Roman Epic

History as Epic

Lucan, *Pharsalia* 7

Discussion

- The *Pharsalia* is a pretty big departure from what we've been reading, both in terms of style and of content.
    - What do you think the ultimate message of this epic is?
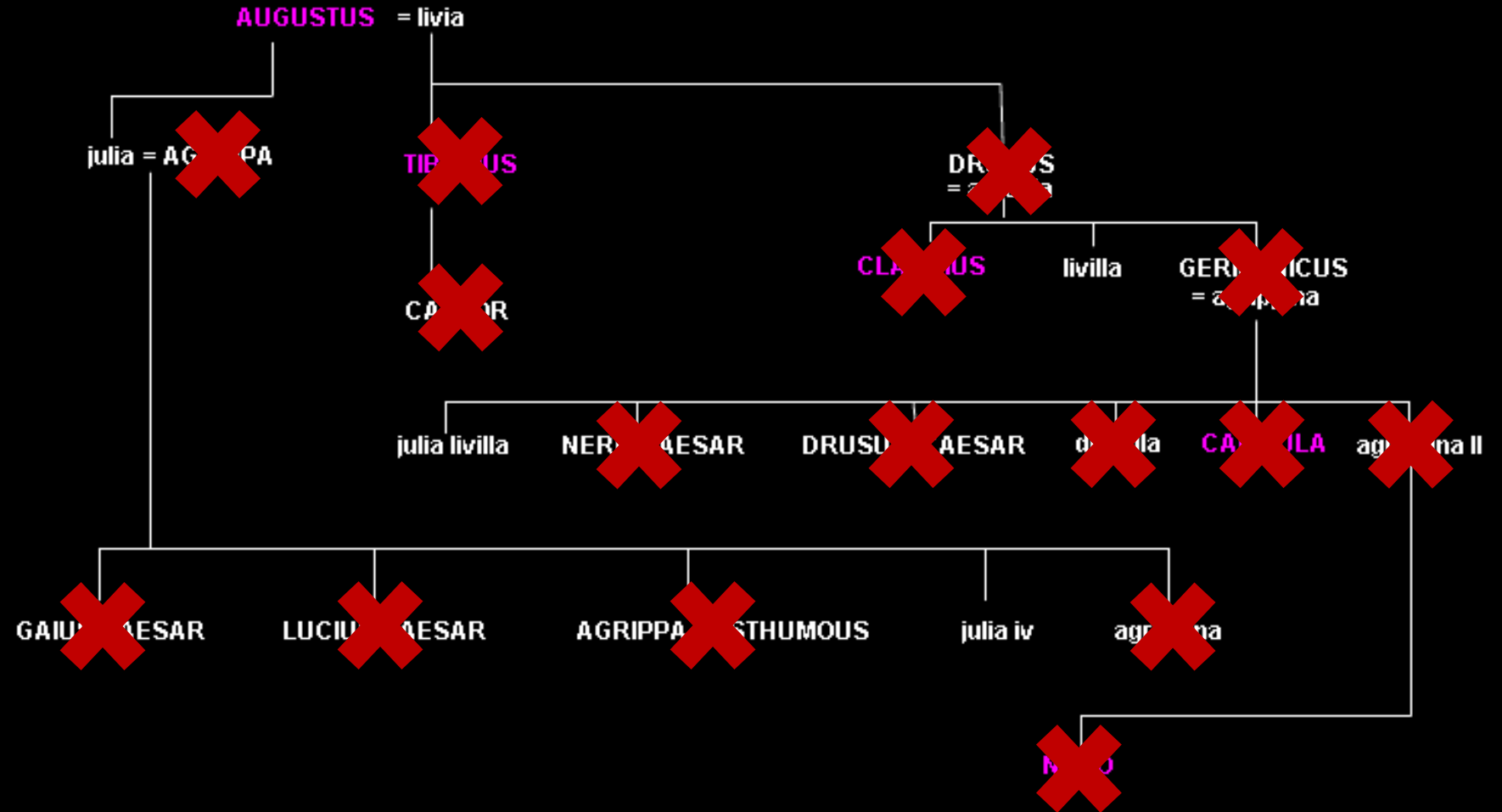
Lucan

- Born in Cordoba in Spain in 39 CE, when the empire was firmly established

- Gained fame under Nero in the 60s CE
  - Promptly fell out of favor

- Implicated in the Pisonian Conspiracy in 65 CE to kill Nero
  - *Pharsalia* unfinished

The Julio-Claudian Family Tree

- The purple names were emperors

- The ✖ names didn't die naturally

- What was the point of the moral codes?

Lucan and Roman history

- *Pharsalia* or *De bello civili* within tradition of Roman history as epic
  - Everyone in his day would have known about Caesar's war with Pompey
    - Everyone would know when he changes something
  - Not drawing on specific earlier epic traditions so much as treating recent history with an epic form
  - To understand it, we have to know that history

  - Starts with the First Triumvirate (60-53 BCE), ends in civil war
    - Caesar marries his daughter to Pompey in attempt to seal peace

Civil Wars and the End of the Republic

- 88–87 BC: Lucius Cornelius Sulla vs. Gaius Marius (S
- 82–81 BC: Sulla vs. Marius' supporters (Sullan victor
- 80–72 BC: Rome vs. Quintus Sertorius (in Hispania), victory)
- 77 BC: Lepidus vs. Sulla (Sullan victory)
- 63–62 BC: Catilinarian Conspiracy vs. Senate (Senato
- 49–45 BC: Julius Caesar vs. Pompey the Great (Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus) and the Senate (Caesarian victory)
- 44–42 BC: Second Triumvirate (Octavian and Antonius) vs. Caesar's assassins and Pompey's son (Triumvirate victory)
- 41–40 BC: Octavian vs. Lucius Antonius and Fulvia (the younger brother and wife of Mark Antony) (Octavian victory)
- 32–30 BC: Octavian vs. Antonius and Cleopatra (Octavian victory)

No one wanted to return to *this* Republic
- They wanted to return to a more idealized Republic where they had power

Caesar's Civil War

- 49–45 BC: Julius Caesar vs. Pompey the Great (Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus) and the Senate (Caesarian victory)
  - Caesar defends himself
  - A tale of two "Romes"
  - The vassals gather
  - Converge on Pharsalus

Caesar's Civil War

- 49–45 BC: Julius Caesar vs. Pompey the Great (Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus) and the Senate (Caesarian victory)
  - Caesar's army was vastly outnumbered
  - Pompey's army was brand new
  - Catastrophic defeat for Pompey (Republic?)
    - Fled to Egypt, executed
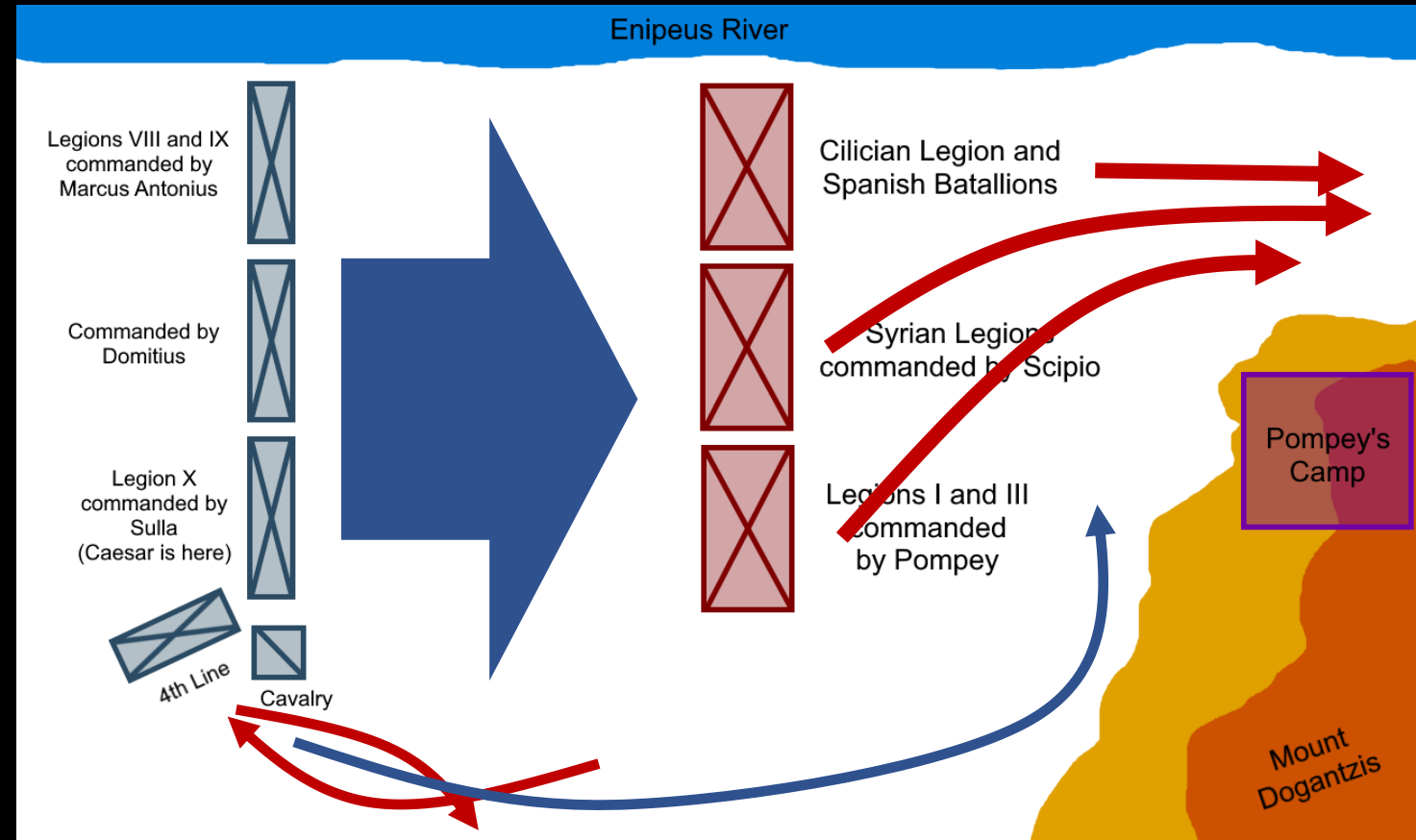
Lucan's *Civil War (Pharsalia)*

- Books 1-6:
  - Opens with encomium to Nero
  - Caesar begins the civil war against the wishes of Roma and with evil omens; Rome and other cities allied with the Senate are cast into despair (or siege and destruction), Pompey and other senators flee, Cato argues with Brutus for a "just war" against an evil oppressor
  - Caesar is victorious in the west, Pompey rallies allies in the east; Oracle of Delphi produces confusing prophesy, powerful witch Erichtho (through necromancy) prophesies Pompey's defeat and Caesar's death
    - Sets the stage for an epic tragedy

Lucan's *Civil War (Pharsalia)*

- Book 7:
  - Pompey's dream and harsh reality
  - Pompey claims he can win without fighting
    - Ultimately follows moral imperative
  - Expectation of battle creates panic and confusion (Mars is unpredictable)
  - Caesar whips soldiers into bloodthirsty frenzy, Pompey reminds them of their duty and heroes of old
  - Battle
  - Pompey "withdraws" while Caesar feasts on the battlefield

Lucan's *Civil War (Pharsalia)*

- Books 8-10
  - Pompey flees to Egypt, suspects his own death and still faces it willingly as a messianic sacrifice; King Ptolemy kills Pompey; Caesar struggles to contain joy
  - Cato takes command of Senate's army while Caesar wastes time in Egypt; ends abruptly with attempts to assassinate Caesar

The Analysis

- The Social Background
  - Gods?
    - Absent and/or denied
      - Outright hostility and denial (58-61)
      - Question existence/power/usefulness (193; 250 ff.)
      - Don't help, only punish (455 ff.)
      - Caesar uses them though…
        - Appeals to them (297)
        - Narrator asks what non-State gods used to subvert natural order (168-71)
  - War is blind and unpredictable once unleashed (85 ff.)

Mix of upper class Roman Stoicism and Epicureanism
- Agency with humans

The Analysis

- The Narrator's Voice
  - Lucan is very present throughout (his voice is italicized)
  - Can barely tell own story (551-5)
  - Rhetorical devices to make the point more clear:
    - Introduces anachronisms to suit narrative
      - Cicero was never at the battle (62 ff.)
        - Morals of the Old Republic demanded battle
    - Has to downplay victory to play up defeated virtues
    - Long view of time
      - Conflation of Pharsalus with Philippi (849 ff.) conflates all Julio-Claudians with the crimes of Caesar

The Analysis

- The Literary Background
  - Epic similes used in the old way for flavor
  - Same use of myth and drama, but not emphasized
  - Type-Scenes (because they need to be there, right?)
    - Descriptions of Battle (in general)
    - Arming Scene (139 ff.) but not formulaic, very different
    - Catalogue of allies (214 ff.)
    - Battle Speeches (Caesar: 235 ff.; Pompey: 337 ff.)
      - Caesar mocking defeated and mortally wounded general (606 ff.)

The Analysis

- Language and Performance
  - Careful language to place blame for everything on Caesar
    - "greedy longing for kingship" (240)
    - Whipping his troops and mocking defeated enemies
    - Dining at the end among carrion birds and dogs
  - Language of kingship draws a line from Caesar to Nero

The Analysis

- The Idea of the Hero
  - A Tale of Two Leaders/Ideals/Governments/Philosophies…
    - Pompey
      - Wants to avoid war if possible
      - Modeled on old heroes of Early Republic
      - Leads an army made of patricians (nobility)
      - Cares about his men (enough to run away from battle)
    - Caesar
      - Wants to be a king
      - Relishes in bloodshed and death
      - Leads an army made of plebeians (and psychopathic mercenaries)

Mos Maiorum

Polar opposite

"What will Rome be? (133)"

- Only a subversive epic written under an emperor who didn't care to shape his own propaganda by a man executed for sedition could ask that question
- Shame isn't to have a king, but to willingly submit to one (426 ff.) and choose slavery over freedom
  - Easy to see why he and Nero had a falling out
  - Gods can't be used because they tend to validate the victor, and Lucan wanted to revive the defeated and their claim to morality (which disputes the victor's claim to moral superiority)

"What will Rome be? (133)"

- Morality at the heart of all of this
  - "the victorious cause pleased the gods, but the conquered cause pleased Cato" (1.128)
  - "throughout the world and for all time, we are ruined" (7.640)
  - Conflict of "Caesarism" vs. Republicanism
    - State benefits most from stability offered by autocrats, but individuals benefit most from freedom of self-government
    - Criticizing the basis for imperial government is actively subversive
    - But we've seen this before, remember Dido and Turnus…?

What Exactly Did He Want Though?

- 88–87 BC: Lucius Cornelius Sulla vs. Gaius Marius (Sullan victory)

- 82–81 BC: Sulla vs. Marius' supporters (Sullan victory)

- 80–72 BC: Rome vs. Quintus Sertorius (in Hispania), a supporter of Marius (Sullan victory)

- 77 BC: Lepidus vs. Sulla (Sullan victory)

- 63–62 BC: Catilinarian Conspiracy vs. Senate (Senatorial victory)

- 49–45 BC: Julius Caesar vs. Pompey the Great (Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus) and the Senate (Caesarian victory)

- 44–42 BC: Second Triumvirate (Octavian and Antonius) vs. Caesar's assassins and Pompey's son (Triumvirate victory)

- 41–40 BC: Octavian vs. Lucius Antonius and Fulvia (the younger brother and wife of Mark Antony) (Octavian victory)

- 32–30 BC: Octavian vs. Antonius and Cleopatra (Octavian victory)

What Exactly Did He Want Though?

- 88–87 BC: Luci
- 82–81 BC: Sul
- 80–72 BC: Ro
  victory)
- 77 BC: Lepidu
- 63–62 BC: Ca
- 49–45 BC: Jul
  Senate (Caesar
- 44–42 BC: Sec
  Pompey's son
- 41–40 BC: Oc
  Mark Antony)
- 32–30 BC: Octa

- The "peace" that ended all of this came at the cost of brutally eliminating all other voices
- Caesar (and Augustus, and their entire family) brought that peace through brutality and bloodletting
  - By not recognizing the possibility that other voices could exist, and slaughtering those voices without mercy or hesitation
  - This is not a good or moral thing, and it's no way to run an empire
- Ideals are seductive