

## An Elegiac Reading of Lucan's *Bellum Civile*:

### The Civil War between Pompey and Caesar as a Rivalry for the Love of Rome

Scholars of Latin elegy have long focused their attention on the motif of *militia amoris*, which consists in the description of love affairs in military terms (Spies 1930; Murgatroyd 1975; Gale 1997). It was not until recently, however, that the reverse trope of *amor militiae*, namely the description of martial activity in erotic terms, was brought to prominence. Kennedy (2012: 189-90) observes that as love can be described in terms applicable to war, so war can be eroticized. Following in the wake of recent studies on Lucan's engagement with elegy (Hübner 1984; Matthews 2008; Caston 2011; McCune 2014; Burns 2016; Littlewood 2016), in this paper I argue that Lucan, who often uses the technique of the *imitatio negativa* to reverse single phrases, scenes, and ideas of his models, also uses it to reverse the elegiac trope of *militia amoris*, and turn it into that of *amor militiae*, more suitable for epic. In particular, I suggest that the civil war between Pompey and Caesar is described as an elegiac rivalry for the love of Rome: if in *Amores* 1.9, the veritable manifesto of *militia amoris*, Ovid compares the *puella* with a city to capture, in the *Bellum Civile* Lucan presents Rome as a girl to conquer.

Pompey and Caesar show several features of elegiac love rivals. First, just as love rivals are unable to share the love of the girl (Ov. *Ars* 3.564: *non bene cum sociis regna Venusque manent*), the two leaders are unable to share the reign of Rome (*BC* 1.92-3: *nulla fides regni sociis, omnisque potestas / inpatiens consortis erit*). Second, in the famous portrait of the two leaders that Lucan sketches in Book 1 of his poem, Pompey is described as a passive old man (1.129-43), whereas Caesar as active and energetic (1.143-57). The contrast between youth and old age is common in love poetry. In particular, in *Amores* 1.9 Ovid explicitly argues that a lover should be young and strong (ll. 3-6), and that only enterprising men can be successful lovers (ll. 31-2). By portraying Pompey as old and passive Lucan makes clear from the very beginning that he is doomed to lose the love rivalry—and so the conflict—against strong and active Caesar. Third, when in Book 2 Pompey

withdraws from battle and heads to Brundisium, his behavior is compared with that of a bull who, defeated by a rival, withdraws into the wood to gain back his strength (601-7). This simile is clearly modeled on the description of the bull who withdraws into the forest at Vergil *Georgics* 3.220-36. Interestingly, there the bull withdraws after being defeated by his rival for the love of a heifer. The same passage is significantly used as a model by Vergil himself to describe Turnus, Aeneas' rival for the love of Lavinia, at *Aen.* 12.103-6.

By describing the civil war between Pompey and Caesar as an elegiac rivalry for the love of Rome Lucan suggests that the only possible form of love in this context is the love for power. Both leaders, in fact, aspire to be the sole ruler of Rome, and so to establish the Empire, although only Caesar has the necessary strength to accomplish his mission. The only true and disinterested lover of Rome is Cato. It is no accident that he is not involved in this rivalry. His relationship with Rome is not comparable to that of two elegiac rivals and a *puella*, as Pompey's and Caesar's, but rather to a lawful marriage, for he remains faithful to the Republic.

#### Bibliography

Burns, P.J. 2016. *Amor Belli: Elegiac Diction and the Theme of Love in Lucan's Bellum Civile*.

Ph.D. Diss., Fordham University.

Caston, R. 2011. "Lucan's Elegiac Moments." In Asso, P. ed. *Brill's Companion to Lucan*. Leiden. 133-152.

Gale, M. 1997. "Propertius 2.7: *Militia Amoris* and the Ironies of Elegy." *JRS* 87: 77-91.

Hübner, U. 1984. "Episches un Elegisches am Anfang des dritten Buches des *Pharsalia*." *Hermes* 112: 227-239.

Kennedy, D.F. 2012. "Love's Tropes and Figures." In Gold, B.K. ed. *A Companion to Roman Love Elegy*. Malden. 189-203.

Littlewood, C. 2016. "Elegy and Epic in Lucan's *Bellum Civile*." In Keith, A. and Edmondson, J. eds. *Roman Literary Cultures. Domestic Politics, Revolutionary Poetics, Civic Spectacle*. Toronto. 159-184.

Matthews, M. 2008. *Caesar and the Storm. A Commentary on Lucan De Bello Civili, Book 5 lines 476-721*. Bern.

McCune, B.C. 2014. "Lucan's *Militia Amoris*. Elegiac Expectations in the *Bellum Civile*." *CJ* 109: 171-198.

Murgatroyd, P. 1975. "*Militia Amoris* and the Roman Elegists." *Latomus* 34: 59-79.

Spies, A. 1930. *Militat Omnis Amans. Ein Beitrag zur Bildersprache der antiken Erotik*. Ph.D. Diss., University of Tübingen.