

Lucan the Formalist

Recent scholarship on Lucan (e.g. Johnson, Bartsch, Quint) has tended to vacillate between two contradictory positions: first, that Lucan mimetically illustrates his belief in an aleatory universe by smashing to bits the formal traditions of epic poetry; second, that he is a bitter caricaturist who parodies his epic predecessors, especially Vergil, in order to expose the bankruptcy of epic ideology. The two positions are contradictory because the caricaturist is by definition a manipulator of form; a caricature fails if the original cannot be recognized in it. This paper will argue that Lucan's caricatures serve, in addition to the negative purpose of ridiculing the epic genre, a positive one as well: to privilege pure form above all other aesthetic considerations. Discussion will concentrate chiefly on the long proem and on the Erichtho and Appius scenes.