

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Thomas May, *Lucan's Pharsalia* (1627), edited by Emma Buckley and Edward Paleit, Tudor and Stuart Translations 18 (Cambridge: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2020). 451pp. ISBN 978 1 7818 8008 1.

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This book offers the first fully annotated, modern-spelling critical edition of Thomas May's translation of Lucan's *Pharsalia*. Emma Buckley and Edward Paleit contextualise, dissect and discuss a text that has rarely been the subject of critical scrutiny despite its popularity during the seventeenth century. The editors' analysis and commentary engage with classical and early modern sources while also incorporating contemporary research on issues relevant to May's translation, all the while privileging the text itself as the central focus of the examination.

Thomas May was an early Stuart-era playwright, poet and translator. Coming from a strong academic background, he wrote comedies and tragedies drawing upon classical antiquity, but he became renowned for his translation of Lucan's *Pharsalia*, as well as for several other English translations of the classics. After years of apparent royalist loyalty, which even witnessed his composition of a continuation of the *Pharsalia* commissioned by King Charles I himself, he became a supporter of Parliament in 1640 until his death in 1650; during the Restoration, his name was the object of slander and ridicule, and May's works lost a large share of the respect they had earned during the 1620s and 1630s.

Scholarly attention towards May has been slowly rising over the past few decades, and some of his works have been the subject of critical contributions and editions. David Norbrook has displayed a continued interest in May, especially by investigating his translation of Lucan, with several essays and the entry for Thomas May in the *ODNB*.¹

¹ See 'Lucan, Thomas May, and the Creation of a Republican Literary Culture', in *Culture and Politics in Early Stuart England*, edited by Kevin Sharpe and Peter Lake (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 45–66.

May has been mentioned relatively frequently and has occasionally been devoted chapters in monographs centring around Stuart literature and politics, as well as in volumes dealing with the reception of the Roman past in early modern England.² Although editions of his plays are still rare, with just four published throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, 2016 witnessed the publication of Matteo Pangallo's critical edition of May's *Antigone*.³

Buckley and Paleit's volume follows this trend of rediscovery (and the editors' own research path — see, in particular, Buckley's 'Reviving Lucan: Marlowe, Tamburlaine, and Lucan's First Booke' and Paleit's *War, Liberty, and Caesar: Responses to Lucan's 'Bellum Civile', ca. 1580-1650*) and offers the first modernised and annotated edition of this translation.⁴ To be sure, although May's *Continuation*, originally published in 1630, has enjoyed relative editorial success and has often been reprinted alongside more recent translations of Lucan's text, his English version of the *Pharsalia* has been neglected since it was displaced as the standard English translation by that of Nicholas Rowe in 1719.

The volume opens with a concise and thorough overview of May's life and work, which takes into account critical commentary from the early modern era onwards; mentions of the infamy tied to his name ever since the Restoration and Andrew Marvell's satire 'Tom May's Death' are relegated to few lines at the end of this short biography, thereby indicating the editors' intention to investigate Lucan's *Pharsalia* from a new angle. After providing readers with May's biography, the editors proceed with an outline of Lucan's text and its contextualisation within the frame of English Renaissance culture. The summary is a balanced amalgam of historiographical information, literary practice and Lucan's own life — which cannot be ignored since it 'has always been an important accompaniment to his text' (p. 9) — and everything is observed through the lens of early modern readers and scholars. Prior to this English version, Lucan's *Pharsalia* had been rather popular and often a subject of debate among readers, proving fertile ground

² See J. G. A. Pocock, 'Thomas May and the Narrative of Civil War', in *Writing and Political Engagement in Seventeenth-Century England*, edited by Derek Hirst and Richard Strier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 112–42; Angelica Vedelago, 'Ben Jonson's and Thomas May's "Political Ladies": Forms of Female Political Agency', and Emanuel Stelzer, "'Poison on, Monsters": Female Poisoners in Early Modern Roman Tragedies', in *Roman Women in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*, edited by Domenico Lovascio (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2020), 141–64 and 207–26.

³ Thomas May, *The Tragedy of Antigone, the Theban Princesse*, edited by Matteo Pangallo (Manchester: Manchester University Press for The Malone Society, 2016).

⁴ Emma Buckley, 'Reviving Lucan: Marlowe, Tamburlaine, and Lucan's First Booke', in *Conversations: Classical and Renaissance Intertextuality*, edited by Syrithe Pugh (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 91–120; Edward Paleit, *War, Liberty, and Caesar: Responses to Lucan's 'Bellum Civile', ca. 1580–1650* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

for discussions centring alternatively on literary value, historical accuracy, Stoic overtones in the text, the dramatisation of civil war and ideals of republican identity, although it is debatable whether the concept of republicanism as interpreted after 1649 also applied in the same way to earlier readings of the text and to May's own outlook. A more substantial part of the introduction is devoted to discussing May's translation itself. A translation of the first three books of the *Pharsalia* by May was entered into the Stationers' Register and printed in 1626; 'the whole ten bookes' were published a year later. Buckley and Paleit propose a series of interesting hypotheses as to why May might have chosen to do this by investigating printing and editorial clues as well as the contemporary political and historical context, thus also shedding further light onto the life and career of May himself.

Through a painstaking examination of the text, Buckley and Paleit manage to reconstruct the translator's thought process in accepting or rejecting critical conjectures offered in previous editions of Lucan's *Pharsalia*, thus demonstrating both his scholarly knowledge of Latin and his willingness to engage with his contemporaries. To be sure, May's translation owes numerous conscious debts to many early modern writers, not only to those who had approached or explicitly referenced Lucan's work before him, such as Ben Jonson and Christopher Marlowe, but also to other renowned poets or playwrights such as Edmund Spenser, Philip Sidney, William Shakespeare, John Fletcher, Philip Massinger and others. All such echoes are duly noted in the commentary to the text. Contemporary allusions are not limited to literary nods, but include references to seventeenth-century military tactics, practice and ideals.

In a note prefacing the text, Buckley and Paleit describe their editorial procedure. Their edition is based on a copy of the 1627 quarto held in the British Library. Most of the recurring interventions, such as modernisations of spelling, punctuation or silent corrections of misprints, are illustrated in the note prefacing the text; occasional variations from the 1627 quarto for reasons other than accessibility to twentieth-century readers are signalled in the commentary. Confusing passages are made clearer through notes and punctuation, although May's — and Lucan's — syntax sometimes eludes obvious clarification and remains ambiguous.

The volume includes a reproduction of the engraved title page, the annotations at the end of each book, the dedicatory epistles celebrating the work and all of May's own much-discussed single-book dedications, which were excised from successive editions; all parts are accompanied by a substantial commentary. This provides various information, ranging from historical insights (relating to both imperial Rome and Renaissance England), attempts to rationalise obscure passages, literary references,

comparisons with previous translations or editions, highlighting of translation choices and observations upon metre or verse. Rather than in the commentary below the text, modern equivalents of ambiguous or obsolete early modern words are given in italics in the right-hand margin of the page. All Latin referenced in the footnotes better to understand the translator's choices is given an English translation or explanation. The main text is followed by a series of textual notes detailing major variants that appear in the 1631, 1635 and 1650 editions, likely the work of May himself; subsequent editions are not taken into consideration as they were printed after his lifetime and therefore hold no textual authority. This section is also supplied with footnotes, occasionally advancing hypotheses for the variants. Finally, the volume contains a useful glossary of names and places recurring in Lucan's text, the bibliography and an index of the most important names.

Overall, Buckley and Paleit offer a very nuanced reading of the sentiment permeating May's *Pharsalia*: rejecting Restoration and royalist charges that branded the text as a sort of 'revolutionary commitment to overturn existing tradition', they nonetheless acknowledge its 'ideological edge and topical urgency', which inevitably tie it to the increasingly partisan political climate of the 1620s and set it apart from earlier classical translations (p. 26). Without venturing into far-fetched or unsubstantiated speculations regarding May's political allegiance or the reasons behind his decision to translate Lucan (or even the meaning behind certain translation choices), Buckley and Paleit's analysis merely presents facts and suggests possible hypotheses throughout, often leaving the burden of interpretation to the reader.

I believe that this volume fulfils the promise of the back cover, according to which the volume purports not only to provide access to this 'dense, sometimes provocative poem' as interpreted by May, but also to contribute to a broader appreciation of May's own literary merits and of the importance of his work as a testimony of the reception of Roman literature and culture in England. Indeed, Buckley and Paleit first and foremost treat this translation of the *Pharsalia* as an artistic work in its own right, occasionally employing May's political career and the reception of his work as tools for commentary rather than as starting points of analysis. The focus is on the text, which, despite being a translation and not a wholly original work, provides a firm basis for the investigation of May's thought processes; if anything, given the nature of the work, variations and deviations from Lucan's Latin text make May's version all the more thought-provoking and fascinating. What is more, the product of Buckley and Paleit's meticulous research is presented in an approachable, enjoyable and captivating manner.

A major step towards a reappraisal of this semi-forgotten early modern personality, this edition will not only prove of great value for students of the reception and translation of classical authors during the Renaissance, undoubtedly eliciting further debate in this area, but it will also prove compelling for scholars interested in the relationship between literature and Caroline politics and in early modern translation theory and practice.