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Review: Momentary Monsters: Lucan and His Heroes

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REVIEWS

W. R. Johnson. *Momentary Monsters: Lucan and His Heroes*. Cornell Studies in Classical Philology, 47. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987. Pp. xiii, 145. \$17.95. ISBN 0-8014-2030-X .

Laughter in Lucan? Johnson takes the laughing matter of Lucan seriously, and with mordant wit and cynical humor presents an original and provocative reading of the *Pharsalia* as Lucan's black comedy—full of hilarity, farce, high camp, and cartoon-like caricature sardonic laughter at the dread seriousness of what Rome had become under Nero with its loss of freedom and pessimism unto despair.

The author's examination of this black comedy focuses on the *Pharsalia's* four quasi-heroes or "momentary monsters", each the subject of a significantly titled chapter: 1) "Erichtho and her Universe", 2) "Cato: the Delusions of Virtue", 3) "Pompey: the Illusions of History", and 4) "Caesar: the Phantasmagoria of Power." Johnson, in his amusing and acute reading of Erichtho, analyzes the Roman universe as a *discors machina* in which the implosion of evil has rendered men monstrous and the gods absurd. Cato is deconstructed by Johnson into a comic/ugly caricature deluded by an implausible and meaningless notion of virtue. Cato, the stoic saint, canonized on the pages of Seneca, has been reduced here to momentary monster and clown. Pompey receives similar treatment in, for example, Johnson's discussion of the apotheosis that opens Book 9, read by most critics as serious stoic eschatology, but taken here as burlesque deification. The pathos of Cornelia fainting at the sight of her husband's death becomes for Johnson a flippant scene made comic by overacting: "She has read *Aeneid* 4 once too often. . . ."! The book's final section offers some interesting observations on the psychology of Caesar, and closes with a discussion of decline and decadence.

Applying the Harvard School of Pessimism, long associated with Vergil, to Lucan, Johnson offers an array of fresh insights into a complex poem, sure to challenge traditional readings of characters like Cato and Pompey and to stimulate lively discussion for both scholar and layman.

The book is attractively bound and printed and reasonably priced, but marred here and there by typographical errors both in the author's text and in the Latin quotations.

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JOHN F. MAKOWSKI

Walter Burkert. *Ancient Mystery Cults*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987. Pp. ix, 181. \$20.00. ISBN 0-674-03386-8.

This study of five major cults—of Eleusinian Demeter, of Dionysus, of the Anatolian Great Mother, of Isis, and of Mithras—is based on four Carl Newell Jackson Lectures presented at Harvard University in April 1982. Through them, the leading historian of Greek religion focuses on the mysteries as personal experience as well as cultural phenomena. The chapters—