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Roman Bodies as Bodies of Romans: Corporeal Symbolism in Lucan's *Pharsalia*

The *Pharsalia* is a brutal poem. Its ten books see a veritable panorama of deaths befall soldiers on either side of Rome's civil war between the Pompeians and Caesarians. The violent ends met in its verses are vividly detailed by Lucan, whose dramatic extravagance sculpts the *Pharsalia*'s many spectacles of death into pseudo-voyeuristic pictures of warfare: in the killing fields of Homer's Troy can be found nothing like the "fields of death...rivers overflowing with bloodshed, bodies piled/in mounds as high as hills, the multitudes/beginning to decay..." (Lucan VII. 918-921) that make up the imagistic arsenal of the poem. This violence, however, is present for much more than its shock value. The cruelties inflicted on bodies throughout the *Pharsalia* are intimately tied to the poem's stated themes "Of civil wars and worse...[and] of crime made law" (Lucan I. 1-2). Throughout the poem, Lucan uses the human form as a symbol for Rome; the multitude of ways in which bodies are brutalized in the *Pharsalia* represent the various social and political woes facing the city in both the poem's historical setting and the poet's own world. In this way, Lucan's literary mode is intimately connected with the story he tells and the themes he treats.

The *Pharsalia* is not the earliest Roman text in which a symbolic connection between the human body and Rome itself occurs. The second book of Titus Livius' *History of Rome From its Foundation* describes how the first succession of the plebs was brought to an end; contained therein is a speech (recreated by Livy) given by one

Menenius Agrippa, in which the orator compares the disenfranchised plebs to an essential part of Rome's figurative anatomy. He tells the plebs the "fable of the revolt of the body's members" (Livy 2.33): "Long ago when the members of the human body did not, as now they do, agree together...the other parts resented the fact that they should have the worry and trouble of providing everything for the belly" (2.33). It then comes to pass that the appendages cease delivering food to the stomach in protest, and the whole body, including the rebellious members, dies for lack of nourishment. Livy then writes that "This fable...Menenius applied to the political situation, pointing out its resemblance to the anger of the populace against the governing class; and so successful was his story that their resentment was mollified" (2.33). It is impossible to know how much of this speech was really given and how much was of Livy's own creation. Assuming Menenius' address was really given in this (or a similar) manner, the use of a rhetorical comparison between the city and the human body in Roman oratory can be dated to at least between 494 and 493 BCE (De Selincourt 147). Supposing Menenius' speech is entirely constructed by the historian, it can be assumed that corporeal symbolism of Rome was in general usage, or available to Livy in some other source, as he wrote this early book of his *History* around 25 BCE. In any case, the use of the human body's functions to symbolize those of Rome itself had precedents in earlier literature, and Lucan both utilizes and expands upon this motif in his *Pharsalia*.

Although he may not have devised the motif in question, the poet implements and sustains it to perhaps a greater extent than any other classical writer; the body's status as a symbol of the state in past Roman writing is never considered to the gruesome extent seen in Lucan's poem. Like those of most epic poems, the *Pharsalia*'s opening stanzas concern themselves with the themes that will be treated in the epic proper. From the

second line of the proem (and thus the poem as a whole), personification of the Roman state is given prominence in the work. Rome's civil war is immediately styled using the language of the human body: "Of civil wars and worse...we sing, how a powerful people/turned on its own *heart* its conquering *hand*" (Lucan I. 2-3, emphasis added). In placing this symbol alongside his declared theme in the poem's proem, Lucan indicates the extent to which the device and the theme are intertwined. Lucan's image of revolting bodily appendages also immediately evokes the oration of Menenius in Livy's *History*, and the slight rhetorical differences between the two addresses can be attributed to the different circumstances in which they are given: in Livy's account, the plebes cease to function in, and remove themselves from, Rome's social structure—thus the rhetorical body's limbs simply stop working; Lucan's opening lines see "the hand" *actively* turn on "the heart," as the civil war's corporeal equivalent requires active aggression from the rhetorical body's parts. Both writers thus connect the nature of the body's revolt directly to the nature of Rome's problems. As Lucan develops this "city-as-body" motif throughout the work, the symbolic connection between the state of the body and the condition of Rome is sustained. Through this device's prominence in the very first verses of the text, Lucan implies that the poem is as concerned with the extent to which this pre-existing symbol can be applied to Rome's civil war as it is with the exploits of Caesar and Pompey. Thus, as the poet himself suggests, the progression of this symbol is to be traced throughout the body of the *Pharsalia*.

Immediately following the introduction of this motif, Lucan applies it to his own contemporary political environment. Lucan composed his poem under the emperor Nero, a man whose physical appearance is described by Suetonius thus:

“He was of a good height but his body was blotchy and ill-smelling. His hair was fairish...his eyes bluish-grey and dull, his neck thick, his stomach protruding, his legs very thin...He was often to be seen in public dressed in a dinner robe, with a handkerchief around his neck, his tunic unbelted and his feet bare” (225).

Lucan mocks the physical size of Nero’s body in his comically extravagant praise of the emperor in the first stanzas of the *Pharsalia*. As the poet writes, the gods will “install your [Nero’s] world throne./But...If you weigh on any one part of boundless space/the axle will feel the load. Keep your weight/to the middle: balance heaven” (Lucan I. 56-62). Aside from serving as a subtle mockery of the poet’s patron, the state of Nero’s body is emblematically connected with the condition of Rome itself: if the political turmoil of pre-Augustan Rome (civil war) can be effectively symbolized by way of a body in conflict with itself, it follows that the political circumstances under which Lucan writes have their parallel in Nero’s bloated figure. Suetonius writes that Lucan “came out almost as the ringleader in the conspiracy [against Nero] of Piso, publically making great talk about the glory of tyranicides...” (479), and thus the poet was *probably* a republican, and *certainly* an anti-Neronian. This view of Lucan’s politics is shared by Charles Martindale, who states: “there remain three key 'facts': Lucan wrote a poem attacking Caesarism, he was banned from promulgating his poetry, and he died in a conspiracy to remove a Caesar. This configuration may not be without its significance” (67). If Rome’s politics under the Republican system are as a body, the abhorrent procession of Caesars finds its comparison in a bloated figure glutted with overindulgence: the *Princeps Civitatis* as an

institution embodies immoderation and excess in terms of *power*, as wielded by the emperor over the entirety of Roman politics. As critic Mark Bradley asserts, “One thing is clear: excessive flesh in the Roman world tapped into a highly subjective and versatile set of traditions about the relationship between personal appearance and social, political and economic status. Fat mattered” (2-3); thus Lucan’s identification of the emperor’s bloated body with imperial politics may come not without precedent. If influence in the Republic is a feast at which senators, tribunes, consuls and other statesmen enjoy their varying portions of power, the imperial system is akin to the Caesar procuring all of the feast’s trappings for himself (and his body evidently looks the part). In this way, the bloated figure of Nero applies the “Rome-as-body” motif to the poet’s own contemporary political situation, thus further stressing its importance to the work.

Following Lucan’s initiation of the motif in the poem’s early verses, imagery of violence done to the body begins in earnest as a group of elders recount the previous civil war between Sulla and Marius in the *Pharsalia*’s second book; here, descriptions of corporeal harm continue to reflect the political situation in Rome. The first stanzas of the elders’ dialogue detail Marius’ tyrannical rule, and therein “The bloodthirsty conqueror/pick[s] up a head chopped off of who knows who,/ashamed to walk with empty hands” (Lucan II. 118-20). The image of Marius, human head in hand, holds symbolic value when Rome is associated with the body: the tyrant’s capture of Rome’s government (its head, so to speak) easily lends itself to this gory detail. Imagery of mangled human bodies is prominent in the stanzas that follow. As Rome’s body (its population) is brutalized by Marius’ reign, so too is the human body subjected to abuse in the poem:

“Who had time to weep...for Baebius, his guts scattered,/ringed
by countless hands that ripped him limb from limb...Fimbria
butchered/the Crassi’s corpses. Cruel stakes were soaked/with
putrid flesh of tribunes...And Scaevola also...they offered your
body to [Vesta’s] eternal flames” (Lucan II. 126-36).

The same corporeal imagery is subsequently used to describe Sulla’s reign, and here the speaker directly personifies Rome: “[Sulla] drained what little blood remained in the city;/and while he forcefully excised the rotting limbs-/his remedy was too much, his hand went too far/pursuing the disease” (Lucan II. 147-9). Throughout the gruesome accounts of Rome under both Marius and Sulla, political violence done to the city’s Republican system is reflected in Lucan’s imagery of mutilated human forms. In this digression early in the poem, Lucan establishes a connection between the state of the human body and that of the civil body, and this symbolic link will continue to hold throughout the *Pharsalia*.

Many deaths in the *Pharsalia* take the form of oft-spectacular suicides, and the imagery of bodies harming themselves is closely connected to the poem’s theme. Suicide would seem an effective symbol for Rome’s battle against itself, however here Lucan deviates in his employment of the body as a symbol for Rome: at numerous points in the poem is suicide lauded by the speaker and deemed heroic, but Rome’s suicide via civil war is abhorred throughout the *Pharsalia*. The value of suicide as a means of retaining freedom is stressed as Sulla’s reign is recalled: “[many people] *stole their deaths away*/from the bloody conqueror. One man piled high/wood for his own pyre, and while he still had blood/and freedom, dove into the fire” (Lucan II. 165-7, emphasis added). Following the dramatic suicides of Vulteius and his men in the fourth book, the taking of

one's own life is again lauded by the speaker as an omnipresent freedom one has under the rule of tyrants: "cowardly nations will still not understand/these men's example: how a simple feat of bravery/frees you from slavery. Instead, kings use iron/to terrify, liberty is branded by savage armies,/to keep us ignorant that swords are for setting free!" (Lucan IV. 606-9). These celebrations of suicide seem to contrast the poet's corporeal motif as it appears elsewhere—given his theme of Rome's abhorrent self-destruction, one would assume that Lucan would avoid celebrations of self-harm. However, the intent with which these suicides are carried out, and the circumstances surrounding their performances, distinguish self-slaughter from other forms of bodily harm depicted in the poem. Suicide is necessarily committed through one's own willpower; even when it is forced, agency over the physical action remains always with the body. Thus the plentiful imagery of Roman bodies being *unwillingly* destroyed by other Romans in the "war without a foe" (Lucan I. 272) is more thematically relevant to the *Pharsalia*'s subject of civil war's woes than are the actual instances of bodily self-harm in the poem. Regardless of the specifics of its implementation, suicide (the body self-destroyed) is deeply connected to the major themes of tyranny and freedom treated by the poet, and thus his literary technique reflects his subject matter.

What is done to the body after death also has symbolic value throughout the *Pharsalia*. Imagery of unrecognizable bodies appears multiple times in the text; it is prevalent in the elders' description of Sulla's reign: "[bodies] decaying and losing their identities/as time wore on...I myself remember the disfigured features/of my brother they killed...through all those truncated bodies I searched for a neck/to match his head" (Lucan II. 175-84). This motif, as established in the *Pharsalia*'s second book, emerges elsewhere in the poem as well. Following the battle of Massilla, Lucan writes that "Many

[Greek] wives embraced a Roman soldier's corpse,/mistaking the face defaced by the force of the sea./Over burning pyres miserable fathers fought/over headless bodies" (III. 785-8). In both of these cases, the unrecognizable state of the bodies holds significance to the poem's theme of civil war. The civil war itself is a conflict fought over the state's identity: the war is fought to determine the nature of the leading party (Pompeians or Caesarians, Optimates or Populares); Rome's government is in an ambiguous transition stage between a republican and pseudo-monarchical system of government (disfigurement to the point of unrecognizability); the city itself is functionally leaderless (headless) as the senate has fled to Greece. The unrecognizable bodies strewn across the *Pharsalia's* battlefields also suggest the irrelevance of the specific flag under which each soldier was killed, as all the victims of the "war without a foe" (Lucan I. 272) indeed fought under the same, Roman banner. Nevertheless, Lucan's corporeal symbolism continues to apply to the state of the body even after death, and is intimately connected with the *Pharsalia's* theme.

The death and subsequent decapitation of Pompey in the poem's eighth book sees Lucan's literary connection of Rome with the human body realized to perhaps its fullest extent. Critic R. Marks notes that in classical literature, "a leader's death or fall from power...is often conveyed by some image of violence done to the head, such as decapitation, and thus the loss of the head becomes a conspicuous motif" (71), before asserting that through Pompey's decapitation in the *Pharsalia*, "An instructive parallel, nevertheless, does emerge...between Pompey and Rome...for it is Rome who, like Pompey, is decapitated" (74). Here, Rome is politically beheaded alongside Pompey: as Septimius "hacks at nerves, muscles, and tendons, taking/a long time to break the knotted bones" (Lucan VIII. 826-7), so too has Caesar effectively cut the head off Republican

Rome by defeating Pompey and his cause. The extensive treatment Lucan gives to this event is appropriate, given the general symbolic value (as discussed above) of decapitation, and the particular identity and political significance of the man decapitated here. Although the poet works with a historical event, his description of the severed head's "face still living...which, when it called for war/there was never peace, which set the laws,/the Campus and the Rostra into motion" (Lucan VIII. 839-44) stresses the figurative connection between the body's head and Rome's governance. Alongside Pompey, the Republican system as a form of government is defiled as "they drain/the head of decay by their forbidden art,/take out the brain and desiccate the skin,/wash out rotting fluid from deep inside,/and firmly set the face with drugs infused" (Lucan VIII. 846-50). Lucan's extensive treatment of Pompey's decapitation is intrinsically linked to the *Pharsalia*'s "Rome-as-body" motif, and the man's gruesome death is among the most poignant uses of corporeal symbolism in the poem.

In another macabre episode, the witch Erictho reanimates the body of a fallen soldier to prophesy Sextus' (and Rome's) future. If Rome is symbolically connected with the human body, it follows that a scene of resurrection may signify a glimmer of hope in contrast with the poem's many killing fields; however, a closer reading sees this incident figure into Lucan's corporeal motif in a less-than comforting manner. The circumstances of the body's restoration are vile and decidedly unnatural: "At last [Erictho] picks a body/with its throat cut, takes and drags it by a hook...First she fills the chest with boiling blood/through new wounds that she opens...and liberally applies poison from the moon" (Lucan VI. 708-44). The witch then adds "froth of dogs...guts of lynx...eyeballs of dragons...Arabia's flying serpent and the Red Sea's viper" (Lucan VI. 747-52) among other repulsive items, before speaking "in a Haemonian chant, piercing Tartarus with her

tongue” (Lucan VI. 770). The bodily resurrection thus employs imagery comparable in its lucid repugnance to any scenes of slaughter or corporeal defilement described by Lucan elsewhere in the poem. If the Roman Republic is said to perish in the civil war, the poet’s vision of its resurrection is one far from phoenix-like. The soldier’s body is re-animated like Rome’s government is re-established following the war; however, through his grisly depiction of the man’s resurrection, Lucan draws attention to the repulsive and unnatural circumstances under which Rome too was revived following the Republic’s demise. With Lucan’s corporeal motif in mind, this set piece of the *Pharsalia*’s sixth book functions as an ode to the corrupt imperial system as implemented following the death of Rome’s Republic: “Every muscle palpitates,” the speaker describes, “every nerve goes tense-/then the body rises from the ground, not slowly,/limb by limb, but thrown straight up from the earth/all at once. He did not yet look alive, but like/ someone who was now dying. Still pale and stiff,/ he stands dumbstruck at being thrust back into the world” (Lucan VI. 842-6). To a republican (or anti-Neronian) like Lucan, Rome’s body under the corrupt, tyrannical rule of emperors like Nero is effectively symbolized in a rotting, yet nonetheless reanimated, corpse. Further, this reading (suitably, given Lucan’s apparent political leanings) identifies Erictho with the Caesars, who themselves symbolically “whip the motionless body” (Lucan VI. 809) of Rome, and likewise imbue the city with a sort of living (political) death. Implicit herein is a damning prophesy of Lucan’s own: if the sickening circumstances around which the corpse is resurrected are akin to the Caesars’ resurrection of a politically and socially dead Rome, it follows that Rome’s second take on life is to be as equally short lived and meaningless as the soldier’s. Lucan’s technique of linking Rome’s health with that of human bodies in the *Pharsalia* reaches its apex at this point in the text.

In what are perhaps the *Pharsalia*'s most famous verses, Lucan writes, "Pharsalus was a different kind of battle/than other disasters. In those, Rome was undone/by the deaths of men; here, by the deaths of peoples./Then, a soldier would die; now, *entire nations*" (VII. 729-732, emphasis added). The circumstances surrounding death of the Roman Republican indeed find their parallels in the many deaths of soldiers throughout the poem. As Lucan implements it, the "Rome-as-body" motif is multifaceted, and can be employed in as many gruesome ways as bodies can be desecrated. His sustained and complex use of this technique marks a poet for whom literary form is inseparable from poetry's narrative and themes: in Lucan's *Pharsalia*, the poetry is in the death to the same extent that death is in the poetry.

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