

The 'Carmen de bello Actiaco' and Early Imperial Epic

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It is a commonplace of historians of Latin literature that, after Vergil, all epic poetry looked back to him. He had absorbed into his own writing all that Ennius, Naevius, Lucretius, and perhaps Cicero had to offer, so that later poets did not need to think of their contributions at all and could base their own work upon the Vergilian norm.¹ At first glance this claim appears to be beyond controversy, yet there is one aspect of epic in which Vergil did not show the way to those who followed but rather dominated the field to such a degree that he appears to have frightened off potential rivals. This refers not to style but to subject; Vergil had written a vast epic of legend and myth, while many of his immediate successors chose not to challenge him on his ground but to revert to the example of Naevius and write of contemporary or nearly contemporary historical events.² The epic writers who survive from the mid and late first century A.D. do not generally exemplify this trend: Lucan chose a subject more than a century before his own time, Silius Italicus went back about three centuries, and Valerius Flaccus and Statius chose themes from Greek legend. But in the half century following the death of Vergil, the tendency seems to have been quite different.

Let us discount Ovid, whose subject is anything but historical. Who then remains, whose name springs readily to mind? Alas, there are only the authors whose works have totally or very largely disappeared, who find a place in studies such as HENRY BARDON's 'La Littérature Latine Inconnue'.³ Cornelius Severus composed an epic on the 'Bellum Siculum', which culminated in the defeat of Sextus Pompeius;⁴ nothing certainly survives, although MOREL's 'Fragmenta Poetarum Latinorum' contains a baker's dozen of fragments, some of which might indeed come from this poem.⁵ Did the famous description of Cicero's

¹ See, for examples, E. E. SIKES, *Latin Literature of the Silver Age*, in: *CAH XI* (1936) 711, and C. W. MENDELL, *Latin Poetry: The Age of Rhetoric and Satire* (Archon 1967) 9.

² T. W. DICKSON, *Unwritten and Lost Epics of the Augustan Poets*, *CJ* 30 (1934-35) 278-86.

³ Tome II: *L'Époque Impériale* (Paris 1956).

⁴ *Ibid.* 61.

⁵ (Teubner 1927, reprinted 1963) 116-19.

death, which the Elder Seneca liked so much and hence quoted in the 'Suasoriae' (VI 26), form part of it? It is unlikely, just considering chronology, but it gives an example of his by no means negligible abilities.

Albinovanus Pedo began with a mythological theme, but soon turned to contemporary history, history, indeed, in which he played a part.⁶ He participated in the campaigns against the Germans under the command of Germanicus; of the poem which he later produced, only a fragment describing the storm which overwhelmed the Roman fleet has survived, again thanks to the Elder Seneca, who considered it the finest description of the Ocean in Latin.⁷ In Quintilian's eyes, he was at least a poet of the second rank; no Vergil, to be sure, but also no hack.⁸

Perhaps a still better poet was Rabirius, whom Quintilian joined in praise with Albinovanus and whose talent both Ovid and Velleius Paterculus admired.⁹ His subject was the war between Octavian and Antony; MOREL quotes five partial or complete lines, some of which probably come from this poem.¹⁰ Yet there is a chance that more, indeed, has survived.

A papyrus from Herculaneum, horribly mutilated and only partially legible with the greatest of difficulty, contains fragments of a poem dealing with the defeat and final hours of Antony and Cleopatra.¹¹ It is these lines that I wish to consider at greater length for the remainder of this paper, for even if they cannot be shown to be by Rabirius, that possibility still does exist,¹² and any study of the poetic treatment of the battle of Actium in the Augustan age should not totally ignore them.

But that they are almost totally ignored is shown by two extensive articles of fairly recent date, authored by M. L. PALADINI¹³ and Frère LÉON-MARCIEN.¹⁴ PALADINI cites the papyrus fragments twice in footnotes, LÉON-MARCIEN is

⁶ BARDON 69.

⁷ The most recent study of the fragment is H. W. BENARIO, *The Text of Albinovanus Pedo*, *Latomus* 32 (1973) 166-69.

⁸ *Inst. Orat.* X 1,10.

⁹ BARDON 73; Quintilian, *Inst. Orat.* X 1,10; Ovid, *Ep. ex Ponto* IV 16,5: *magni Rabirius oris*; Velleius II 36,3.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.* 120-21.

¹¹ It is one of the two oldest MSS of Latin poetry (P. J. PARSONS, *Elegiacs by Gallus from Qasr Ibrim*, *JRS* 69 [1979] 128.).

¹² *Communis opinio* currently is against accepting Rabirius' authorship: M. SCHANZ-C. HOSIUS, *Geschichte der römischen Literatur II, Die römische Literatur in der Zeit der Monarchie bis auf Hadrian*, *Handb. d. Altertumswiss.* VIII 2, (Munich 1935) (repr. 1959) 267; W. KRÖLL, *RE I A* (1914) 28 s. v. Rabirius; J. W. DUFF and G. B. A. FLETCHER, *OCD*² (Oxford 1970) 909 s. v. Rabirius; P. L. SCHMIDT, *Der Kleine Pauly* 4 (1972) 1329, s. v. Rabirius; BARDON; L. HERMANN, *Rabirius ou Lucilius Minor*, *Latomus* 25 (1966) 769-83. The date assigned is generally in the Neronian period.

¹³ M. L. PALADINI, *A proposito della tradizione poetica sulla battaglia di Azio*, *Latomus* 17 (1958) 240-69 and 462-75 (see 245 n. 2 and 268 n. 1).

¹⁴ Frère LÉON-MARCIEN, *L'interprétation de la bataille d'Actium par les poètes latins de l'époque augustéenne*, *LEC* 24 (1956) 330-48.

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completely silent. Granted that their interpretation is more difficult and hardly as satisfying as that of extant poems of major authors such as Vergil, Horace, and Propertius, there are certain differences in these fragments from the tradition handed down by other sources, and one could get a sense of the author's intent as regards the victor of the battle and the fate of the defeated.¹⁵

It is widely known that Cleopatra died by the bite of an asp which she held against her breast. She had tested the efficacy and varying degrees of pain produced by different poisons by using condemned criminals as unwilling victims. But the consensus of ancient sources does not go beyond this. Only the 'Carmen' testifies that she vicariously experienced other means of death in a massive scene of death, suffering, and torture.¹⁶ The embroidery of the accepted asp poisoning has a kind of 'grand Guignol' effect. It adds an unexpected horror, in which is an undercurrent of sexuality. *Libido mortis* substitutes for the common *amor mortis*. Whether this better suits the age of Augustus or, for example, that of Nero, as exemplified by some of the violence of Seneca and Lucan, is a question that can only be answered subjectively. If, as COZZOLINO¹⁷ argues, the poem is earlier than Lucan's epic, one must then try to fit it into the literary output of previous decades. The subject would certainly have had appeal in the years following Actium, when there were still living some who had experienced the fear and thrill of that great battle and the overriding impact of Cleopatra's power and person. It may thus be that the possibility of Rabirius' authorship should not be rejected out of hand. But, whatever the conclusion, the passage shows how the Cleopatra phase of Rome's history continued to have impact on writers subsequent to the great contemporaries of the Augustan age.

In 1958, G. GARUTI published an extensive and detailed study of the fragments and offered a new text, based upon his own readings and earlier transcriptions.¹⁸ His work is basic; although E. J. KENNEY subjected it to a harsh review, other critics, H. BARDON, L. HERMANN, P. FRASSINETTI, and G. CAMBIER, have been more generous.¹⁹ GARUTI's book is not widely available, and FRASSINETTI has offered alternative readings in a number of passages. Consequently, I offer here a composite text, with a modest apparatus of alternate readings from the works cited above.²⁰

¹⁵ See E. GROAG, *Beiträge zur Geschichte des zweiten Triumvirats*, *Klio* 14 (1915) 59.

¹⁶ J. LINDSAY, *Cleopatra* (New York 1970) 413.

¹⁷ A. COZZOLINO, *Il Bellum Actiacum e Lucano*, *Cronache Ercolanesi* 5 (1975) 81-86, concludes that several passages in Lucan display an affinity with the 'Carmen', which must be earlier.

¹⁸ *Bellum Actiacum* (Bologna 1958).

¹⁹ KENNEY, *CR* 10 (1960) 138-39; BARDON, *REL* 37 (1959) 359-60; HERMANN, *op. cit.*; FRASSINETTI, *Sul 'Bellum Actiacum'* (*Pap. Herc. 817*), *Athenaeum* 38 (1960) 299-309; CAMBIER, *A propos d'une édition récente du 'Bellum Actiacum'* (*Pap. Herc. 817*), *CE* 36 (1961) 393-407.

²⁰ I am grateful to J. M. CONANT and H. C. RUTLEDGE for help with interpretation of the Latin text.

Col. I The subject is Octavian's attack on and capture of Pelusium

..... c um
 [p]roxim [c]ael[es]tia sem[per]
 †cesar . . . a . . . ad [P]hariam s exc[it]
 [ho]rtans ille [petit] nato cum [pro]elia por[t]am,
 quem iuvenem [g]ran[d]a[e]vos erat per [c]uncta [sec]u[tus] 5
 bella, fide dextraque pos[t]ens rerumque per us[um]
 callidus, adsidu[us] tra]ctando in munere [Mart]is.
 Imminet opsessis Italus iam turribus [ho]stis,
 a[ut] d[oma]t[obstanti]s, nec defu[it] impetus illis.

4 hortans F., fert his G.; petit F., pater G.;

7 adsiduus F., adsiduos G.

Col. II Octavian restrains the enthusiasm of his soldiers because the city is already captured.

..... [illo]s [se]qu[itur]
 [fugiu]nt ipso[que] infecta cr[u]o[re]
 [funera] succ[edunt] patr[is] defor]mia t[er]ris,
 [et] foed]a i[psa] m]agis quam s[ic] co]ngl[es]ta later[e]nt,
 cum [s]uper]ans La]tius Pelusia [m]oenia Caesar 5
 [coep]erat im]p[er]i[us] animos cohi]be]re su[orum]:
 „Quid [c]apitis iam [ca]pta iacen[t] quae [praemia belli?]
 subruitis ferr[o] me]a moenia. quondam er[at] hostis
 haec mihi cum d[iv]a plebes quoque: nu[nc] sibi] victrix
 vindicat h[anc] fa]mulam Romana pote[n]tia ta]ndem.“ 10

7 praemia belli G., prona quid usque F.

Col. III Consolation offered to Cleopatra by an unknown companion.

..... lius
 im o u
 [cessit] Al[e]xandro tha]l]amos [o]ner[a]re de[o]rum;
 di[co] etiam no[l]uisse deam vidiss[e] t]um[ultu]s
 Actiacos, cum [c]ausa fores tu ma]xi]ma [be]lli, 5
 pars etiam im]p[er]ii. quae femina t[an]ta, vi[r]orum
 quae serie[s] antiqua [f]uit? ni gloria mendax
 multa v[et]us[t]atis nimio c[on]cedat honoris!

3 cessit F.; 8 vetustatis G., venustatis F.; honori BARDON

difficult and hardly as
 Vergil, Horace, and
 s from the tradition
 the author's intent as

15
 n asp which she held
 ing degrees of pain
 minals as unwilling
 yond this. Only the
 means of death in a
 dery of the accepted
 t unexpected horror,
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; HERMANN, op. cit.;
 38 (1960) 299-309;
 ap. herc. 817), CE 36

interpretation of the

Col. IV Cleopatra's thoughts and words.

..... *rn* *no*
 „Saepe eg[*o*] quae ve[*st*]ris cu[*pid*]e [se]rmonib[*u*s] uto[r]-
 qua[*s*] igitur segnis [e]t[*f*]ia[n]nunc quaerere causas
 exs[*a*]ngu[*i*]sque moras vitae libet? Est mihi coniunx,
 [Part]ho[*s*] qu[*i*] posset [P]hariis subiungere regnis,
 qui s[*pre*]vit, nostr[*a*]eque mori pro nomine gentis.“
 his igitur [p]artis a[ni]mu[*s*] didu[*ctu*]s in om[n]is,
 [q]uid velit incertum est, terr[*i*]s quibus aut quibus undis

5

2 vestris cupide F., veteris curae G.; utor F., angor G.; 5 Parthos qui G., Parthica
 si F.; 6 spreuit G., statuit F.; 8 animus F.; animum G.; 4-6 "extremely odd
 Latin," KENNEY.

Col. V and VI Cleopatra experimented on condemned criminals to find out
about different kinds of death

[Dele]ctumqu[e] lo[*c*]um quo noxia turba co[*i*]ret
 praeberetque suae spectacula tri[*s*]tia mortis.
 Qualis ad instantis acies cum tela parantur,
 signa tubae classesque simul terrestribus armis,
 est facies ea visa loci, cum saeva coirent
 instrumenta necis, v[*a*]rio congesta paratu:
 und[*i*]que sic illuc campo deforme co[*a*]c[t]um
 omne vagabatur leti genus, omne timoris.

5

[Hic] iacet [ab]sumptus f[*er*ro, tu[*m*]et [il]le ven[*en*o]
 aut pendente [cav]is cervicibus aspide mollem
 labitur in somnum trahiturque libidine mortis:
 percutit [ad]flatu brevis hunc sine morsibus anguis,
 vulnere seu t[*e*]nui pars inlita parva veneni
 ocuis interem[*i*]t, laqueis pars cogitur artis
 in[t]ersaeptam animam pressis effundere venis,
 in[*n*]mersisque f[*r*]eto clausurunt guttura fauces.
 [H]as inter strages solio descendit et inter

5

Col. VII Cleopatra laments her abandonment by Antony and contemplates
death.

Atq[ue] alia incipiens miseram me linquit] a[*man*]te[*m*].“
 Sic illi in[*te*]r se misero [s]e[r]m[*o*]n[e] fruuntur.
 Haec regina gerit: procul hanc occulta videbat
 Atropos inrid[*e*]ns [in]ter diversa vagantem
 consilia interitus, quam iam qua fata manerent.

5

Col.

Trar

I. "he, i
prov
busi
concII. "bloo
they
wall
"Wh
dest
an e
for iIII. say
wer
anci
shouIV. fore
hust
for
thei
wha

109

*Ter fuerat revocata d[i]es: cum parte se[n]atus
et patriae comitante suae cum milite Caesar
gentis Alexan[d]ri c[ur]rens ad m[en]sura[m] venit,
signaque constituit; sic omnes t[er]ror in artum*

1 miseram me F.

5

Col. VIII The Roman army encamps before the walls of Alexandria.

*[atte]rere [atque etia]m portarum claustra nec urbem
opsidione tamen n[on] corpora moenibus ar[ce]nt
castraque pro muris atque arma pedestria ponunt.
Hos inter coetus [t]alisque ad bella paratus
utraque sollemnis iterum revocaverat orbes
consiliis nox apta ducum, lux aptior armis.*

5

1 atterere atque etiam, F. after a verb such as *possent* in the preceding lines.

Translation

I. ". . . when he, urging battles on his son, seeks the gate, the young man whom he, aged, had followed through all wars, powerful in allegiance and his physical prowess, skillful through his experience of things, constantly busy in handling the business of Mars. The Italian enemy now threatens the besieged towers or conquers those who resist, nor did the besieged lack spirit."

II. ". . . he pursues them . . . they flee and deaths, befouled with the visible blood, approach, ugly to their native lands, and themselves more foul than if they were to lie hidden, heaped together, when Latin Caesar, conquering the walls of Pelusium, began to restrain the spirits of his men with his commands: 'Why do you capture the prizes of war which already lie captured? You are destroying my walls with iron. Once this people, along with the goddess, was an enemy to me; now victorious Roman power at last claims her as a maid servant for itself.'"

III. ". . . it fell to the lot of Alexander to sit on the couches of the gods; I even say that the goddess did not wish to see the tumults of Actium, although you were a very great cause of the war, even a part of command. What woman, what ancient succession of men was so great? Unless much lying glory of antiquity should yield to an excess of honor."

IV. "'Often I who eagerly enjoy your conversations — what feeble causes, therefore, and tedious delays of life does it even now give pleasure to seek? I have a husband, who was able to subject the Parthians to the Egyptian realms and to die for the fame of our race, who scorned to do so.' With these words, therefore, their minds were drawn in all directions, it is uncertain what she wishes, in what lands or what seas . . ."

*hos qui G., Parthica
4-6 "extremely odd*

inals to find out

5

5

ind contemplates

"

5

V. "And the chosen place where the guilty mob might assemble and offer grim spectacles of their own deaths. Just as when weapons are being prepared for oncoming battles, standards, trumpets, and fleets, along with land arms, so seemed the appearance of the place, when the cruel instruments of death assembled, brought together with varied preparation: gathered there on the field from everyplace in this way, every foul kind of death was wandering, every kind of fear."

VI. "This one lies cut off by the sword, that one is swollen with poison or, with the asp hanging on his hollow neck, drifts into soft sleep and is led on by the desire for death: this one a small snake kills with its breath without a bite, or a small amount of poison, smeared in a slight wound, kills more quickly, some are compelled by tightened nooses to pour forth their blocked breath from compressed passageways, and the throats of those plunged in water closed the openings. In the midst of this slaughter she descended from her throne and among . . ."

VII. ". . . And so, beginning other things, he abandons me his wretched lover.' Thus they enjoy their mutual sad conversation. These things the queen does: hidden at a distance, Atropos saw her, mocking her as she wandered among different plans of death, whom now somehow the fates were awaiting. Thrice had the day been called back: when Caesar, with part of the senate and his country accompanying him, came running with his soldiers to the walls of Alexander's race, and planted his standards; thus terror . . . all into a narrow place . . ."

VIII. "(although) they were even able to destroy the barriers of the gates, they nonetheless neither keep the city from siege nor their own bodies from the walls and they place their camp and their infantry weapons before the walls. In the midst of these gatherings and such preparations for war, each had a second time called back its solemn circuits, night suited for the deliberations of leaders, light more suited for arms."

I. I
II. I
III. I
IV. I
V. M
Adde

I. In

HAM
The
HAN
rece
Paul

'Pan
segu
la se
pare,
richi

sul c
fida

¹ D
² V
C
³ II
⁴ TI