

Lucan the Satirist

Lucan (Marcus Annaeus Lucanus, AD 39-65), born in Corduba, Spain, was the nephew of Seneca the Younger (tutor of Nero) and a friend of the emperor of Nero, but was involved in the conspiracy against Nero and was forced by him to commit suicide. Of his various literary works, only his unfinished epic, *The Civil War* or the *Pharsalia*, 10 books of the probably projected 12, tracing the war between Julius Caesar and Pompey the Great, from Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon through Marcus Porcius Cato's assumption of command of the republican army in Africa after the murder of Pompey in Egypt by the ministers of young Ptolemy and breaking off while Caesar is still under attack by Egyptian forces in Alexandria.

The Romans had normally been governed by annually elected consuls during the Republic, which succeeded the monarchy, but the spread of empire in the last century AD had given rise to larger armies and generals with longer commands, as a result of which soldiers developed more loyalty to the generals than to the state. Hence, a century of civil strife, ended only by Augustus' rise to power as the first emperor, the sole man at the top. Augustus (known as Octavian after his adoption by Caesar and before receiving the honorific title of Augustus) persevered because he was more temperate than his predecessors and also because he was supported by a number of literary people who gave a legitimacy to his rule, especially Vergil, whose *Aeneid* gave the imprimatur to Rome and to the empire. Nevertheless, the golden age prophesied by Vergil did not come about.

While it was only senators who were losing their lives to the emperors after Augustus, the common people did not concern themselves too much. When Nero came to power, there were high hopes because he was young and under the control of two respected tutors, Seneca and Burrus. Nero kept killing off those near him (including his mother and Seneca), but this was seen mainly as domestic trouble, but people began to get really upset when Nero was linked to the burning of Rome and a variety of demeaning actions (like assuming the role of a charioteer). When Nero fell out with Lucan, perhaps over the publication of the *Pharsalia*, the emperor forbade Lucan to publish anything further.

The *Pharsalia* spoke glowingly about the republic and gloomily about the loss of liberty after its fall under the empire. It also denied the divine status of the emperors. This sounded like the sort of man who might emulate the tyrannicide Brutus and kill the current tyrant.

The *Pharsalia* is epic in form, but it is satiric in organization and approach, breaking into a number of large chunks to give variety and employing exaggeration and grotesqueness to create ridicule and humor. This can be seen in two sample passages.

In the first, in Book I Lucan addresses Nero, calls on him as his muse and delivers a (mock) panegyric to Nero. Lucan wonders which god Nero is to be identified with after his death, whether Jupiter or Phoebus (Apollo), whose fiery chariot's horses would not even notice the change of drivers of the sun chariot. Lucan concludes by saying Nero alone should choose: "every deity will shrink humbly back, while Mother Nature waits for you to decide which god to be, and where to establish your seat of power", advising him to locate himself in the middle of the sky (not at either pole), lest, putting too much weight at either extreme, he overbalance it. Besides, if he were at either extreme his radiance would come only obliquely to earth. This might read well on the surface, even if a bit extreme in its praise, but the satire becomes more pointed if we remember that Nero was grossly fat (overbalance indeed!), squint-eyed (oblique light) and too closely connected with the

fire at Rome (shades of the disastrous fires caused by the luckless youth Phaethon when he tried to drive the chariot of the sun). And so it goes.

In the second, in Book IX, as Cato is leading the anti-Caesarian army across the desert of Libya, the men encounter a variety of poisonous snakes formed there by the drops of Medusa's blood as Perseus was flying back from his mission to kill the Gorgon. These include, among many others, the flying javelin-snake, and the monstrous seps, whose venom dissolves bone as well as flesh, and the gluttonous foam-jawed prester. Lucan tells in grotesque, extended detail about soldiers who die agonizingly from the bites of various of these snakes: the poor soul killed when a javelin-snake launched itself at him and pierced him right through the temples -- and kept on going; the soldier who speared a basilisk, but lost his arm when the poison ran right up the spear and withered his arm, the immediate amputation of which alone saved him; the man, bitten by the seps, whose whole body liquefied, bones and all; the young man, bitten by a fiery prester, whose face turned red as a glowing coal and then began to swell until features could no longer be recognized and whose body also swelled beyond all distinguishing of limbs, until the soldiers could bear to look no longer and fled away, glancing back only to see the body still swelling in every direction. The piling up of grotesque description becomes like the effect of a Godzilla movie, and ultimately funny.

Lucan, a Silver Age writer rather than a Golden Age writer like Vergil and Horace, was popular in the middle ages but not much in modern times until about 25-30 years ago, with the work of Frederick Ahl. Previously disparaged by critics as inferior writers, Silver Age writers (early empire, after Augustus) began to be seen not as second-hand and unsuccessful imitations of their predecessors but as creative artists in their own right, doing different things with literature than the Golden Age writers had been doing.