

## NERO AND CAESAR: LUCAN 1.33–66

For his epic of civil war Lucan calls not on Apollo or Bacchus, but on the reigning emperor, Nero, to be his inspiration (1.66):

tu satis ad vires Romana in carmina dandas.

This invocation and the flattery that accompanies it seem surprising in a poem that devotes many lines to lamenting Rome's loss of liberty and to attacking Caesar and his successors. For some, there is no problem here: Lucan, who had at most a sentimental republicanism, never intended to write a work likely to offend Nero; if anything in the later parts of the poem would have been unacceptable to Nero, this is because Lucan changed his intentions after Nero had banned him from reciting.<sup>1</sup> Others, more disturbed by the apparent contradictions, try a different approach: Lucan's clear opposition to monarchy means that we must regard the praise of Nero as ironic, concealing perhaps attacks on his personal appearance or paradoxically emphasising the problematic nature of such praise of emperors.<sup>2</sup>

These studies have investigated whether or not the praise of Nero is ironic (a question on which it seems unlikely that a scholarly consensus will be reached). This article is concerned with two different, but related, problems. Firstly, whether the lines are seen as ironic or sincere, how was, or is, a reader to take the contradiction between the politics of the praises and those expressed elsewhere in the poem? Secondly, is there any way Lucan could have hoped that the poem he was writing might be acceptable to Nero?

A possible approach is suggested by a consideration of the nature of the contradiction. While on the one hand Lucan never explicitly criticizes Nero, on the other he writes lines on freedom that imply that Rome is not now free, and that this is a bad thing;<sup>3</sup> worse, he attacks "Caesars," the successors of his villain, Iulius Caesar, and thus criticises Nero as part of this group.<sup>4</sup> The examples cited here do not make an exception of Nero and his reign—there is no implication in them that Rome is free or well governed under Nero; on the contrary, it is clear that freedom and Caesarian rule are a current issue. Why should Lucan avoid personal attacks on Nero, but attack the group to which he belonged? What good would it do to praise Nero in

1. See, e.g., P. Grimal, "L'éloge de Néron au début de la *Pharsale* est-il ironique?," *REL* 38 (1960): 296–305; W. D. Lebek, *Lucans "Pharsalia"* (Göttingen, 1976), 81–107; E. Fantham, *Lucan, "de bello civili," Book II* (Cambridge, 1992), 13–14.

2. The view was already current in antiquity: Comment. Lucan. 1.53, 55, 57, 58, 59; Adnot. Lucan. 1.55, 57. Among recent supporters, see F. M. Ahl, *Lucan, an Introduction* (Cornell, 1976), 47–49; the view is attacked by M. Dewar, "Laying It On with a Trowel: The Proem to Lucan and Related Texts," *CQ* 44 (1994): 199–211.

3. 1.669–72 (Nigidius' prophecy cannot be discounted, as Lebek [*Pharsalia*, 168–71] attempts to do, as referring only to Caesar; the long years of war and continuous suffering that Nigidius demands would seem excessive even to a lover of liberty, if they were to postpone only Caesar's brief reign, rather than the continued domination of his successors); 5.385–86; 7.131–33, 431–44, 455–59, 641–46; 10.343–44 (note *exemplum*). That most examples come from the seventh book surely does not show that Lucan's personal opinions have changed; rather the events described decide the reactions called forth from the narrator, cf. V. Hunink, "Lucan's praise of Nero," in *Papers of the Leeds International Latin Seminar*, vol. 7, ed. F. Cairns and M. Heath (Leeds, 1993), 137.

4. 3.168; 4.821–23 (where one notes the deliberate stylistic imbalance that characterises Sulla, Marius, and Cinna each with a disapproving adjective, the Caesars with an apparently neutral noun, *series*, which is itself a criticism); 7.695–96.

our passage (or to disguise his criticism with praise) while openly attacking him as one of the Caesars? Lucan seems to be saying both that he is Nero's admirer and that he is his enemy. Perhaps we can see here an implication that the combination of attacks on Caesars and praise of Nero dramatizes an inner conflict: while, politically, Lucan abhors emperors and is opposed to Nero's power, Nero himself is so wonderful as to compel his admiration. An idea of personal praise can perhaps be seen in the etymologies in the final line of the invocation (1.66 quoted above). The juxtaposition of *vires* and *Romana* of course implies the familiar derivation of *Roma* from ῥώμη, strength. Statius may allude to this in a passage that reflects these lines, when he says of Lucan (*Silv.* 2.7.52–53), “memor . . . gentis / carmen *fortior* exeres togatum.” A less obvious allusion is buried in *tu*. *Tu* is Nero (so named at the beginning of the section which ends in line 66); and we read in Suetonius of the name Nero (*Tib.* 1.2), “significatur lingua Sabina fortis ac strenuus.” The qualities, then, that make Nero suitable for inspiring the poem, are tied to him personally in his name, specifically in that part of his name which, unlike *Caesar*, was not effectively a title for emperors, and was not shared with Iulius Caesar. Of course, the name Nero was itself common in the imperial family; Nero had taken it, in place of the original “Domitius,” as a sign of his adoption (*Tac. Ann.* 12.26.1), “rogata . . . lex, qua in familiam Claudiam et nomen Neronis transiret.” Consideration of the genesis of Lucan's line brings us to another member of the family; as has long been recognized, the line is modelled on Ovid, *Fasti* 1.17, “da mihi te placidum, dederis in carmina vires,” a line addressed to Germanicus Iulius Caesar, born Nero Claudius Germanicus.<sup>5</sup>

The contradiction between the praise of Nero and Lucan's other expressions on Caesars in general is not something that can be removed; rather it plays a part in expressing Lucan's admiration. The fiercer his hatred of the tyranny of the Principate, the greater the implied praise of Nero, whose qualities are such as to compel praise even from one opposed to his power. If we look now at the praise itself, we find that the same contradiction that exists between it and the rest of the poem (admiration of Nero, opposition to Caesars) is also working within it; praise of Nero combines with elements that underline the evils of the monarchical system and compare him to its founder. The conflict between praise and criticism is emphasized by an opening whose heightened paradox draws attention to the unexpectedness of what it has to say.

Lucan begins with the thought that the sufferings of the Civil War were worth it if they led to Nero's rule (1.33–37):

quod si non aliam venturo fata Neroni  
invenere viam magnoque aeterna parantur  
regna deis caelumque suo servire Tonanti  
non nisi saevorum potuit post bella gigantum,  
iam nihil, o superi, querimur.

Two points may be made: firstly, with *servire* in 35, we seem to touch on the theme of liberty that will be such a feature of the later books;<sup>6</sup> secondly, that the sufferings

5. A similar etymological allusion has been suspected in Hor. *Carm.* 4.4.29 on Drusus, *fortes creantur fortibus*; cf. M. C. J. Putnam, *Artifices of Eternity* (Cornell, 1986), p. 90, n. 1.

6. Lebek, *Pharsalia*, 82 (“Vielmehr ist *servire* hier . . . in die semantische Nähe von *colere* gerückt”) seems to ignore the influence of context on interpretation.

and damage of the civil war are treated as worthwhile for preparing the way for Nero's reign is an idea at odds with what Lucan says throughout the poem on the harm they have caused, and would surely have astonished a contemporary audience. The view expressed is almost a perfect reversal of the justification that one might have expected Lucan to offer for Nero's reign, a justification that M. T. Griffin attributes to Lucan also:<sup>7</sup> "What Lucan expressed throughout, even in the violent passages of Book VII, was the common senatorial view . . . that the Republic and *libertas* were preferable but that the Principate was a practical necessity for stability and peace." Fine things though stability and peace were, Lucan seems to be saying, it was worth destroying them (and the Republic and *libertas*) if that was what was needed to give us Nero. He could hardly have chosen an idea more emphatically counter to the expectations of a contemporary. In this, the word *servire* is surely calculated to astound the reader: can he really be saying that subjection to tyranny is welcome, when the tyrant is the wonderful Nero?

The degree to which the idea offends a reader's feeling is heightened by the metaphors in which it is expressed. Nero is to travel (*venturo*) along a path (*viam*) made by the tragedy of civil war; a cheerful acquiescence in this treading underfoot of the Roman dead is not something we should expect even in the most wholehearted emperor worshipper. Then there are the commercial metaphors, "*magno . . . aeterna parantur / regna*," kingdoms bought at great cost, in 34–35 and "*scelera ipsa nefasque / hac mercede placent*," the evil is worth it at this exchange, in 37–38. Feeney calls attention to the image as "degrading commercial metaphor";<sup>8</sup> but it is worth asking what is being degraded. To speak of the costs of war can be an uncontentious image; but to speak of Nero as the profit gained from civil war is liable to rouse the resistance of readers, with its suggestion of seeing the deaths of citizens in terms of commercial gain. Many passages in the poem take their effect from the absurdity of seeing civil war, the murder of one's countrymen, as a matter of profit.<sup>9</sup> Such an idea lends itself to paradoxical metaphor, as when Gnaeus Pompey calls on the republican leaders to avenge and appease his murdered father (9.150–51):

ite duces mecum (nusquam civilibus armis  
tanta fuit merces) inhumatos condere manes.

Except for those wickedly set on their own gain, it is impossible that there can be profit to seek in civil war. The implicit paradox is resolved by the selflessness of the deed actually proposed: others seek profit in civil war; we true republicans know there can be no such thing, but Pompey's ghost makes greater claims on us than greed makes on them. The excellent deal whereby the death of so many Romans at the hands of other Romans gives us finally the Emperor Nero is surely similarly unexpected not only in the implied equation of worth in the things traded, but in the metaphor of trading itself. For Nero, Lucan will look at the war as a matter of gain, a way of seeing things that he would otherwise leave to the greed of the Caesarians.

7. M. T. Griffin, *Nero* (London, 1984), 159.

8. D. C. Feeney, *The Gods in Epic* (Oxford, 1991), 299.

9. Compare for instance 2.255 ("castra petunt magna victi mercede"); 5.285–86; 7.303; 7.738 ("superest pro sanguine merces"); 7.749–51 ("quis agger / sustineat pretium belli scelerumque petentes? / scire ruunt, quanta fuerint mercede nocentes"); 7.757 ("parvo scelus hoc venisse"). A similar idea can doubtless be seen behind formulations such as 10.170 ("gessisse pudet genero cum paupere bellum").

The continuation emphasizes the surprise (38–45):

diros Pharsalia campos  
impleat et Poeni saturentur sanguine manes,  
ultima funesta concurrant proelia Munda,  
his, Caesar, Perusina fames Mutinaeque labores  
accedant fati . . . ,  
multum Roma tamen debet civilibus armis,  
quod tibi res acta est.

At the beginning of his praises, Lucan referred to the emperor as Nero; now, in the list of battles, Lucan apostrophizes him for the first time as “Caesar,” the name he shares with Julius Caesar. And the point at which he includes this apostrophe in the list (after Munda and before Perusia) is the point at which Caesar was assassinated (compare the *matrona*’s vision at 1.678–94: Pharsalus; Egypt; Thapsus; Munda; the assassination of Caesar; Philippi). This coincidence led Burman to suppose that “Caesar” here was nominative, an ellipse, of a kind common in Lucan, for “Caesar occisus.”<sup>10</sup> Once again, our attention is being drawn to the fact that what we are reading is a reversal of what we might expect to find: Lucan offers us “Nero makes it all worth while,” but surely the only moral for an epic of civil war is “death to Caesar.”

The lines that follow are in themselves less problematic. We move away from a choice between Nero and Caesar to more conventional praises, an anticipation of the emperor’s apotheosis based clearly enough on the similar praise of Augustus at the beginning of Virgil’s *Georgics*. The offered choice of responsibility in heaven and the discussion of the appropriate astronomical position for the created star reflect his model (Verg. *G.* 1.24–39); the ideological restraint in regarding Nero as a god only after his death even tones down the original. Augustus was as uncontroversial an emperor as any of Nero’s predecessors: he appears in the *Apocolocyntosis* to damn the bad emperor Claudius (Sen. *Apoc.* 10–11); Nero on his accession had declared his intention to take him as his model (Suet. *Ner.* 10.1). So perhaps the implicit argument has brought us round to a point where Lucan can look on the emperor with equanimity, if that emperor is Nero. But the doubts of a republican are still given their due. Nero may be explicitly not Phaethon (1.48–50); but the anxieties of the observer at his ability to cause havoc, indeed (unless the greatest care is taken) to upset the whole balance of the world (1.53–57), surely reflect the fears of the Neronian courtier at the distorting influence of a single individual over events in the world below. Again this is not criticism of Nero personally; he is clearly expected to do very well under the circumstances. The problem is in the nature of emperors.

Lines 60–63 continue the story. With Nero installed in heaven and exerting his influence, a new age of peace is anticipated:

10. Wrongly of course: a vocative is necessary; the catalogue is one of military actions, all with geographical indications; Lucan would not have seen Caesar’s death as a disaster. Cf. Housman ad loc. The transition from “Neroni” to “Caesar” was noted by J. Henderson, “Lucan: The Word at War,” in *The Imperial Muse*, ed. A. J. Boyle (Victoria, 1988), 156; he sees “Caesar” as deliberately positioned between the careers of Julius and Augustus Caesar.

tum genus humanum positis sibi consulat armis,  
inque vicem gens omnis amet; pax missa per orbem  
ferrea belligeri conpescat limina Iani.

Again Virgilian influence has been found here, this time from the *Aeneid* and Jupiter's promise to Venus of the future good fortune of Aeneas' descendants (Verg. *Aen.* 1.291–94):

aspera tum positis mitescent saecula bellis:  
cana Fides et Vesta, Remo cum fratre Quirinus  
iura dabunt; dirae ferro et compagibus artis  
claudentur Belli portae.

The parallel is clear and doubtless flattering; its context, however, makes the idea more disturbing in a poem on the Civil War. As in Lucan, the age of peace that Virgil describes follows on the entry into heaven of a newly created god; in Lucan this god will be Nero, in Virgil it is Iulius Caesar. Once again, Lucan raises the question of what his attitude to Nero should be, of whether Nero and Caesar are to regarded in the same light.

Some account should be taken here of the view, generally current, that the Caesar in the lines that precede this passage in the *Aeneid* is not Iulius Caesar (as Servius supposed), but Augustus. The lines run (Verg. *Aen.* 1.286–90):

nascetur pulchra Troianus origine Caesar,  
imperium Oceano, famam qui terminet astris,  
Iulius, a magno demissum nomen Iulo.  
hunc tu olim caelo spoliis Orientis onustum  
accipies secura: vocabitur hic quoque votis.

The chief arguments for identifying this Caesar with Iulius Caesar are: (1) that Virgil calls him Iulius and Caesar; (2) that if *tum* in line 291 indicates that the events of 291–94 follow Caesar's apotheosis, then Caesar must be Iulius, since 291–94 describe the reign of Augustus; and (3) that everything in the description is consistent with Iulius Caesar. Against Iulius Caesar it is urged: (1) that *spoliis Orientis onustum* in 289 is more appropriate to Augustus; (2) that fifteen further years of civil war make it absurd to talk of an age of peace following Iulius' arrival in heaven, so it is preferable to refer *tum* in 291 back to the lines describing when this Caesar, Augustus, was on earth; and (3) that Virgil must be praising Augustus here, since that is the purpose of the *Aeneid*. The question of how Lucan understood the passage can be answered directly; since his *tum* refers to events after Nero's apotheosis, it is reasonable to assume that he saw Virgil's lines in the same way, with lines 286–90 describing Iulius Caesar.<sup>11</sup> Doubtless Lucan was right. The objection that the spoils of the East are inappropriate to Caesar ignores the triumphs celebrated in 46 B.C. over Gaul, Egypt, Pontus, Africa, and Spain, and their associated festivities, which were noted, indeed notorious, for their extravagance. The Gallic triumph was more

11. M. L. Clarke, *CR* 24 (1974): 7–8 saw the relevance of Lucan here, but decided that lines 286–90 therefore described prosperity after Augustus' death. This involves Virgil in an unnecessary slighting of Augustus' closing of the doors of Janus. Nero, too, was to do this before his death; but that would presumably have been unforeseeable, cf. C. H. V. Sutherland and R. A. G. Carson, *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, vol. 1 (London, 1984), 140–41, 143.

magnificent than the others; but “the spoils of Gaul” is less suggestive of riches than “the spoils of the East.”<sup>12</sup> More importantly, “loaded with the spoils of the East” compares Caesar with the originator of the triumph, Dionysus, himself an example of a god who had entered heaven after earthly successes.<sup>13</sup> As to the objection that fifteen years of civil war forbid us to see an age of peace following Caesar’s deification, a (perhaps flippant) answer is that fifteen years is negligibly small on the time scale that Jupiter is using; more importantly, we know that Virgil, several years after Caesar’s death, when Rome was still involved in civil wars, allowed the Julian star to be described as the sign of a coming age of peace (Verg. *Ecl.* 9.46–50, although there the prophecy is undercut by being recalled in less happy circumstances; that such prophecies were current seems likely from Servius ad loc.). It may be that Augustus allowed the star to be seen in a double light, as the deified Iulius, and as a sign of a new (Augustan) golden age (cf. Plin. *HN* 2.93–94), and that Virgil is combining the two here. In addition, to describe Venus as receiving Caesar into heaven is appropriate to Iulius, whose star (Plin. *HN* 2.93) appeared at the games which Augustus “faciebat Veneri Genetrici non multo post obitum patris Caesaris in collegio ab eo instituto.”<sup>14</sup>

Finally we return to Lucan’s call on Nero to be his inspiring god; *mihi iam numen* (1.63) takes us away from the themes of ruler cult to a more personal admiration, such as we suggested finding in line 66, “tu satis ad vires Romana in carmina dandas.” This is the last explicit mention of Nero in the poem, though Lucan will still have occasion to talk of tyrants and Caesars; by linking Nero and the Roman song as he does, he reminds the reader here at the outset that the poem before him, whatever else it may be about, is also, one way or another, about the emperor Nero.

Some final remarks may be helpful. What this article suggests seeing in the poem is not a concealed hostile meaning, available only to those who shared Lucan’s views, invisible to Nero. Rather two incompatible attitudes are presented to the readers, who must then find their own resolution of the conflict. Lucan’s choice to criticise Caesars, but to praise Nero potentially allows a reader (the important reader being Nero himself) to extract a further implication of homage, at least as long as Lucan remained in Nero’s circle: not only does he praise him, he does so against his own political beliefs, compelled by the excellence of Nero himself. The lines discussed here usefully develop the contrast between Lucan’s admiration of Nero and his distrust or hostility to Caesars; they raise the question of how Nero is to be regarded, as the man that Lucan admired or as the inheritor of the mantle of Iulius Caesar. A possible reading is “I think we must be rid of Caesars, but admire Nero”; in a context where praise is expected, the lines could reasonably yield such a reading to Nero or his court. The more dangerous attitude (hostility to Nero as Caesar) is

12. It may be noted that the display of his Gallic triumph, unlike that of his other triumphs, is unlikely to have come from Gaul (Vell. Pat. 2.56.2, “Gallici apparatus ex citro . . . constitit”). Those who expect that the Gallic wars should be mentioned as more historically significant fail to note Ov. *Met.* 15.752–57, where Egypt is mentioned among Caesar’s victories; Gaul is at best only to be deduced obliquely from reference to the “aequoreos . . . Britannos.”

13. Cf. Cic. *Nat. D.* 2.62; Hor. *Carm.* 3.3.13–15; Plin. *HN* 7.191; Tac. *Ann.* 4.38.5 (discussing imperial cult), “optimos . . . mortalium altissima cupere; sic Herculem et Liberum apud Graecos, Quirinum apud nos deum numero additos.” In the *Eclogues* the deified Daphnis is also given Dionysiac traits (Verg. *Ecl.* 5.29–31). Of course, this comparison could apply to Augustus as well as Iulius (cf. Verg. *Aen.* 6.804–5).

14. In Ov. *Met.* 15.843–51 it is Venus who puts Iulius Caesar among the stars; at Prop. 4.6.59 his star is called *Idaliūm*.

subjected to the more acceptable one (admiration of Nero as Nero). But such balancing acts can easily be overturned; nothing but prior expectation prevents a reader from understanding “I admire Nero, but think we must be rid of Caesars.” And the whole idea depends upon the accepted fiction that Lucan did, in fact, admire Nero; to a reader not willing to accept the fiction, the approach might seem rather to be “I say that I admire Nero; but in fact I believe that all Caesars should die.” As the poem and Lucan’s relations with Nero progressed, this meaning would come to make stronger claims.

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### THE HOROSCOPE OF PROCLUS

Concerning the date when Proclus died there is no doubt.<sup>1</sup> Not that his biographer Marinus made things easy for the chronographer. Unwilling to date Proclus’ death according to the institutions of the Christian empire, he tells us instead (*Vita Procli* 36) that it occurred in the 124th year from the reign [βασιλεία] of Julian; and it is not obvious that this means the beginning of Julian’s effective rule in late 361 rather than his becoming Caesar in 355, or for that matter his death in 363.<sup>2</sup> The further statement that the year was that of the Athenian archonship of Nicagoras the younger is no help in the absence of an archon list for the period in question.<sup>3</sup> The day, according to Marinus, was April 17, and also the 17th of the Athenian month Mounichion. If the Athenian calendar in the fifth century still employed lunar months beginning approximately at new moon, we could limit consideration to years in which a conjunction took place about March 31 or April 1; but it is also possible that the Athenian and Roman months are here simply synchronized.<sup>4</sup>

The only thing that fixes the date with certainty is the report of two ominous events that Marinus audaciously connects with his master’s death: a total eclipse that was seen in Athens a year before Proclus’ death, with the sun in Capricorn close to the eastern horizon, and another eclipse that was forecast by the ἡμερογράφοι (compilers of astronomical almanacs) to occur the year after his death.<sup>5</sup> These eclipses can be identified securely as those of January 14, A.D. 484, and May 19, A.D. 486.<sup>6</sup> Hence Proclus died on April 17, A.D. 485, which would fall within the 124th Athenian

1. I am indebted to T. D. Barnes for suggesting improvements to a draft of this article.

2. The phrase ἀπὸ τῆς βασιλείας would normally mean “from the beginning of the reign,” as is clear from the precise chronological reckonings in Ptol., *Alm.* 3.7 (ed. Heiberg, 1:256). For βασιλεία as “accession year” see also *BGU* 646, line 12. Julian’s official count of regnal years began in 355 (Bagnall and Worp 1978, 75). Neither Évrard 1960, 137–38 nor Neugebauer and van Hoesen 1959, 136 note this fact.

3. This is one of only five attestations of Athenian archons after 267; see Follet 1976, p. 9, n. 2.

4. Follet 1976, 361–62; Neugebauer and van Hoesen 1959, p. 136, n. 14.

5. To my knowledge the unique other mention of ἡμερογράφοι is Olympiodorus, *In Mete.*, ed. Stüve, 50, a corrupt passage that seems to refer to predicted dates of visibility of Mercury. The only known variety of astronomical table that could have included forecasts of eclipses and planetary phenomena is the so-called “ephemeris”; see Jones 1999, section 5.1; Neugebauer 1975, 2:1055–58; and Delambre 1817, 2:635–37. Eclipses were traditionally interpreted as omens pertaining to kings and kingdoms: see for example Hephaestio Thebanus l. 21, ed. Pingree, 52–65.

6. Ginzel 1899, 222. The eclipses were first dated by Vincenzo Renieri in the second edition of his *Tabulae Mediceae* (Florence, 1647, *non vidi*).