity against standards, of eagles matched and javelins threatening javelins. What madness was this, O citizens? (1.1-8).

Lucan says that the eagles were matched. The power of Pompey and Caesar was the same; two citizens fighting one another and bringing javelin against javelin. "Caesar does not use his talents to cure the ills of the sick republic. He ends the sickness by killing the patient."¹⁵ A mighty people are attacking their own guts, a suicide; the goddess Roma disemboweling herself. Madness indeed, and Caesar was to blame.

CONCLUSIONS

Two thousand years after the war, Caesar proves elusive in who he really was, and remains convincing in his self-presentation. Caesar's perception of Caesar was also misdirecting. It was intended to persuade the reader to believe that Caesar was the victim of the Republic's misguided fear and enmity. However, a close reading of Caesar's *Bellum Civile* will reveal the

⁷ Ahl 191.

⁸ Ahl, 191.

insecurities that Caesar has and his desire to try hard to convince everyone of the rightness of his actions. Using Lucan's *Pharsalia* as a foil, the reader should be able to get a clearer perspective of Caesar. While neither Caesar nor Lucan should be read as the definitive perception of the person of Julius Caesar, the two books should be read together to get a more correct perception. However, it is important to understand that Lucan subverts Caesar's presentation of Caesar by presenting Caesar as Hannibal. Ultimately, a balanced perspective shows that Caesar is neither a passive peacemaker, nor a malign Hannibal.

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