

Heads, Limbs, Trunks: Arboreal Anatomy and Body Horror in Lucan's *Bellum Civile*

In Book 1.135-157 of Lucan's *Bellum Civile*, the poet describes Pompey as an aged oak tree which no longer clings to the ground with strong roots and casts shade only with its massive trunk (*truncus*), not its foliage. This simile, which is paired with a description of Caesar as a bolt of lightning, has often been described as programmatic for the entire poem and its characterization of Pompey in particular (Rosner-Siegel 1983). This paper argues that the double meaning of *truncus* as "tree-trunk" and "trunk of a human body; (mutilated) torso," which is evident in Lucan's repeated description of Pompey's headless corpse as a *truncus* in Books 8-9 (Bartsch 1997), is a leitmotif that underlies both the poem's obsession with mutilated human bodies and its obsession with damaged or disfigured trees. According to my analysis, the poem's sustained interest in embodiment and dismemberment – a key focus of scholarly attention in recent decades, such as in Martin Dinter's 2012 monograph *Anatomizing Civil War* – is given a particularly grotesque cast through the slippage between images of human anatomy and those of tree anatomy.

Following this line of inquiry, I provide a close reading of two episodes in the *Bellum Civile* in which I argue that the analogy between human anatomy and vegetal anatomy enhances the poem's vivid body horror and activates potentially disturbing intertexts. The first is the veteran's description of the mutilated and decapitated bodies of Sulla's victims in Book 2.160-73, in which the speaker recalls wandering among these *trunci* and seeking a corpse to match his murdered brother's head. I propose that the analogy between human anatomy and tree anatomy makes this image into a kind of uncanny forest of the dead, and that the following episode, in which these corpses stop the flow of the Tiber River (2.209-220), expresses the reduction of

human bodies to physical mass in much the same way as individual trees are reduced to lumber. Furthermore, building on work by Matthew Roller (1997) and Amy Richlin (1999) that explores Roman anxieties around decapitation, I argue that the decay of the heads beyond recognition and the difficulty of matching body to head connotes politicized anxieties about selfhood and identity. Reading the double meaning of *truncus* in this light, I suggest that we might understand the (potentially mismatched) *trunci* of this scene as a grotesque reinterpretation of the cut-up and grafted *trunci* of Book 2 of Vergil's *Georgics*, which sustain foliage and fruit that are not their own and can be read as an expression of metapoetic and political concerns.

The second episode that I propose may be read as an expression of the arboreal anatomy motif is the destruction of the druidic grove at Massilia by Caesar's soldiers in Book 3.399-452, in which violence is inflicted upon trees whose disturbing physical characteristics are suggestive of decaying human bodies. As Phillips (1968) notes, the episode draws upon the myth of Erychthon as told in Callimachus' *Hymn to Demeter* and particularly in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and I argue that the mutilation of these trees is a prefiguration of the later acts of violence inflicted by Caesar's soldiers upon living and dead human bodies. I also suggest that we might expand an intertextual reading of this episode to include other scenes of arboreal suffering and human-to-tree transformation in the *Metamorphoses*, such as the transfiguration of Phaethon's sisters into poplar trees in Book 2, as well as scenes of arboreal violence and extirpation in the *Aeneid* (Gowers 2011). Reading these intertexts, I argue that the arboreal anatomy motif in the *Bellum Civile* operates a kind of intertextual uncanny, in which Vergilian and Ovidian *trunci* are defamiliarized and metaphorically cut from their own roots. Finally, I suggest that Lucan's pervasive identification of tree trunks with human bodies places a grim cast upon the common Latin metaphor of *silva* and *materia* as translations for Greek ὕλη ("poetic

material”) and indicates that the material of the *Bellum Civile* is, in some sense, the bodies of the dead.

Works Cited

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