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Review of "After 69 CE - Writing Civil War in Flavian Rome"

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Lauren Donovan Ginsberg, Darcy A. Krasne (ed.), *After 69 CE – Writing Civil War in Flavian Rome. Trends in classics – supplementary volumes, volume 65*. Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 2018. Pp. x, 489. ISBN 9783110583960. €119,95.

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[Authors and titles are listed below.]

For contemporary audiences, the events of 69 CE were already part of the larger narrative of iterative civic violence embedded in Rome’s history. As each civil war constituted the next chapter of an ongoing saga, each new generation of authors interacted not only with instances of conflict, but with the literature of those conflicts in a meta-narrative of decline. Flavian authors thus engaged both recent events and *bellum civile* as a defining feature of Roman history and identity.

By framing *bellum civile* as an intertextual project, this volume offers compelling new angles on Flavian literature, intertextual studies, and civil war’s lurking presence in Rome’s cultural consciousness. It brings together a wide range of geographic and generic positions from which ancient authors responded to 69 CE in its visceral aftermath, filling in a crucial gap between the exhaustive scholarship on Lucan and Breed *et al.*’s (2010) survey of civil war in Roman literary and material evidence from Livy and Propertius to Tacitus, the *Historia Augusta*, and Shakespeare.¹ Simultaneously, it broadens the conversation beyond epic’s current predominance in Flavian scholarship to capture the shared cultural and literary conversations of the post-69 CE historical moment across historiography, epigram, ethnography, and didactic texts: reintegrating Flavian authors into wider discussions on Roman civil war, this volume articulates both the singularity and continuity of the period.

The introduction considers core themes, tropes, vocabulary, and metaphors that cut across the individual papers to constitute a “trans-generic literary tradition” (9) of *bellum civile*. Divided into five Parts, the seventeen papers provide ample evidence for this *koine* (Bessone, 90) of civil war. Passages such as Silius’ Saguntum episode continually crop up across the various methodologies and foci represented; as such, the volume well shows the primacy of *bellum civile* in the Flavian *Zeitgeist*.

At the same time, the editors seek to deconstruct monolithic definitions of *bellum civile*. The introduction’s brief overview of the terminology of civil war is usefully supplemented by König (Ch. 8), who opens her essay on Frontinus with a survey of the malleability of this term in ancient discourse. König contests the scholarly assumptions that underpin discussions of civil war’s literary manifestations: while the slippage between civil and foreign war may reflect the psychological trauma of those who witness it—and the rhetorical manipulations of its

¹ Breed, B., C. Damon, and A. Rossi, eds. (2010). *Rome and its Civil Wars*. New York and Oxford.

participants—it also suggests that ancient authors at times engage civil conflict in more objective terms, as one more form of the warfare in which Rome was constantly embroiled. By defusing the scholarly terminology without minimizing its subject matter, König makes room for a more nuanced conversation on civil war’s presence in ancient literature and cultural consciousness.

The opening two sections, each comprising three papers, approach specific works from different methodological perspectives. Part I examines the “rapid canonization” (10) of Lucan’s *Bellum Civile* as the Flavian authors refashion Lucan’s language and imagery into the currency of their civil war literature. Part II focuses on Statius’ *Thebaid* as the Flavian epic that centers the theme of civil war; these papers dive deep into Statius’ development of the poetics of *nefas*—the themes of language, composition, and generic interplay.

The following three sections are organized by trope, addressing “Leadership and Exemplarity,” “Family, Society, and Self,” and “Ruination, Restoration, and Empire,” respectively. Part III explores the crisis of leadership in the context of civil war’s inversion of political and social values, asking whether exemplary Roman virtues such as *pietas* and *fides* are possible when political and military command is separate from ethical authority. The four papers of Part IV explore civil war’s impact on the individual and her or his relationships with the community. Treating the themes of fraternity, inheritance, suicide, and gender, these essays focus on the dialogue between different scales of conflict and resolution from nuclear family to society as a whole. The fifth and final section shifts back to a macroscopic view of conflict, from *urbs* to *orbis*, and thence to cosmos.

Individual contributions are of a generous size and scope without being overwhelming. Engagingly and accessibly written, they will all be useful stand-alone pieces for the specialist and advanced student alike. The size of the volume prohibits the in-depth attention that each deserves; in what follows I focus on contributions that showcase a range of methodologies and raise intriguing ideas for future research.

Fucecchi’s opening chapter sets the tone for the volume’s exploration of what civil war does in Flavian literature. In his reading, the Flavian epicists “metabolize” (29, and *passim*) Lucan’s explosive representation of civil war into a wider imperial teleology by “correcting” Lucan’s treatment of their own subject matter and thereby recuperating these stories from the *Bellum Civile*’s violent depths. Silius’ *Punica*, for example, celebrates Republican Rome’s ancient virtues through the state’s successful confrontation with the possibility of civil discord at the battle of Cannae: by facing its own downfall, Rome learns how to rise again. Marks’ contribution follows naturally on Fucecchi’s, arguing that Silius invents the Syracusan sea-battle of *Punica* 14 precisely to invite its reading as response to Lucan’s Massilian sea-battle; Silius thereby aligns Syracuse with the other cities that fall through internal dissent rather than external force—a counterpoint to Rome’s successful triumph over *discordia*.

This theme of geographic and temporal distancing—a mainstay of Flavian epic scholarship—finds fertile new ground throughout the volume. While Thebes and Carthage have dominated conversations on the displacement of Roman identities onto the “Other,” Manoralaki (Ch. 16) explores Egypt’s “cultural currency” in Vespasian’s claim to *imperium*.

Manolaraki convincingly shows how Pliny's *Aegyptica* represents the duality of Egypt and of Vespasian's role as victor from and of the East for the Flavian cultural imagination: as Vespasian sought to recast Rome and its provinces as an integrated whole, so too did Pliny's "domestication" of Egypt reframe the relationship between center and periphery. Diminishing Egypt's singularity by comparison with (e.g.) Italy and Sicily, Pliny lowers the lights on one of Vespasian's more questionable moves during the civil war: his control of the grain trade. Likewise, by normalizing stereotypical Egyptian characteristics—fecundity, theriomorphism, exotic flora and fauna—Pliny de-alienates and defuses Egypt's threatening foreign landscape, integrating it into a cohesive imperial network as a site of enrichment rather than contention.

Chomse (Ch. 17) offers a counterpoint to Manolaraki's consideration of the Flavians' self-positioning at Rome's ideological center, showing their simultaneous distancing of Nero as hostile invader. Drawing on Kant's definitions of the sublime and its application in Latin literary studies, Chomse explores the monumentality of Martial's epigrams as parallel to the Flavian (re)construction of Rome: both produce delight through awareness of recent horrors as they rebuild Rome on the "sublimely unstable" foundation of the Neronian age. The Colosseum, for instance, inherits and reappropriates Nero's attempt to fold *urbs* and *orbis* into a single *domus* and, within its walls, reenacts the violence of *bellum civile* by pitting inhabitants of Rome's empire against each other before the urban audience. Martial's epigrams celebrate violence repackaged as public gift—an apt metaphor for the Flavians' self-construction.

New directions are also suggested by König's chapter on Frontinus' *Strategemata*, which compellingly argues both for further study of a text that has heretofore received little attention in Flavian scholarship, and for a reconsideration of what material should be considered "literary." This chapter, indeed, challenges a number of scholarly assumptions underpinning contributions to this volume. König compares Frontinus' collection of military *exempla* with his epic counterparts' impulse to distance contemporary issues through the lens of mythology or mythologized history. Showing how Frontinus' juxtaposition of contemporary and historical *exempla* in foreign and civil war may reflect on his cultural *Zeitgeist*, König raises the provocative question of whether this treatment neutralizes the trauma of civil war or places such conflict front and center, "exposing the festering sore that Valerius Maximus suggested should be kept out of sight" (160).

A different sort of displacement is considered by Bessone (Ch. 5). As she points out, recent interest in Flavian literature has focused primarily on political and cultural engagement rather than stylistics, a byproduct of the label "Silver Latin" with its implications of baroque and mannered density. Bessone examines style as political commentary, showing how Statius' poetics extend the pervasive theme of internal discord to the linguistic level—"as if inscribed in its DNA" (89). Offering a new angle on the filial relationship posited by Hardie (and others) between Vergil and his successors, Bessone's contribution makes a strong case for the premise of the volume as a whole, i.e., that the Flavian authors engage with their predecessors through an established language of civil war.

Several chapters address the combined questions of exemplarity and literary inheritance, with greater and lesser success. While the majority of chapters do much to advance our understanding of Flavian literature, others show the lurking chip-on-the-shoulder of the period's "Silver Age"

designation. Dominik (Ch. 13), for instance, makes the case for the *Punica*'s relevance to its contemporary political climate. In so doing, he seems to take a step back in the scholarly discourse that is somewhat surprising in the context of this volume. Penwill, to whom the volume is posthumously dedicated, analyzes Valerius Flaccus' integration of Lucanian poetics into the *Argonautica* to argue that the ubiquity of (destructive) desire for power undermines any positive reading of the poem's teleology. The most surprising aspect of Penwill's analysis is his ascription of intentionality to the *Argonautica*'s abrupt ending halfway through the eighth book; he follows Masters' (1992) reading of Lucan to suggest that Valerius broke off his text before Medea could implicate Jason in her brother's murder.² This is a difficult argument to make.

Despite this *caveat*, fruitful conversation emerges between Penwill and van der Schuur (Ch. 7), both of whom read the incomplete works of Seneca and Lucan as invitation and provocation to their successors to engage with the dense intertwining of epic and tragic representations of civil war. The unfinished business of the Neronian poets becomes the principal topic of their Flavian heirs—a different sort of intergenerational curse that invites the Flavian authors to move beyond anticipation of civil war to its full fruition.

Compelling dialogue likewise emerges between contributions that approach the same passage from different interpretive angles. Foremost among these is the Saguntum episode in *Punica* 2, with which Bernstein (Ch. 9), Marks (Ch. 3), Penwill (Ch. 4), and Hulls (Ch. 15) variously engage. Bernstein continues the discussion of exemplarity with a chapter on the Saguntum episode in Book 2 of Silius' Italicus' *Punica*, arguing that this episode demonstrates a fundamentally Flavian distrust of the appeal to *fides*, or, more broadly, to exemplarity. Hulls compares the episode to the mass suicides of Jotapata and Masada in Josephus' *Bellum Judaicum* to offer a model in which suicide "literalizes the metaphor of civil war" (323). Stover (Ch. 6), Keith (Ch. 14), and Landrey (Ch. 11), engage in a productive conversation through Statius' and Valerius' Lemnian episodes. Stover examines Statius' description of Harmonia's necklace (*Theb.* 2.269-305) as commentary on his poetic composition. In his reading, this *decorum nefas* (2.294-5)—a physical catalyst of war—intertextually reevaluates the presence of civil war in the *Argonautica*; Statius thereby incorporates the material of the *Argonautica* into a narrative that unambiguously progresses towards *nefas*. Keith explores the gendering of civil war in Flavian epic, a response to Augustan rhetorics of order established through the domestication of out-of-control women. She traces conflict between the sexes as an integral element of *bellum civile* through Valerius' Lemnian massacre and Silius' Saguntum episode, where the Fury Tisiphone instigates self-destruction, to Statius' (Vergilian and Valerian) motif of brides who embroil their husbands in civil war. Reading these women as physical embodiments of the Furies elsewhere associated more abstractly with civil war, Keith's chapter offers a wider framework for Stover's close reading.

Landrey investigates Valerius' Lemnian episode as mythological homologue to the burning of the temple of Capitoline Jupiter in December of 69 CE. By rescuing her father in a sequence that closely replicates Domitian's escape from enemy troops, the Lemnian princess Hypsipyle figures those Romans who chose to abstain from civil strife. While Landrey's reading of Hypsipyle as *exemplum virtutis* is undoubtedly correct, his assertion that she represents Valerius' "carefully crafted antidote to all of civil war's ills" (243) is somewhat jarring. If Thoas' rescue is meant to

² Masters, J. (1992). *Poetry and Civil War in Lucan's Bellum Civile*. Cambridge.

evoke Domitian's, the evaluation of Hypsipyle's deed depends very much on the reader's temporal and political perspective.

Mason (Ch. 10) interrogates Flavian representations of exemplary virtue from a different angle, comparing Josephus' and Tacitus' account of Vespasian's motives to reassert Josephus' authorial independence. Mason points to an intriguing problem of the historiography of civil war both ancient and modern: how to know when such conflict is actually over. Without an opponent to (decisively) destroy, the teleology of *bellum civile* must be the product of hindsight rather than its actors' pursuit of a successful conclusion. From this angle, Vespasian's entrance into the melee of 68/9 CE is not intervention in a destructive civil war, but the initiation of a new one.

Amidst this wealth of compelling and innovative scholarship, only minor criticisms present themselves. Many of the contributions engage with questions of methodology and terminology, collectively unpacking the vocabulary used to investigate Rome's understanding of its own *bellum civile*. While the editors in their introduction do a good job of pointing out themes shared among chapters, it would have been interesting to see more dialogue on this broader conceptual conversation; this is of course a tall order in a volume of this scale.

On a more prosaic level, while the editors use chapter numbers throughout the introduction, these numbers appear nowhere else in the volume; the Table of Contents lists only "Parts", and the chapters themselves are not numbered. This minor awkwardness means that the reader must count chapters for herself (the Introduction counts as Ch. 1). Other peculiarities include inconsistent section titles allotted to the chapters' endings, from "Epilogue" to various "Conclusion" and "Conclusions." These are minor quibbles, and do little to undermine the significant contribution that this volume makes to current scholarship both in Flavian studies and to the consideration of civil war in Rome's cultural consciousness.

Authors and titles

Part I: Lucanean Lenses

Marco Fucecchi, Flavian Epic: Roman Ways of Metabolizing a Cultural Nightmare?

Raymond Marks, Sparsis Mauors agitatus in oris: Lucan and Civil War in Punica 14

John Penwill, How It All Began: Civil War and Valerius's Argonautica

Part II: Narrating Nefas in Statius's Thebaid

Federica Bessone, Signs of Discord: Statius's Style and the Traditions on Civil War

Timothy Stover, Civil War and the Argonautic Program of Statius's Thebaid

Marco van der Schuur, Civil War on the Horizon: Seneca's Thyestes and Phoenissae in Statius's Thebaid 7

Part III: Leadership and Exemplarity

Alice König, Reading Civil War in Frontinus's Strategemata: A Case-Study for Flavian Literary Studies

Neil W. Bernstein, Inuitas maculant cognato sanguine dextras: Civil War Themes in Silius's

Saguntum Episode

Steve Mason, Vespasian's Rise from Civil War in Josephus's *Bellum Judaicum*

Leo Landrey, Embroidered Histories: Lemnos and Rome in Valerius Flaccus's *Argonautica*

Part IV: Family, Society, and Self

Claire Stocks, Band of Brothers: Fraternal Instability and Civil Strife in Silius Italicus's *Punica*

William J. Dominik, Civil War, Parricide, and the Sword in Silius Italicus's *Punica*

Alison Keith, Engendering Civil War in Flavian Epic

Jean-Michel Hulls, A Last Act of Love? Suicide and Civil War as Tropes in Silius Italicus's

Punica and Josephus's *Bellum Judaicum*

Part V: Ruination, Restoration, and Empire

Eleni Hall Manolaraki, Domesticating Egypt in Pliny's *Natural History*

Darcy A. Krasne, Valerius Flaccus's Collapsible Universe: Patterns of Cosmic Disintegration in the *Argonautica*

Siobhan Chomse, Instability and the Sublime in Martial's *Liber Spectaculorum*
