

Cannibalism in Latin Epic

The proposed paper considers the implications of the association of cannibalism with two particular themes in Roman epic. The passages in question associate cannibalism either with starvation or with the denial of sight, or with both. Ovid *Metamorphoses* 14, for instance, interweaves all three themes: Achaemenides is reduced to eating acorns, grass and leaves as he listens to the Cyclops, with gory eye-socket, expressing his desire to feast on human flesh.

The story of Erysichthon in Ovid *Met.* 8 helps us to understand the juxtaposition of starvation and cannibalism in such passages. A mountain nymph finds Hunger, who represents the polar opposite to Ceres' bounty, scrabbling for herbs. The goddess goes on to inspire such greed in Erysichthon that he cannibalizes his own body (vs. Call. *HDem.*, where Erysichthon is associated with starvation but not cannibalism). By juxtaposing these two acts of feeding (Hunger's and Erysichthon's), these lines portray cannibalism not as nutritive but as a kind of self-consumption: eating one's own kind is like eating oneself.

Passages from Silver Latin epic offer a different perspective on cannibalism. They develop themes first found in *Od.* 9, where the Cyclops' cannibalism is juxtaposed with the gouging out of the monster's eye (see Bakker, Buchan for the importance of cannibalism in Homeric epic). But Lucan and Statius present the combination of cannibalism and denial of sight in such a way as to suggest the impact of the scene on the witness or reader. In Lucan *Pharsalia* 6 the witch Erictho consumes the eyeballs of corpses. In Statius *Thebaid* 8 Minerva is forced to wash her eyes after seeing Tydeus eat Melanippus' head. These passages configure cannibalism as a problem not merely of consumption but also of viewing: the witness – and by extension the reader who imagines the scene – is/would be unable to bear the sight. A double movement is

suggested to readers: the events described are to be experienced as if were seen instead of read or heard, but the resulting vision is too vivid for the eyes

These poems, then, portray cannibalism not merely as a violation of the victim's body but also as self-harm to the aggressor and as an assault on the witness.

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