

Mark THORNE

Cato and the Snakes in Lucan: Whose *aristeia* Is It Anyway? (*Pharsalia* 9.700-889)

There is perhaps no more infamous passage in Lucan's *Pharsalia* than Cato's encounter with the snakes in Book Nine, an episode repeatedly described as horrific, ludicrous, even *sordide* and *répugnant* (Johnson 1987, 55; Bartsch 1997, 29; Aumont 1968, 107). Fred Ahl reads it as Lucan's attempt to give Cato a Homeric *aristeia* so as to highlight his virtue (Ahl 1976, 74), but I argue that in fact it is not Cato but rather the army of snakes that claims the *aristeia*, showing off its martial prowess by notching one kill after another. The outcome of such success, however, is striking, for what in Homeric epic would be a triumph becomes in Lucan a *de facto* failure—Cato's march carries onward regardless, despite the snakes' "victory." Cato ultimately does emerge victorious in the end, but in decidedly un-Homeric terms.

Some have questioned recently whether one should read the episode as an *aristeia* at all (Leigh 1997), but I argue that Lucan himself invites such a reading through his military imagery and details of the individual "combats." Furthermore, the snakes as a plurality may be seen to represent Libya as the larger individual entity opposed to Cato's march, emphasized by the preceding Medusa myth explaining that the snakes were conceived from the Libyan sands where poisonous drops of the Gorgon's blood fell (Loupiac 1997; Fantham, 1993). Cato's journey begins with an image of invasion, surprisingly not by Cato but by the land itself (*invasit Libye securi fata Catonis*, 9.410). Libya's weapons are successive assaults of sandstorms, parching thirst, and finally venomous snakes, these last recognized by Cato's men as their real enemies when they cry out, *pro Caesare pugnant!* (9.850) Also, the individual pairings of snake and victim provide specific details that recall the epic language of the *aristeia*: the natures and poisons of individual snakes are given in often gruesome detail, while the poet tells us that Aulus is a youth of Etruscan blood (9.737) and Numidius is a plowman from a Marsian farm (9.790).

It is essential to note that this episode is depicted as an *aristeia* by the snakes against Cato's army and *not* against Cato, who is himself untouched while he "watches" the horrible sufferings of his men like a spectator (*insolitasque videns mortes*, 9.736). Cato is essentially a non-combatant, so this technically cannot be his *aristeia*. In turn, however, Lucan's epic of the civil war—of a world whose very logic has been turned upside down by the horrors of civil war—subverts the traditional norms of epic by showing us that Libya's "success" through the snakes' *aristeia* is ultimately unsuccessful within the narrative of the poem. Cato remains unharmed, the army survives essentially intact, and they all reach their destination of Leptis Magna by the end of the book. Yet this seeming purposelessness is emblematic, I argue, of one of Lucan's primary messages in his *Pharsalia*, namely the self-defeating nature inherent to civil war. Just as Lucan's prologue presents the "victorious" hand that plunges the sword into the victor's own belly (1.3), so the *aristeia* of the snakes and of Libya herself is subverted by the poet to emphasize his message that traditional military success does not bring true victory in *civil* war. The snakes enjoyed their *aristeia*, but virtuous Cato is depicted ultimately as the *aristos*, the best.