The Rebel and the Old Gray Head: Lucan's Caesar and Whittier's *Barbara Frietchie*

There was a time when schoolchildren all over the nation were made to memorize *Barbara Frietchie,* John Greenleaf Whittier's ballad in which a 90-year old woman refuses to take down her Union flag during the Confederate occupation of Frederick, Maryland, and is spared by Stonewall Jackson himself:

"Shoot, if you must, this old gray head,
But spare your country's flag," she said.
A shade of sadness, a blush of shame,
Over the face of the leader came;
The nobler nature within him stirred
To life at that woman's deed and word:
"Who touches a hair of yon gray head
Dies like a dog! March on!" he said.

Once among America's best-loved and most-anthologized poems, *Barbara Frietchie,* first published in 1863, is now largely forgotten; when discussed at all, it is castigated for its unreliability as history, a matter admitted even by Whittier himself: "This poem was written in strict conformity to the account of the incident as I had it from respectable and trustworthy sources. It has since been the subject of a good deal of conflicting testimony, and the story was probably incorrect in some of its details*"* (see Stewart 2003). The purpose of the present essay is not to assess the value of *Barbara Frietchie* as a document of the American Civil War, but rather its literary connection to another poem of civil war, the *Pharsalia* of Lucan.

In *Pharsalia* Book One, Lucan famously depicts Caesar at the Rubicon (see Walde 2006 for further discussion). In contrast with the accounts of Suetonius (*Jul.* 31-32), Plutarch (*Caes.* 32.4-9), and Caesar himself (*BC* 1.8), Lucan (Phars. 1.183-) imagines the scene thus:

> ut uentum est parui Rubiconis ad undas,
> ingens uisa duci patriae trepidantis imago
> clara per obscuram uoltu maestissima noctem
> turrigero canos effundens uertice crines
> caesarie lacera nudisque adstare lacertis
> et gemitu permixta loqui: 'quo tenditis ultra?
> quo fertis mea signa, uiri? si iure uenitis,
> si ciues, huc usque licet.'

The trembling goddess Roma, with white hairs streaming from her turreted crown, calls to mind "old Barbara Frietchie ... Bowed with her fourscore years and ten," who, hoping to withstand "the rebel tread," faces down their leader. The heads of both the old woman and the goddess are especially noted by the poets; as Myers has recently noted of Lucan's episode, the emphasis on Roma's *caput* points to the city as *caput mundi* as well as to the heads that will be lost in the war's dénouement (2014: 412-3). Furthermore, the "shade of sadness" and "blush of shame" that comes over the face of Stonewall Jackson seems very like the reaction of Lucan's Caesar following the confrontation: *tum perculit horror /membra ducis, riguere comae gressumque coercens / languor in extrema tenuit uestigia ripa* (1.192-4). In the end, however, where Caesar brazenly ends up crossing the Rubicon, Jackson is instead moved to back down and spare Frietchie.

Did Whittier consciously model his own Civil War poem after this critical moment from the *Pharsalia*? Certainly he was familiar with the Rubicon as a metaphor, and employed it powerfully in an 1845 letter to an abolitionist legislator about the annexation of Texas. Among the "Fireside Poets" of mid-nineteenth century America, Whittier was the one with the least extensive classical education. Still, as noted by biographer Wagenknecht, he referred to many ancient authors in his writings, among them Homer, Virgil, Sophocles, Pliny, Seneca, Apuleius, and Tibullus (1967: 96). Americans during and after the Age of Jackson had a vexed relationship with the Greco-Roman heritage, at times embracing it and at other times rejecting it (see discussion of Haase 1994). Whittier believed strongly in taking the classics out of the classroom and applying them to "everyday life" as, for instance, the school-master in *Snow-Bound* (1866), who "could doff at ease his scholar's gown" to recount classical stories as edifying entertainment, "wherein the scenes of Greece and Rome / Had all the commonplace of home." In *Barbara Frietchie*, Whittier seems to have refashioned Lucan's Rubicon episode in a similar fashion, both as a way of updating the story and as a commentary on the moral struggles of his own country's Civil War.

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