Reaching out and Pushing Away: Caesar and Cato as Antisocial and Prosocial Figures in Lucan's *Pharsalia*

Philosophers from Socrates to Seneca have claimed that to be virtuous was to acknowledge one's role as a member of a community and to subordinate personal desires to the welfare of that community. These philosophers considered the social bonds within the community to be the lifeblood of civilization. Michael Lapidge has demonstrated that Lucan's *Pharsalia*, borrowing heavily from Chryssipean Stoicism and its concept of cosmic *ἐκπύρωσις* (dissolution), depicts the destruction of social bonds within the Roman State as tantamount to the destruction of the universe (Lapidge 1979). In the *Pharsalia*, the difference between Caesar, the agent of Rome's destruction, and Cato, the agent of its preservation, is most evident in their characterization as antisocial and prosocial figures respectively. This characterization permeates the characters' dialogue, actions, and their description by the narrator. Caesar's destructive power stems from his lack of social connections. Cato, in contrast, is able to resist Caesar through deep, personal connections to others. By depicting Rome's destroyer as antisocial and its preserver as prosocial, Lucan indicates that the root of civil war and the cosmic dissolution it entailed was a lack of respect for the manifold bonds between members of the Roman state.

Stripped of his last link to Pompey by the death of Julia, Caesar no longer has any connections to any other human being (1.111-120). This social isolation is evident in his dialogue, much of which consists of monologues characterized by heavy use of the first-person-singular. Whenever he speaks with another character, he issues threats or orders and never engages with them as an equal. Not even Marc Antony warrants a measure of respect from Caesar: "*Illum saepe minis Caesar precibusque morantem evocat… 'ignave, venire te Caesar, non ire, iubet.*'" ("Often does Caesar call him (Antony) with threats and entreaties while he

delays… 'Caesar commands you to come, not to go, you coward!'") (5.480-488). Caesar's speech to his troops in Book I (1.296-366) showcases his inability to connect with others. Despite his best attempts to appear concerned for his men, he is clearly mostly concerned about himself and he is unable to persuade them without the support of his more popular and group-minded centurion Laelius (1.357-86). Caesar's independent actions, such as his personal attack on the Grove of Massilia (3.432-37) and his failed solo crossing of the Adriatic (5.508-721), show Caesar at his most absurd but also at his most terrifying. This independent, antisocial spirit is what makes Caesar the unstoppable force of destruction he is described as in Book I (1.146-154). Lucan's Caesar perfectly fits Aristotle's description of a man who, through his absence from the community, is "*ὥστε ἢ θηρίον ἢ θεός*" ("just like a beast or a god") (Arist. Pol. 1253a 25-30). Just like a god, he can change the entire universe and just like a beast, he is uncontrollable and dangerous.

Cato's ability to forge strong connections with others sets him up as Caesar's opposite. In Book II, Brutus and Marcia seek him out for wisdom and comfort in a time of crisis. Unlike Caesar's egotistical use of the first-person-singular, Cato's use of the first-person-plural during his speech to Brutus (2.286-323) is indicative of his inclusive mindset. Cato's former transfer of his wife Marcia to another husband recalls the Spartan practice of polyandry as described by Xenophon (Xen. Const. Lac. 1.7-9). Lucan explains that Cato gave up Marcia so that she might unite two families "*sanguine matris*" ("from the blood of the mother") (2.332) and thus form more social bonds. The description of Cato's lifestyle (2.380-391) strengthens the comparison between Cato and the Spartans. Like a Spartan, Cato dedicates himself and all he owns, even his marriage, completely to the community. In Book IX, Cato's power to form connections allows him to keep the Pompeian army together after Pompey's death. After Cato's speech, the narrator

compares the army to a swarm of bees (9.283-293). As the ultimate collective consciousness, bees serve as a metaphor for the Roman state where unity is natural and individualism means impotence and dissolution. When Cato keeps the army together, he maintains their natural order and acts as an anchor of the cosmos.

At times, Lucan depicts the civil war as inevitable. At other times, it seems like it could have been avoided if its participants had remembered the bonds they shared with one another. Lucan's message is clear through his contrasting characterization of Caesar the destroyer and Cato the preserver. The survival of the Roman state depends on the bonds between its citizens. Civil war results when these same citizens care only about themselves and forget about one another.

Bibliography

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