

Why Is He Licking that Sword? Caesar, Laelius, and Uncanny Politics in Book 1 of Lucan's  
*Bellum Civile*

Drawing on the concept of necropolitics (Mbembe 2019), I argue that the speeches of Caesar and Laelius in Book I of the *Bellum Civile* (BC 1.291-391), in the process of negotiating Caesar's unity with his troops, create an uncanny relationship between the prospects of Roman biopolitics and necropolitics. Further, I argue that this uncanny relationship may implicitly critique Nero, the office of the *princeps*, or both.

Caesar locates his speech's derogation of Pompey within a biopolitical rhetoric of social reproduction. That is, he uses terms of vital disorder to figure Pompey's inability as a leader to engage in proper reproduction of Roman social relations—and, by implication, to properly sustain and administrate Roman life. This vital disorder is a sensual, sexually suggestive perversion, especially in the degraded orality of lines 327-332: like a young tiger with a taste for cattle blood, Pompey is accustomed “to lick the Sullan sword” (BC 1.330). Beyond Pompey as a ticking bomb of bestial bloodlust, I argue that the swordlicking image evokes a further derogation by implying a taste for performing fellatio, thereby presenting a perversion of sexual reproduction for elite Roman men (Adams 1990, 19; Williams 2014, 506-8 and 510). Additionally, Pompey is a student of Sulla who exceeds his proper place to overcome his teacher in crime (BC 1.324-6): another perversion of a relationship that should reproduce proper Roman social relations. In all, Caesar's derogations are premised on a politically consequential value of sensual and reproductive restraint that must be policed on an individual level.

Laelius' response rejects this biopolitical premise underlying Caesar's appeal, and commits instead to a necropolitical premise. Here, killing becomes its own end, a hallmark of necropolitics; all sense of futurity is negated—as figured most strikingly by Laelius' fantasy of

killing the unborn infant in his wife's belly (*BC* 1.377-8)—and collapses utterly into a present will to destruction (Mbembe 2019, 78 and 89-90). Previous scholarship argues that Laelius' elegiac language casts him as Caesar's *erastês* (Leigh 1997, 205-6); Giulio Celotto concludes that this demonstrates the destructive nature of love between Caesar and his men (Celotto 2022, 177). Here, I argue a further conclusion, understanding pederasty as (like Sulla's pedagogy) socially reproductive: Laelius' speech is a necropolitical affirmation of the perversions that Caesar's biopolitical rhetoric condemns. While this initially strikes us as an inversion—or perverted reproduction—of the biopolitical, Laelius implies it is the proper *telos* of military power and of Caesar (*BC* 1.359-65). Laelius suggests the necropolitical mode is not a comprehensible miscarriage of the biopolitical but, ambiguously, is twin or perhaps parent of the biopolitical; this introduction of ambiguity contributes to what Elaine Sanderson identifies as a central Lucanian preoccupation with the uncanny, a persistent and unsettling process of de-recognition (Sanderson 2021, 93-4).

Of course, this is not the first place in the *Bellum Civile* that cultivating and culling Roman life are marked as coextensive: after all, “the first walls dripped with brotherly blood” (*BC* 1.98). However, I suggest these speeches are additionally significant in light of Caesar as imperial catalyst and in the context of Laelius' speech as a last word negotiating the conditions of Caesar's unity with his military corps—a unity instrumental to Caesar's ambition and one that Lucan underscores through recurring poetic fusions between Caesar's individual body and his military corps (Dinter 2012, 31). Therefore, I suggest that the revelation of Laelius' speech may offer an implicit critique not just of Nero as a reputed kinslayer, but of the principate as a whole. If the necropolitical bears such an uncannily close relationship to the biopolitical, this may condemn by implication the Augustan apex of biopolitical governance to which Nero seems to

have aspired in his first speech to the Senate, even while proclaiming himself generationally exempt from the taint of civil wars (Tacitus *Annales* 13.4, Suetonius *Nero* 10).

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