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Anatomizing Civil War

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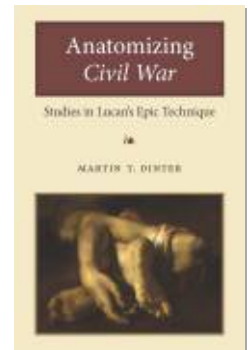
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Aide-Mémoire

The Plot of Lucan's *Bellum Civile*



To ease the reader into Lucan's epic and offer orientation in the *Bellum Civile* I provide a brief summary of the epic's plot.

BOOK 1

Proem (1–7). Rome could have conquered the rest of the world rather than lead civil war (8–32), but this war was worth all its toil as it leads to Nero's reign (33–66). Lucan explains the causes of the civil war, both historical and metaphysical (67–182), and introduces the two main protagonists, Pompey the Great (“Magnus”) and (Julius) Caesar (158–82).

Caesar crosses the Rubicon and occupies Ariminum (183–261). Curio and the tribunes of the people join Caesar's troops (261–95). Caesar addresses his armies: they will march on Rome (296–465). Panic breaks out in Rome on hearing rumors of Caesar's advance: the consuls and most senators join Pompey and his troops on their flight from Rome (466–522). A series of bad omens and prodigies unfolds (522–83). The reader of sacrificial entrails Arruns (584–638), the astrologer Nigidius Figulus (639–72), and a raving matron (673–95) predict civil war.

BOOK 2

Lament. The older generation reminisce on the terror of the wars under Marius and Sulla and regret that they will have to live through a further war (1–223). Brutus and Cato are introduced as stout supporters of the Roman Republic.

Marcia, Cato's former wife, remarries him (234–391). Pompey moves with his army toward Brundisium via Capua. Many cities open their gates to Caesar without fight. Domitius Ahenobarbus, a paternal ancestor of Nero, intends to defend Corfinium from Caesar but has to capitulate (392–525). Pompey encourages his troops by reminding them of his former glory. He reaches Brundisium (526–627). While his son and the consuls are sent to the East to recruit more troops, Pompey and his men barely escape Caesar, who occupies the city and blockades its port (628–736).

BOOK 3

On his way to Epirus the ghost of Pompey's deceased wife Julia appears to him in a dream (1–45). Caesar secures grain provision for his army and arrives in Rome. He calls a senate meeting and despite the protests of the tribune Metellus takes over the public monies (46–168). Meanwhile Pompey reaches Dyrrhachium and gathers troops in Greece (169–297). Caesar organizes the siege of Massilia, a city that prefers to remain neutral. He also has a sacred grove in the vicinity cut down (298–452). While Caesar moves on to Spain his admiral Brutus gains victory in a sea battle against the Massilians (453–762).

BOOK 4

In Spain Caesar's troops suffer setbacks through flooding and hunger, but in the end the Pompeians under their generals Petreius and Afranius have to capitulate for lack of water (1–401). On the island Curicta the troops of the Caesarian legate Antonius are blockaded by Pompeians. They attempt to escape on rafts. One of these loaded with men from Opitergium is caught. After putting on a brave fight their commander Vulteius leads them to communal suicide (402–581). In Africa Curio leads Caesar's troops against Varus and King Juba. A native tells him the story of Hercules' fight against the giant Antaeus (581–660). After initial success Curio's troops get caught in a trap set by Juba and are eliminated. Curio kills himself and is commemorated by Lucan with an obituary (661–824).

BOOK 5

The senate comes together in Epirus and appoints Pompey as commander in chief (1–64). The Pompeian Appius questions the Delphic oracle (64–236). Caesar's troops stage a mutiny but he manages to suppress it (237–373). He crosses from Brundisium to Epirus with part of his troops; his commander Antonius

hesitates to ship over the remaining troops from Italy in the teeth of wintry weather. When attempting to return to Italy to fetch his troops Caesar has to brave an immense storm and must turn back (374–702). Finally his troops arrive (703–21). Pompeius moves his wife Cornelia to safety in Lesbos and then leaves for Dyrrhachium (722–815).

BOOK 6

The armies face each other at Dyrrhachium: Pompey's troops suffer plague, Caesar's hunger. Caesar surrounds Pompey's camp with a rampart, which Scaeva defends heroically against large numbers of Pompeian troops (1–262). Thanks to informers Pompey manages to break out of Caesar's siege and weakens the enemy (263–313). But instead of returning to Italy to declare victory Pompey pursues Caesar's army to Thessaly (314–32). After a geographical excursus on Thessaly (333–412) Lucan describes how Sextus Pompeius seeks out the advice of the Thessalian witch Erichtho, who performs a necromancy (413–830).

BOOK 7

The night before the battle of Pharsalus Pompey dreams of his former greatness (1–44). His soldiers want to fight but Pompey hesitates, for the omens are bad (45–213). The troops take their positions (214–34). Both Caesar and Pompey address their troops (235–336; 337–84). Lucan bewails the effects this battle will have on Rome's future (385–459). The battle begins and the fighting is ferocious. Pompey's cavalry fails; Domitius Ahenobarbus is the one fallen soldier Lucan names; Caesar's victory is clear (460–646). Pompey flees to Larissa (647–727). Caesar storms the Pompeian camp, where he spends the night plagued by nightmares. The next day he gazes at the dead on the battlefield while holding a banquet. He forbids their burial (728–864).

BOOK 8

Pompey flees over the sea to his wife Cornelia at Lesbos. The citizen of Mytilene offer him asylum but he declines (1–158). Pompey departs and after a council meeting Deiotarus is sent out on a special mission (159–255). In a senate meeting in Cilicia Pompey ponders where to go to raise new troops. After Parthia is rejected (256–441) Pompey decides to go to Egypt, whose young king Ptolemy, at war with his older sister Cleopatra, owes him gratitude (442–471). Ptolemy's advisers sway the boy against Pompey (472–560). On arrival in Egypt Pompey is met by two former Roman soldiers in a small boat. Fallen into the trap, he

is killed and decapitated. Pompey's seal and embalmed head are brought to Ptolemy (560–711); his headless trunk floats along the coast and is granted a makeshift funeral by a follower (712–872).

BOOK 9

Pompey's ascension (1–18). Cato takes over Pompey's cause. In the presence of Cornelia and Pompey's sons a ceremony is held to honor Pompey and those fallen at Pharsalus (19–217). After some discussion the troops and allies swear allegiance to Cato. Because of a storm at sea they march through the Libyan desert via Tripolis to Leptis Magna (218–949). En route they pass the oracle of Ammon, which Cato decides not to consult (511–86), and are attacked by a multitude of snakes. Lucan's Medusa excursus (619–700) provides an explanation for the snakes' existence. The exhausted troops arrive at Leptis Magna (938–49). Caesar meanwhile travels to Egypt—with a stopover and guided tour at the ruins of Troy (950–99). On arrival the Egyptians hand over Pompey's head and seal, which Caesar greets with crocodile tears (1000–1108).

BOOK 10

Caesar visits the tomb of Alexander the Great (1–52). King Ptolemy attempts to stir up trouble. Cleopatra seduces Caesar and he sides with her cause (53–106). Lucan describes a famously luxurious feast (107–331), as part of which Caesar consults the priest Acoreus about the sources of the Nile (172–331). Ptolemy's advisers, however, fearing Caesar's revenge, kindle war in an attempt to eliminate Caesar. Cleopatra's sister Arsinoe joins the rebel army. A final scene depicts Caesar's life in great danger when he sees Scaeva nearby (332–546). The epic ends more or less where Caesar's own account in his *commentarii de bello civili* ends.