

The Empire's New Texts: A Lucan-Centered Syllabus for Roman Literature and History

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Abstract submitted: This paper will present a syllabus concept for teaching the literature and history of the Roman sociopolitical transformation from Republic to Principate. The course begins with a close tandem reading of Caesar's and Lucan's *Civil Wars*, then slowly fills in the gaps (chronological, generic, ideological) with other Augustan and early Imperial texts (e.g., the *Res Gestae*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Ovid's *Ars* & selections from the *Met.*, *Tristia*, and *Epistles ex P.*, selections of Horace, Propertius, Livy). The goal of the course is to mutually enliven the literature and historiography of the epochal century between Julius Caesar and the Neronian Rome of Lucan's day by reading Augustan classics through the polarizing field of Caesar's and Lucan's politically opposed propaganda pieces. Ideally, the course turns at the end to the broader issue of historical reception of the critical Republic-Imperial divide, a topic explored by reading Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Written roughly 110 years apart, Julius Caesar's prose commentary *Bellum Civile* and Lucan's verse epic *Bellum Civile* (or, as some prefer, the *Pharsalia*) each treat the cataclysmic events of 49-48 BC, when Caesar's legions clashed in civil strife with those of the senatorial faction led by Pompey the Great. Both accounts are partisan and partial, Caesar's, of course, to the right of his own cause, and Lucan's deeply inimical to Caesar and favoring if not Pompey himself, at least the cause of the *res publica* and senatorial *libertas*, as those same partisans and "republicans" in Lucan's own time construed the stakes of the fight. Despite the apparent appeals of Maecenas and Augustus for leading poets to compose epics memorializing the tragic events of civil war and its eventual settlement, it took a full century for a Roman *vates* (as Lucan identifies himself at book 1 line 63) to return to the explicitly historical epic that had been pioneered by Naevius and Ennius in the heyday of the Republic. But after that century of poetic *recusatio*—through Augustus' long principate after restoring the republic, and through the checkered reigns of his successors Tiberius, Gaius, and Claudius—finally under Nero, the last Julio-

Claudian, the sardonic young Lucan decided to essay a radically revisionist narrative of the opening Caesarian phase of Roman civil war that had led to the foundation of Octavian's new autocratic regime. Thus these two texts, if nothing else, provide aesthetically satisfying bookends to the beginning and the end of the Julio-Claudian period; for within three years of Lucan's death, Nero himself would be dead and civil war briefly flared again before the consolidation of a new family dynasty [the Flavians].

Lucan actually follows Caesar's account of events pretty closely, as you can see on the handout. He mixes around the order of a couple events, but also, more importantly, adds in a great deal of extraneous material and poetically expands many scenes, especially the battle scenes, to provide the usual epic pathos and *enargeia* or "vividness." Moreover, he breaks off exactly where Caesar's own account ends, at the outbreak of the Alexandrian war. So although we know that Lucan left his poem unfinished when he was forced to commit suicide in 65 AD after the abortive Pisonian conspiracy against Nero, nevertheless the epic text as it stands is unique in all of ancient literature in being a verse rendition, albeit a blatant subversion, of a single extent text of prose historiography. For this reason Lucan's poem calls out to be read closely in tandem with its prose counterpart by Caesar, and it is such a project of parallel reading, in the context of an undergraduate (or even a graduate) course that my talk today will explore.

Since I don't have the usual thesis to argue, but instead I want to workshop, as it were, a syllabus with you as fellow-teachers, what I will do is go over the syllabus and articulate some of my rationale for the readings that it includes and their organization. I should say that I have not yet had a chance to teach this course, though I may get to next

year, and this conference has given me the welcome opportunity to work out in concrete specific form several syllabus ideas I've been thinking about for the last few years.

Some specific, and in fact surprising, pedagogical experiences have inspired this syllabus as a response. Chief among them is that I've had more success teaching Roman historical texts like Suetonius' *Twelve Caesars* and Tacitus' *Annals* in the context of literature and civilization surveys, than I have had teaching Augustan poetry like the *Aeneid* or the *Metamorphoses* on their own, for example in mythology or epic courses. And I think the reason why is that while students today do find Roman history intriguing and will study it with eagerness when given a coherent orienting framework (after all, Hollywood has well-trained most of them to appreciate a good historical drama, and that includes ones where the characters wear togas), when they are, on the contrary, faced with these poems which are in many ways so foreign to their own day's literary styles and conventions, it is difficult to situate the poems in an understandable historical context which, for most of them, has not been provided by their high school history classes. In short, and again in my own experience, the abysmal level of historical knowledge that most students today bring to college—indeed, I myself started college woefully ignorant of ancient history—makes it a challenge to read with them the poetry of the great poets who lived through and wrote in response to those key historical events with which every school-child used to have at least a passing familiarity.

So, this pedagogical dilemma is what led me to try and craft a syllabus that could teach both the history that I think is necessary context for reading the canonical poems—what sense does the *Aeneid* make, for example, without some knowledge of Antony,

Octavian, and Actium?—as well as the poems themselves which lend so much to our understanding and interpretation of those historical events.

The syllabus is designed for a typical 13-15 week college semester. The curricular rubric I have in mind is the sort of Roman literature and history survey course that is common in various forms and guises in our college course lists.

As you can see, the first four weeks of class are devoted to a close parallel reading of Caesar's and Lucan's texts. Along with this exercise in comparative reading, students will also begin reading Scullard's *From the Gracchi to Nero*, which is assigned in roughly 30 page chunks throughout the semester and so by the end they will read this solid standard modern history of the period we are focusing on. My plan is that this four weeks of focus on Caesar and Lucan, on the background history to civil war and on dissecting the events of 49-48 BC, will create a sort of literary-historical force field through which our other texts, from Cicero to the Augustan poets to Seneca, Petronius and Tacitus, will be energized, and their common topics of concern come to life. In particular, reading Lucan and Caesar closely should help to expose the fault lines—social, moral, psychological, political—that the civil war opened up, and the scars that events from the 50s through the 20s created and which continued to inform politics and literature right through the Julio-Claudian period.

The scars of civil war—as Horace says in *Carm.* 1.35, “oh, the scars and wickedness and brothers fill with shame.”—along with the deep wounds that lay beneath these scars, are chief among the historical and sociological themes that thread through the Augustan and Neronian authors which the reading of Caesar and Lucan should bring into the light. These wounds and the scars that covered them are diagnosed and contemplated

within a complex of ideas that form and frame the discourse of all these texts. The theme of *libertas* and its loss or curtailment during civil war looms large. Of course, *libertas* is a shifting signifier, and just as Caesar used it to justify his initial entry into Italy in January 49, to vindicate the people's liberty being oppressed by a faction, as he says, so Lucan renders history as a perpetual contest between *libertas et Caesar*. In turn, the curtailment of *libertas* which so concerned the senatorial elite ramified into the issues of freedom of frank public speech, and of the loss of immunity to arbitrary and especially violent vengeance and punishment. The changing character of freedom of speech becomes apparent in Cicero, who is forced to stoop to flattery of Caesar in his speech *Pro Marcello* that he privately despises. As he says in a letter to Atticus about a letter to Caesar that he has decided to abandon: "I beg you... let's be half-free (*semiliberi*) at least. Which we can do by being silent and hiding (*tacendo et latendo*).” When Caesar is assassinated in 44, Cicero now exults, and consistently calls the conspirators *liberatores*. And in the *Philippics*, of which we'll read the first and second, we see Cicero recovering momentarily his full measure of liberal eloquence as he attempts to incite his peers, in short, to kill off Antony too. But of course he fails miserably, the proscriptions set in, and Cicero loses his head.

So begin the long years of violence and social chaos between 44 and at least the early 20s, which on the syllabus will be explored as we begin to read the Augustan poets. The central weeks of the course will cover Virgil, Horace, Propertius, as well as short sections of Livy, looking especially at those texts that reveal the attempts to express poetically the depths of sorrow, guilt, and anxiety about what Rome has done to itself, what Rome has come to, and what it might become with Octavian at the helm. Having

read Lucan, students will be prepared for all the major recurring themes of Augustan discourse: the Gigantomachy as mythic paradigm for civil war; the profound sense of a historical blood guilt that curses Rome to self-destruction; the Punic curse; the founding fratricide of Remus; the recurring topoi of moral lapsus and decadence that came with the increase of wealth and power, evident in everything from excessive cuisine, excessive rhetoric, and the decline of the small farm and expansion of latifundia private holdings. Also there are the poets' *recusationes* to treat official and public themes, as well as the capitulations and creative accommodations of official themes and of panegyric of Augustus. One can add in here the important ideas of *fata* and *fortuna* and how they play out in all these texts, as Stoicism becomes a kind of lingua franca for the Roman elite.

One secondary text that I've inserted here is Lowell Bowditch's chapter on how Horace explores the ideas of blood-guilt and the possibility of expiation in his Roman odes. I think her thesis is provocative because it takes the traumas of civil war very seriously for interpreting the Augustan poets, and her reading of Horace's odes is one that can be generalized very well to the texts of his contemporaries. These texts are full of sorrow that nevertheless treads with caution not just for fear of Octavian but of the more general possibility of further waves of civil war erupting.

But as time goes on, Augustus' pacification and settlement invites society to create a new sense of normalcy, which is what we see in the later texts of Virgil, Horace, Propertius and of course Ovid. I've assigned here sections of Galinsky's superb book *Augustan Culture*, in order to flesh out the terms of the Augustan social agenda, for instance, Augustus' emphasis on *auctoritas* over formal *potestas*, and the discourse of moral and social virtues—of *pietas*, *virtus*, *pax*, *clementia*, *iustitia*, *fides*, etc.—that

accompanied that emphasis, a discourse we see play out in all the poets, sometimes seriously, other times more playfully.

On that note, during weeks 9-11 we will focus on Ovid, reading selections of the love poems, the *Metamorphoses*, and less usual, large chunks of the exile poems, which Peter Green's new translation makes readable and very engaging perhaps for the first time. The reason why I've included these is that I think they provide moving evidence of several important elements of the solidifying Principate, among these, the increasing normalization of the language of divinity to talk to or about the imperial family. Ovid in exile also gives us eloquent testimony to the absolute power over life and death retained by Augustus, as well as the intensifying culture of suspicion, partisan informing, and paranoid atmosphere of literary censorship at Rome that would come to characterize life under Tiberius and Sejanus.

In the last weeks of class we'll read some Seneca and the best highlights of Petronius, as well as some Tacitus for historical narrative of the period. As a secondary reading here I've assigned the introduction of Vasily Rudich's great study of political dissidence in the Julio-Claudian Principate. His key of idea of *dissimulatio*, or tortuous ironic dissimulation, is useful I think for exploring these texts. We'll continue to consider how the moral discourses, of *virtus*, *pietas*, *clementia*, *iustitia* etc., play out in their Senecan Stoic form; the continuing discourses of moral and social lapsus as the cause—and consequence—of empire; the character of irony and humor in representing society under the late Julio-Claudian Principate. And so the readings will come to a fitting close with Petronius' mock civil war epyllion, which of course mocks Lucan's text, but also the entire tortured memory of civil war that continued to inform the haggard ruts of political

discourse between senatorial republicans and the pro-principate factions. Here too I would, for another bit of comic relief, have students read the *Apocolocyntosis*.

One last note before I close: I consider this syllabus open-source, so to speak, and would be happy if anyone here was interested in drawing something from it for your own use. If you do happen to draw from it for a course of your own, I would love to hear about how it goes (my email is on the handout). Other than that, I will be glad to hear your thoughts and comments. Thank you.

Syllabus

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Syllabus: Roman Literature and History from Julius Caesar to Nero (49 BC-68 CE)

This course is a literary-historical survey of Roman politics and culture focused on the Julio-Claudian period (~49 BC-68 CE), in particular, the revolutionary transformations of the Roman *res publica* (“commonwealth”) during this period and its representations in and effects on literate culture including poetry, historiography, and other prose genres. A close side-by-side reading of Julius Caesar’s *Civil War* and Lucan’s epic poem *Civil War* will provide a thematic and chronological frame that will guide the rest of our reading and discussion.

The social and psychological traumas of civil war, and the conflicted achievements and institutions of the Caesars which go along with these, will be the main lens through which we read the great literary achievements of the Augustan and “Silver Latin” authors.

NOTE: there will be approximately 100 pages of primary source reading (often poetry), and 30-50 pages of secondary source reading each week.

Papers

There will be three 5-page papers, due in week 5, week 10, and week 15

Primary Readings

Caesar *Civil War* [Penguin]

Lucan *Civil War (Pharsalia)* [Joyce]
 Virgil *Eclogues* I, IV, IX; *Georgics* I, IV; *Aeneid* I, II, VI, VIII [X.1-117]
 Livy *Ab Urbe Condita* preface, 1.1-1.21 [foundations: Aeneas, Romulus, Numa]
 Cicero *Pro Marcello* (46 BC), *Philippic* 1 (44 BC) [& 2], *Letters to Atticus* (Bailey) 293, 298, 299, 302,
 Augustus *Res Gestae*
 Propertius 1.21, 22, 2.1, 2.7, 2.10, 2.14, 2.16, 3.4, 3.5, 3.9, 3.11 [3.11 has Pompey, Cleopatra, civil wars], 3.13, 3.18 [elegy to Marcellus], 3.22, 4.1a, 4.4, 4.6, [4.9] 4.10
 Horace *Carm.* 1.2, 3, 6, 12, 21, 35, 37, 2.1, 2, 7, 15, 16, 18, 3.1-6, 14, 23, 24, 29, 30, 4.2, 4, 5, 14, 15, *Carmen saeculare*; *Epodes* 7, 9, 16; *Sat.* 1.6, [1.7], 2.1, 2.7; *Epistles* 1.3, 1.9, 1.13, 1.19, 2.1
 Ovid *Amores* 1.1, 2, 3, 9, 14, 15, 2.4, 2.7, 2.8, 2.13, 14, 18, 3.2, 8, 12, 13, 14, 15; *Ars* 1, 2, 3; *Met.* 1, 2, 15; *Trist.* 1.1, 2, 3, 7, 9, 2.1, 3.1, 5, 6, 10, 12, 14, 4.2, 4, 8, 10, 5.1, 7b, 11, 12, 14; *Ex Ponto* 1.1, 6, 2.1, 2.2, 2.5, 8, 3.3, 3.4, 3.7, 3.9, 4.4, 5, 7, 9, 13, 16
 Petronius *Satyrica* [selections, including opening tirade against rhetoric, Trimalchio's *Cena*, and the mock civil war poem]
 Seneca *de Clementia*; *ad Marcia de consolatione*, *Apocolocyntosis*
 Tacitus *Annals* 1.1-15; 4-6, 12, 14.14-65, 15-16 (Penguin volume, chaps. 1, 7, 8, 10, 12, 14-16)

Secondary Readings

Rudich, Vasily. 1993. "The Age of Dissimulation," pp. xvii-xxxiv in *Political Dissent under Nero: the price of dissimulation*. Routledge. London.
 Galinsky, Karl. 1996. *Augustan Culture*. Princeton University Press. Princeton.
 pp. 10-24 "Auctoritas"
 pp. 42-79 "The Restoration of the Republic"
 pp. 80-140 "Ideas, Ideals, and Values"
 Scullard, H. H. 1982. *From the Gracchi to Nero*. 5th edition. Methuen. London.
 Bowditch, Lowell. 2001. "Tragic history, lyric expiation, and the gift of sacrifice," pp. 64-115 in *Horace and the Gift Economy of Patronage*. California University Press. Berkeley, CA.

Weekly Schedule

Week 1: The Outbreak of Civil War in 49 BC

Primary texts: Caesar *BC* 1.1-29 (pp. 35-51)

Lucan *BC* 1-2 (pp. 1-53)

Secondary reading: Scullard, pp. 1-20, 105-25

Week 2: Massilia, Ilerda, and Africa

Primary texts: Caesar *BC* 1.30-2.44 (51-104)

Lucan *BC* 3-4 (55-112)

Secondary reading: Scullard, pp. 126-153

Week 3: Caesar's first dictatorship (48 BC), Brundisium & Dyrrachium

Primary texts: Caesar *BC* 3.1-81 (106-147)

Lucan *BC* 5-7.234 (113-177)

Secondary reading: Scullard, pp. 21-60

Week 4: Battle of Pharsalus, Death of Pompey, & Alexandria

Primary texts: Caesar *BC* .82-112 (147-164)

Lucan *BC* 7.235-10 (177-286)

Secondary reading: Scullard, pp. 61-104

Week 5: Caesar, Dictatorship and Assassination

First Paper Due

Primary texts: Cicero *Pro Marcello* (pp. 279-294), *First Philippic* (295-318), *Second Philippic* (pp. 101-153), select letters

Secondary reading: Scullard, pp. 154-87

Week 6: Octavian and the Poets 1, traumas of civil war

Primary texts: Virgil *Eclogues* 1, 4, 9, *Georgics* 1

Propertius 1.21, 22, 2.1, 2.7, 2.10, 2.14, 2.16

Horace *Carm.* 1.1, 2, 3, 6, 12, 21, 35, 37;

Secondary reading: Scullard, pp. 188-207, 236-242

Galinsky, 10-24

Week 7: Octavian and the Poets 2, traumas and expiations of civil war

Primary texts: Virgil *Georgics* 1, 4, *Aeneid* 1-2

Horace *Epodes* 7, 9, 16; *Carm.* 2.1, 2, 7, 15, 16, 18, 3.4, 5, 6, 14, 23, 24, 29, 30;

Secondary reading: Bowditch, 64-115

Week 8: Augustus and the Poets 3, renovations and refoundations

Primary texts: Augustus *Res Gestae*

Livy *Ab Urbe Condita* preface, 1.1.1-21

Virgil *Aeneid* 6, 8, 10.1-117

Horace *Carm.* 3.1-6, 14, 23, 24, 29, 30, 4.2, 4, 5, 14, 15, *Carmen saeculare*

Secondary reading: Scullard, pp. 208-236, 243-67

Galinsky, 42-79

Week 9: Augustus and the Poets 4, restored republic, peace and prosperity

Primary texts: Propertius 3.4, 3.5, 3.9, 3.11, 3.13, 3.18, 3.22, 4.1a, 4.4, 4.6, [4.9] 4.10

Horace *Sat.* 1.6, [1.7], 2.1, 2.7; *Epistles* 1.3, 1.9, 1.13, 1.19, 2.1

Ovid *Amores* 1.1, 2, 3, 9, 14, 15, 2.4, 2.7, 2.8, 2.13, 14, 18, 3.2, 8, 12, 13, 14, 15

Secondary reading: Scullard, pp. 268-287

Galinsky, 80-140

Week 10: Augustus and Ovid, Carmen et Error

Second Paper Due

Primary texts: Ovid *Ars* 1, 2, 3; *Met.* 1, 2, 15; *Tristia* 1.1, 2, 3, 7, 9, 2.1, 3.1, 5, 6, 10, 12, 14, 4.2, 4, 8, 10, 5.1, 7b, 11, 12, 14;

Secondary reading: Vasily, pp. xvii-xxxiv

Week 11: From Augustus to Tiberius

Primary texts: Ovid *Ex Ponto* 1.1, 6, 2.1, 2.2, 2.5, 8, 3.3, 3.4, 3.7, 3.9, 4.4, 5, 7, 9, 13, 16

Tacitus *Annals* 1.1-15; 4-6

Week 12: Early Nero

Primary texts: Tacitus *Annals* 4-6, 12, 14.14-65

Seneca *de Clementia*

Secondary reading: Scullard, pp. 288-321

Week 13: Burning of Rome, Conspiracy, and death of Nero

Primary texts: Tacitus *Annals* 15-16

Seneca *ad Marcia de consolatione*; select letters (47, 55, 56, 83, 90, 104, 105, 106, 107, 114)

Week 14 Satyrical

Primary texts: Petronius, *Satyrical*, beginning on rhetoric, dinner at Trimalchio's, mock civil war poem

Seneca, *Apocolocyntosis*

Secondary reading: Scullard, pp. 321-67

Week 15

Third Paper Due

Wrap-up, review, [final exam]