

Lucan, Caesar, and the Politics of the Pestilence at Dyrrachium

The sixth book of Lucan's *Bellum Civile* opens with the descent of a pestilence upon Pompey's besieged army at Dyrrachium. Beginning among the rotting corpses of emaciated horses, it soon spreads throughout the camp: *corpora dum solvit tabes et digerit artus/ traxit iners caelum fluvidae contagia pestis/ obscuram in nubem* ("While rot dissolves their bodies and loosens their limbs, the stagnant air sucks the contagion of the moist pestilence into a dark cloud," 6.88-9). The decaying bodies of the soldiers lie unburied among the living, enacting a series of boundary violations familiar to readers of the *Bellum Civile* (Bartsch 1997: 10-48). Exemplifying the collapse of the Roman body politic in microcosm, they invest a historical pestilence with symbolic significance (Gardner 2019: 190).

Leveling social differences and exposing shared vulnerabilities (Girard 1974), infectious disease played a central role in the Roman vocabulary of civil war. Lucan exploits its "equalizing, mutually destructive effect" by extending its figurative reach to Caesar's army, which experienced a famine at Dyrrachium (Saylor 1978: 249). Advertising a role reversal that plays out over the next ten lines, Lucan suggests that the famine transformed the besieger into the besieged: *sed patitur saevam, veluti circumdatus arta/ obsidione, famem* ("But he [Caesar] endured a savage famine, as if enclosed by an encroaching siege," 6.108-9). Deprived of their usual sustenance and forced to consume unfamiliar fodder, the Caesarians begin to resemble the horses from which the Pompeian plague began: *miserabile vulgus/ in pecudum cecidisse cibos* ("the miserable crowd lowered themselves to the food of beasts," 6.110-11). As they struggle to push unfamiliar plants down their dry throats (6.115-6), they soon assume the feverish and swollen bodies of their adversaries (6.94). The similarity of their symptoms allows Lucan to

dwell upon all that is shared by the opposing forces at Dyrrachium. He thereby lays the conceptual groundwork for his portrayal of the impending battle as an act of self-destruction.

The significance of this scene comes into sharper focus when viewed alongside the parallel account of Caesar, with whom Lucan was often in dialogue (Rimbaud 1960; Masters 1992: 17-18). I suggest that Lucan crafted these lines in response to *Bellum Civile* 3.49, where Caesar uses the pestilence at Dyrrachium to expose the vast differences between his army and Pompey's. The section opens with the poor health of the Pompeians (*ipsos valetudine non bona*, "they were not in good health," 3.49), which stands in sharp contrast to the vitality of the Caesarians: *at Caesaris exercitus optima valetudine* ("Caesar's army, in contrast, was in outstanding health," 3.49). While the Pompeians are trapped in a marshy camp that lacks water and reeks of corpses, the Caesarians quickly find a new plant to alleviate their hunger and await the maturation of already ripening wheat (3.48-9). In Lucan's hands, however, the figuratively besieged Caesarians become as sick as their literally besieged rivals. The new plant they find ends up being poisonous (6.112-3), while the grain on which they wait has hardly sprouted (6.109). Exaggerating the suffering of the Caesarians so that their physical decline mirrors that of the Pompeians, Lucan insists upon sameness where Caesar prefers to see difference. The representational strategies of both, however, are guided by political concerns.

In a striking authorial intervention in Book 9, Lucan interrupts his narrative of Caesar's visit to Troy to acknowledge the literary shadow cast by his protagonist (Zissos 2013: 141). Addressing Caesar as a rival narrator of Roman history, he declares, *venturi me teque legent; Pharsalia nostra/ vivet, et a nullo tenebris damnabimur aevo* ("Future generations will read me and you; our Pharsalia will live on, and we will be condemned to the dark by no era," 9.985-6). The opening of Book 6 illustrates one way that Lucan responded to the model Caesar left behind.

Filtering the pestilence at Dyrrachium through the symbolic logic of civil war, he polluted and thereby corrected the sanitized narrative of his predecessor.

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