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LUCAN AND EGYPT. J. Tracy *Lucan's Egyptian Civil War*. Pp. viii + 296. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Cased, £65, US\$99. ISBN: 978-1-107-07207-7.

Erica M. Bexley

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LUCAN AND EGYPT

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Geography is never neutral in Lucan's epic. From Gaul to Libya, from the Rubicon to the Syrtes, all through the poem's numerous ethnographic and geographic digressions, the physical world is embroiled in the bloody politics of civil war. T.'s new monograph deals with the Egyptian episodes in Lucan's narrative, situating them within broader traditions of ethnography and natural philosophy, and engaging with parts of Lucan's epic that have not, until now, received much scholarly attention.

The introduction sets the terms for Lucan's engagement with Egypt. T. surveys how Graeco-Roman literature constructed Egyptian culture, and he divides these constructions into two distinct groups: a 'utopian' version that imagines Egypt as a traditional, pious, self-contained society, and a hostile version that denigrates Egypt for the luxury, treachery and servility that classical authors commonly attribute to all Eastern peoples. T. contends that Lucan alone, of all Graeco-Roman writers, combines these two models of Egypt, using them not only to evoke Rome's past and future, but also to symbolise various characters' moral and political attitudes. Broadly speaking, the utopian version is aligned with the Republic and with Pompey, while luxurious, servile Egypt represents Caesar and Rome's imperial future. Although T. may be correct in claiming that Lucan blends these two traditions in an original manner, the poet's broader aims clearly conform to the standard ethnographic technique of using the other as a mirror for the self.

After the introduction, the monograph moves sequentially through Books 8 and 10 of Lucan, beginning with Pompey's flight from Thessaly and concluding with Caesar trapped on a breakwater in the harbour of Alexandria. Chapters 1 and 2 examine the council at Syhedra (*BC* 8.256–455), where the defeated Pompeians debate whether to take refuge in Parthia or in Egypt. T. maintains that these two options represent – respectively – Caesarian tyranny and republican morality. Subtle analysis of this episode constitutes one of the book's highlights, and T. makes a strong case for the inherent escapism influencing Lentulus' view of Egyptian society. The discussion is, however, marred by T.'s evident preference for basing arguments on the metrical position of individual words. Granted a hexameter line accords potentially greater emphasis to words in first and final place, but it is difficult to admit this possibility as solid evidence unless a host of other factors confirm it. Final position, on its own, need not be emphatic.

In Chapter 3, T. maps the two alternative Egypts onto the debate between Acoreus and Pothinus (*BC* 8.472–535), arguing that the former embodies respectable conservatism, the latter tyrannical ruthlessness. He proposes in addition that this scene represents a localised instance of civil conflict, this time between an ethnic Egyptian (Acoreus) and a Greek interloper (Pothinus). Here as elsewhere, discussion is careful and detailed, with T. drawing on a wide range of historical, ethnographic and other literary sources in order to situate Lucan's narrative within a wider tradition.

The second half of this monograph concentrates on Book 10 of Lucan's epic. Chapter 4 examines the interrelated themes of tyranny, exploration and geographical possession that underlie Caesar's interest in the Nile. Although many critics have already addressed the topic of Caesar's antagonism towards nature, T. displays considerable skill in interpreting this theme, to the extent that Chapter 4 stands out as the strongest, most compelling part of the entire book. On occasions, T. could afford to push his analysis even further, such as

when he discusses Alexander's desire to reach the Nile's source (*Nilumque a fonte bibisset*, *BC* 10.40): since Lucan emphasises that Alexander wants to *drink* from the Nile, this line comments not just on imperialist expansion, but on imperialist consumption as well. It also adapts a common phrase that describes tribes in terms of the rivers they drink from (e.g. Virg. *Aen.* 7.715: *qui Tiberim Fabarimque bibunt*; Hor. *Carm.* 4.15.21: *qui profundum Danuuium bibunt*).

Chapters 5 and 6 comprise an extended treatment of how Acoreus' Nile digression (*BC* 10.194–331) relates to his Egyptian heritage (as that heritage was understood by Graeco-Roman writers), and how it engages with Seneca's natural philosophy. According to T., Lucan alters the account of the Nile in Seneca's *NQ* so as to make the river seem more providential and less susceptible to rational enquiry. The result is that Lucan aligns Acoreus' discourse with the speaker's identity as an Egyptian priest. Similar blending of Egyptian and Stoic attitudes towards the Nile informs the didactic value of Acoreus' speech, and T. argues that this episode overall is designed to teach Caesar humility, even reverence, in the face of unfathomable natural forces. In general, these two chapters continue to elaborate the unsurprising, and by now, standard idea that acquisitive imperialist urges underlie Caesar's interest in geography. The main contribution this section of T.'s monograph makes to current scholarship is the subtle differences detected between Acoreus' and Seneca's accounts of the Nile.

T.'s final chapter advances the somewhat surprising idea that Acoreus does in fact succeed, however obliquely, in getting Caesar to curb his ambition. By comparing Acoreus both to the historical Seneca and to Lentulus in *BC* 8, T. asserts that the Egyptian priest sways his interlocutor/pupil to adopt a humbler view of the world. While appealing, the argument ultimately fails to convince, in part because Acoreus' speech, unlike Lentulus', is not a piece of persuasive rhetoric, and also because Caesar's uncharacteristic behaviour in Book 10 results from circumstances beyond his control, namely an Egyptian rebellion. T. is certainly correct when he claims that Caesar resembles Pompey in these final moments of Book 10, but such changes derive from external forces, not internal, psychological ones.

Among this book's many merits are T.'s intricate close readings, his detailed knowledge of the geographic and ethnographic tradition, and his sensitivity towards Lucan's harsh, often paradoxical poetic style. Typographic errors are few (this reviewer found only two: p. 105 line 33 should read *omne* rather than *omnia*, and on p. 169 line 23, the reference should be to Lucan Book 1 rather than Book 5). One might quibble that this monograph sacrifices breadth to depth, but the generally compelling nature of T.'s arguments justifies to a large extent the volume's narrow focus. Discussion could, on occasions, afford to be livelier, though that is very much an individual stylistic choice.

On the debit side, it is not clear from T.'s analysis precisely which ancient sources Lucan drew upon for his portrayal of Egypt. Although T. cites a range of literature from Herodotus to Diodorus Siculus, he fails to explain whether Lucan had first-hand knowledge of all or only some of these sources, and whether ethno/geographic traditions about Egypt changed much over the course of antiquity. Acknowledging and dealing with such issues in the introduction would have strengthened T.'s methodology.

Finally, a very small point: the introduction unfairly characterises Augustan writers as 'cheerleader-poets' (p. 10) and treats their work almost as if it were propaganda. Such a verdict seems unwarranted, especially since T. is elsewhere capable of sophisticated poetic analysis.