



PROJECT MUSE®

Lucan: Civil War tr. by Brian Walters, and: *Statius: Achilleid* tr. by Stanley Lombardo (review)

Patrick J. Burns

Classical World, Volume 110, Number 2, Winter 2017, pp. 290-292 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/clw.2017.0016>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/648015>

discusses the geographical emphases of two ninth-century East Syrian (“Nestorian”) authors. Both Thomas of Marga and Isho’denah of Basra rooted their histories of monasticism in the movement of monks between East and West. Johnson emphasizes that “the role of geography in the formation of Syriac genres” needs to be better appreciated in its relation to “the assumptions of author and audience about the shape of narrative and the tradition of writing as they are revealed in the text itself” (129).

Johnson concludes with a brief discussion of “The Case of India,” which demonstrates how puzzling and contradictory ancient authors’ approaches to geography could be. Ultimately, these approaches are part of the “archival mode of writing,” which “as it appears in late-antique geographical literature (of all types) is one of the important ways in which the period acts as a matrix of reshaping between Greco-Roman antiquity and the Middle Ages” (136).

It is rare that I would suggest a book should be longer. Perhaps this is the first time. Johnson’s capacious knowledge of the ancient world, both East and West, from classical antiquity into the Middle Ages, creates a space for his creative and thoughtful mind to move around freely, but at times he hits against theoretical limits. There is some discussion of Eco and Borges in the beginning, for example, helping to set the stage for the discussion to follow, but I thought “archive,” considering the weight he puts on the term, is under-theorized, as are such terms as encyclopedism and signification. Furthermore, it is surprising not to find some discussion of the genre of apocalypse in a work addressing Christian cartographical thinking. However, such criticisms may seem as though I am complaining that he did not do *everything*. In this short, pleasant-to-read book, Johnson has done much for our thinking about late-antique and early medieval epistemology and literature.

ADAM H. BECKER
New York University

Brian Walters (tr.). *Lucan: Civil War*. Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2015. Pp. xlviii, 266. \$17.00 (pb.). ISBN 978-1-60384-996-8.

With an Introduction by W. R. Johnson.

Stanley Lombardo (tr.). *Statius: Achilleid*. Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2015. Pp. xxxiv, 53. \$9.00 (pb.). ISBN 978-1-62466-406-9.

With an Introduction by Peter Heslin.

Lucan’s reception has often risen and fallen on historical context, and we find ourselves again in a political climate where themes from the *Civil War* resonate: the relationship between state authority and violence against its citizens, the dividing line between leadership and demagoguery, the definition of “liberty” claimed with equal conviction by opposed factions. Brian Walters, aware that the poem’s “obsessive meditations on tyranny and the corruption of power” fit the times, brings to life in his translation the fractured state of the late Roman

Republic as Julius Caesar's compulsive boundary-crossing chips away at the increasingly futile resistance of Pompey and Cato. Lucan's violent content demands an equivalent violence of expression, and here Walters is especially successful, as during the naval slaughter at Massilia (3.549–803) or Erichtho's reanimation of a young soldier's corpse (6.760–883). He really hits his grisly stride, though, with the infamous snake episode (9.749–854), a scene of herpetological carnage that he renders with Quentin Tarantino-esque intensity and absurdity. Walters' language here revels in explaining the "countless strange deaths" that Cato's men suffer in the North African desert, as with Sabellus' fatal encounter with the seps (9.797–798): "His head and neck melted faster than snow/ in the South wind, faster than wax struck by sunlight." Throughout the poem, we find inspired diction such as the description of the storm that nearly finishes off Caesar as a "massive tsunami" (5.738), or Pompey's flight from Pharsalus as "wandering in a zigzag labyrinth" (8.5). But Walters' verse can in stretches be sober—a service to an audience trying to engage with the historical narrative, but occasionally a disservice to Lucan, whose poetry traffics in tortured expression, hyperbole, and paradox. The resulting translation is a solid compromise between the reserved fidelity of Susanna Braund's translation of the *Civil War* and the dynamic vigor of Jane Wilson Joyce's.¹¹

Statius' *Achilleid*, that unfinished epic on Achilles' early life and in particular his time spent disguised as a girl at Scyros, has garnered significant scholarly attention in recent years.¹² Stanley Lombardo, who has become somewhat of an in-house specialist in classical epic for Hackett with excellent editions of Homer, Vergil, and Ovid, provides a literary translation to match this renewed enthusiasm for the poem and succeeds in his stated goal of maintaining the "fine harmonic tension between the poem's unserious and serious strains." Lombardo is at his best in quick-moving scenes, such as the marshaling of the Greek forces in preparation for the Trojan War (1.448–522) or Chiron's education of the young hero (2.109–184)—scenes marked by short sentences often dominated by monosyllables, as, for example, at 1.496–497: "Now all the lands of Pelops and the world of Greece/ has been drained by the War God." His ear for rendering ancient mythological settings with modern turns of phrase—"gender line," "partner in crime," "peccadillo"—or with fragments of English verse pregnant with meaning from nonclassical sources—"don't be cruel," "fairest of them all"—is exceptional. Nuance like this does much to enliven Statius' accidental epyllion and makes Lombardo's *Achilleid* a front-runner among recent English translations.¹³

¹¹ S. H. Braund (tr.), *Lucan: Civil War* (New York and Oxford 1992); J. W. Joyce (tr.), *Lucan: Pharsalia* (Ithaca and London 1993).

¹² See P. J. Heslin, *The Transvestite Achilles. Gender and Genre in Statius' Achilleid* (Cambridge 2005); M. Fantuzzi, *Achilles in Love: Intertextual Studies* (New York and Oxford 2012).

¹³ Two other English translations of the *Achilleid* have appeared recently in the following volumes: D. R. Slavitt (tr.), *Broken Columns. Two Roman Epic Fragments: The Achilleid of Publius Papinius Statius and the Rape of Proserpine of Claudius Claudianus* (Philadelphia 1997); D. R. Shackleton Bailey (ed. and tr.), *Statius: Thebaid and Achilleid* (Cambridge, Mass., and London 2003).

Both volumes contain excellent introductions. W. R. Johnson, a critic who has been most willing to find the dark humor in Lucan's poetry, situates the work accordingly as a "unique fusion of high seriousness with an especially bitter kind of satire fueled by vehement sarcasm" and takes the reader through the greatest hits of modern Lucanian criticism—anti-heroics, Olympian omissions, the poet's relationship to Nero, the poem's "ending"—with an eye to this fusion. Peter Heslin, in a nimble twenty-five pages, efficiently lays out the mythological tradition inherited by Statius and frames the *Achilleid* as a "Very Serious Epic" in an effort to grasp what exactly we should do with this 1000-odd-line poem. In sections with provocative titles such as "Transvestism, Rape, Revelation, and Forgiveness—Seriously?" and "Achilles' Heel and the Vulnerabilities of the Invulnerable," Heslin ensures that the accompanying poem cannot be read as an incomplete curiosity but rather as an interpretative challenge as worthy as any other in the Latin epic tradition.

Both books also include a glossary of proper names and a short list of recommended secondary literature; Walters' volume also helps orient readers with a map of Lucan's Mediterranean theater of war and a particularly useful plot synopsis. In the case of the *Civil War*, these resources may provide a refresher to the casual reader who has some background in mythology and Roman history, but Lucan's epic contains a formidable number of persons, places, and things often presented in an oblique fashion. Accordingly, it is difficult to recommend this edition for classroom use when Braund's translation (not to mention Matthew Fox's recent translation)¹⁴ offers comparable material supported by ample explanatory notes. Because of size, scope, and Statius' more straightforward style, this is far less of an issue for the *Achilleid*, and, accordingly, Lombardo's translation seems like a perfect addition to any reading course that covers the epic tradition, complicating in a compact manner issues such as heroism, masculinity, and sexual identity and offering a ready-made literary foil to the Iliadic Achilles more familiar to our modern imagination.

PATRICK J. BURNS

Institute for the Study of the Ancient World

Patrick Kragelund. *Roman Historical Drama: The Octavia in Antiquity and Beyond*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. xv, 475. \$160.00. ISBN 978-0-19-871829-1.

The title of this book perfectly reflects the contents: the first half (3–126) is a general exploration of Roman historical drama, and the second half then looks in detail at the *Octavia* (129–360). The section on *Nachleben* ("The Afterlife," 363–419) is necessarily restricted to the *Octavia* as the sole surviving exemplar of the genre, but it makes the case for its importance to the rise of vernacular European tragedy and to the beginnings of opera. The views of Kragelund on

¹⁴ M. Fox (tr.), *Lucan: Civil War* (New York 2012).