

In Sua Viscera: Cato's Suicide in the Pharsalia

One of the most perplexing questions on Lucan's *Pharsalia* is the nature of the poet's characterization of Cato. Much scholarship on the poem has focused on Lucan's treatment of this character, who has been alternatively described as a heroic Stoic sage (Ahl 1976), a vicious and unsympathetic parody (Johnson 1987), or an unattainable exemplar (Seo 2013). Whatever one's opinion of Cato, it is clear that his characterization is central to the interpretation of the poem, as the text concludes with him as the most significant remaining opponent to Caesarism and the lone defender of *libertas*. In this paper, I suggest that Cato's suicide at Utica forms the model for the proem to the *Pharsalia* and the frequent allusions to suicide throughout the poem, and that Lucan's version of Cato's death would have been less than dignified.

Current scholarly consensus on the scope of the *Pharsalia* holds that the poem likely would have concluded with Cato's death (see Stover 2008 for a survey of the evidence). This holds with the frequent analysis of Cato as an embodiment of *libertas* or of Rome itself (Johnson 1987 and Bartsch 1997, for example). However, Lucan's metaphor of civil war as national suicide, particularly in the proem (*populumque potentem / in sua victrici conversum viscera dextra*) and the Vulteius episode in book 3 (cf. Day 2013) complicates Cato's status as exemplum. If Cato takes Rome onto his own person in a sort of *devotio*, he also reenacts its grisly self-destruction in his own suicide. Notably, the pseudo-Caesarian account of Cato's death claims that after his self-inflicted wounds had been stitched up, Cato tore them back open with his own hands (*ipse suis manibus vulnus crudelissime divellit; De Bello Africo* 88), perhaps influencing Lucan's memorable description of civil war in the proem.

By suggesting that Cato's suicide models other allusions to self-slaughter in the *Pharsalia*, this paper argues that Cato should be viewed as both an exemplary figure and a profoundly destructive character. Moreover, since the epic opens with a metaphor drawing from Cato's death, it lends additional support to the theory that the *Pharsalia* would have concluded at Utica in a sort of ring composition. In the process, I hope to suggest a method by which the divergent interpretations of Johnson and Bartsch's parodic Cato and Seo's model of exemplarity can simultaneously be correct, and indeed support each other, to the benefit of the scholarly understanding of Lucan's strangest protagonist.

Select Bibliography

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