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Alexis, F (2011). Lucan's Bellum Ciuile and the Epic Genre. University Of Tasmania. Thesis.
<https://doi.org/10.25959/23210102.v1>

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Lucan's *Bellum Ciuile* and the Epic Genre

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This dissertation is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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2011

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Fran Alexis

Lucan's *Bellum Ciuile* and the Epic Genre

Abstract

This thesis demonstrates that Lucan's *Bellum Ciuile* takes epic to a new level, testing the generic paradigm, because Rome's civil war is a new subject for epic poetry. Lucan's epic presents civil war as the self-destruction of republican Rome, and close reading reveals the poem's intricate relationship with Homeric, Virgilian and Ovidian epic. We see that it changes and exaggerates characteristic tropes of the genre, by techniques such as delay, digression and frequent intervention by a complex narrator / persona, whose dramatic intrusions are like the speeches of characters in a tragedy. Such a politically risky subject, a type of impious war where Romans fight against and kill Romans, necessitates a long preamble and an insistent narrator's voice to justify poetic commemoration of such a crime.

Unlike earlier epic where civil war is rare or treated only as an unfortunate but necessary prelude to peace, Lucan's poem is wholly taken up with this type of internecine war, the civil war between Caesar and Pompey. It also includes the civil wars of Marius and Sulla, introduced as a *mise en abyme* to intensify this subject, which suggests the predictability of recurring civil war and ideas of persistent political instability. Lucan's poem offers a detailed portrayal of the sea-battle at Massilia, and paradoxically, this inventive battle is the most 'epic' of its civil war battles, because many conventions of epic land battles are applied to this conflict on ships. Lucan's sea-battle re-presents and revitalises epic *topoi* by their new location, the sea.

The episode concerning Hercules and Antaeus is also an example of a *mise en abyme*, reflecting the focus of Lucan's poem, the idea that civil war degrades both sides equally. It argues that the wrestling match between Hercules and Antaeus illustrates how participants in combat become similar and assume corresponding characteristics. This episode shows how the poem interacts with its own past battle narrative, relates to accounts of conflict in earlier epic, and reflects Roman gladiatorial spectacle. Lucan's paradoxical poem presents the battle at Pharsalus

more symbolically than a typical epic battle narrative. Rhetorical *praeteritio* of the unspeakable wounds, weapons and forms of death in civil war draws a parallel between the human body and the state of Rome.

Lucan's epic stretches the limits of the genre to overcome the difficulty of recounting Romans fighting against fellow Romans in civil war and demonstrates that there is more to this type of war than blood and guts and gruesome mutilation. Lucan's poem is evidence for how much has been and how much more can be articulated through the language and tropes of epic.

Acknowledgements

My most grateful thanks go to my supervisor Peter Davis who has been a source of inspiration, guidance and support since the first lecture in Ancient Civilisations I attended in 1998. I thank him for his unstinting encouragement, and appreciate greatly the enthusiasm for the subject generated during the weekly ‘Reading Lucan’ sessions we had together with Rod Thomson, Jessica Dietrich, Jenna Mead and fellow post-grad David Nolan throughout 2007-08. I thank Jonathan Wallis and Graeme Miles, who took over as supervisors, for their advice and help. Special thanks go to fellow post-grad Michael Berry for his infectious passion for languages and invaluable support during the final stages of this thesis. I also acknowledge the friends I have made among the group of post-grad students and the assistance provided by the office staff. Heartfelt thanks and gratitude go to my family: to my husband, Peter Alexis, for his unfailing confidence and love throughout my years of study; and to our son Adam and daughter Ami, for their love, support and encouragement. I dedicate this thesis to the memory of our son, Rowan, who died 20 October 1999.

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