

CURIO AND ANTAEUS: THE AFRICAN EPISODE OF LUCAN *PHARSALIA* IV

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Critics have given ample attention to the episode of Curio in Africa (*Pharsalia* 4.581-824). Called by one critic the key to the epic in many ways, the episode has been interpreted as a grim analogue to Aeneas' visit to the site of Rome designed to show the decay of Roman *virtus*. In this, Curio figures as a miserable shadow of Hercules the conqueror whose role can only be filled by Cato. The mythical background serves as a device to show the cosmic dimensions of Rome's self-destruction. Myth and setting color the fighting as a gladiatorial combat in which Curio is the sacrifice to Hannibal and Carthage.¹

It seems to me unquestionable that Lucan intended an equation between the mythical struggle of Hercules and Antaeus and the combat of Curio and Juba, and that critics have been right to pursue this equation. There is, for instance, a link between the two combats that has not been noted, and that is words meaning force or power, *vires* and *robor*. In the mythical combat there are ten instances in all, six of *vires* and four of *robor*, used of the strength of Hercules and Antaeus. The

¹ As a key to the epic, F. M. Ahl, "Hercules and Curio: Some Comments on *Pharsalia* IV, 581-824," *Latomus* 31 (1972) 1000; on decay of Roman *virtus* and the analogy to Aeneas, with attention to Ovid *Met.* 9 and Hercules and Achelous as a model, L. Thompson and R. T. Bruère, "The Vergilian Background to Lucan's Fourth Book," *CP* 65 (1970) 167-72, and Ahl 1008 and *Lucan: An Introduction* (Ithaca 1976) 82-115; on Curio and Cato, B. F. Dick, "*Fatum* and *Fortuna* in Lucan's *Bellum Civile*," *CP* 62 (1967) 240; on dimension, P. Grimal, "L'épisode d'Antée dans la *Pharsale*," *Latomus* 8 (1949) 55-61; on the gladiatorial motif, Ahl, *Lucan* 97-100. In other studies of the episode, E. Longhi, "Tre episodi di poema di Lucano," in *Studi in onore di Gino Funaioli* (Rome 1955) 181, finds Lucan sympathetic to Curio. E. Fraenkel, "Lucan als Mittler des antiken Pathos," in W. Rutz, ed., *Lucan* (Darmstadt 1970) 31-32, 41-42, comments on Hercules' speech and Dante's treatment of Antaeus and Curio. M. P. O. Morford, *The Poet Lucan* (Oxford 1967) 4-5, examines the rhetoric of the panegyric in 4.799-824. The text used is A. E. Housman, *M. Annaei Lucani Belli Civilis Libri Decem* (Oxford 1950). I am indebted to one of the journal's anonymous referees for improvements throughout.

instances continue into the combat of Curio and Juba, four instances of *vires* and one of *robor*, but used here to mean the troops of each general.²

In this essay I wish to reexamine the equation of the mythical figures and the generals, in particular the equation of Curio and Antaeus, which seems to me not satisfactorily explained. For as some see it, Juba's victory puts him in the role of Hercules and the defeated Curio in the role of Antaeus. Yet it has been argued to the contrary that any clear equation of this kind is deliberately confused so that Juba and Curio share attributes of both Hercules and Antaeus in a fashion that reflects the confused, unnatural character of the civil war itself.³ It seems to me, however, that a clear identification exists between Juba and Antaeus, and, because of some definite connections that have not been noted, an equally clear identification between Curio and the giant. Or, the true form of the equation is that *both* Juba and Curio assume the role of Antaeus, but the former in a good, advantageous way and the latter in a negative, self-destructive way. The equation is not confused except for dramatic effect. Hercules, whose role is indeed assumed by heroes in other epics (e.g., by Aeneas in Vergil or by Scipio and Regulus in Silius), only acts as foil here.⁴ He is never really a role model for Curio, but as a portent of Roman victory, is designed to disappoint the reader and render the actual alignment with Antaeus all the more dramatic. In the structure of the epic, Curio's failure to be a Roman Hercules is important because it prepares for the true successor of Hercules, Cato.⁵ Finally, the peculiar way in which Curio assumes the role of the giant is of special importance, for it enables us to see the allegory of the failure of Roman character in a perspective larger than the African episode, or one that is integral to Lucan's views in the *Pharsalia* generally.

First as for Juba, many conspicuous features equate him with Antaeus, but, controverting the expectations from the myth, with an Antaeus who is successful. Most conspicuous of these is (1) Juba's ability to draw strength from his earth-like Antaeus. Since he is a native and knows his terrain well, Juba is able to lure Curio into a trap, or draw him down from the hills into a space where Curio is surrounded and overwhelmed (739-47).⁶ (2) As part of his strategy, Juba also conceals his forces in the

² In the myth: 598, 600, 604, 608, 620, 633, 636, 641, 642, 651. In the combat: 665, 667, 668, 723, 731.

³ The first view is that of Thompson and Bruère 167-72, the second of Ahl, *Lucan* 102-3, but neither view is put forward with correspondences between the myth and the combat.

⁴ For Aeneas, see, e.g., M. Wigodsky, "The Arming of Aeneas," *C&M* 26 (1965) 213-21; on Regulus and Scipio, E. L. Bassett, "Regulus and the Serpent in the *Punica*," *CP* 50 (1955) 1-20, and "Hercules and the Hero of the *Punica*," in L. Wallach, ed., *The Classical Tradition* (Ithaca 1966) 258-73.

⁵ For Curio and Cato, see Dick 240 and Ahl, *Lucan* 99, 268-69.

⁶ On this common characteristic of Antaeus and Juba, cf. Ahl, *Lucan* 103.

earth (723, . . . *cava . . . vires in valle retentat*), which answers Antaeus' concealment of himself in his cave (601–2, *latuisse sub alta / rupe*). (3) Juba, like Antaeus, is aligned with the earth, but in the sense that he is the rightful, indigenous ruler of the region. Part of Curio's outrage of heaven and earth as Lucan tells it (689–92) is Curio's desire to dislodge Juba from a place so naturally his. (4) Juba is also closely aligned with earth by way of his people, or military forces. A point not noted about the catalogue which takes up sixteen lines of the narrative (670–86) is that it represents in its people the peculiar features, or grass roots, of the region. In its insistence on the strange, savage Africans and their haunts, it resembles the *Aeneid*'s catalogue of Italian allies who, in the way they are presented, virtually are the hamlets, forests, and streams Aeneas approaches to conquer.⁷ Finally, (5) Antaeus initially confounds Hercules with secret powers which Hercules is surprised to discover (633), while Juba uses to advantage secrecy about himself and his forces (717–33).

Now as for Curio, it has not been observed that he has a relationship to earth as significant in its own way as Juba's. Juba draws strength from the African earth, but apparently not from every part of it. The episode emphasizes that Juba gains his advantage by enticing Curio into particular terrain that is away from the high ground of the Roman camp, in flat land, and unknown to Curio (733, *ignotis . . . campis*). Curio, that is, also has land that (certainly to his mind) is lucky and full of strength for him, a counterpart to Juba's favoring earth, and that is the *Castra Cornelia*, or the old campsite of Scipio on the heights. The narrative singles this place out and identifies it with hills, *colles*, which are mentioned twice (656, 664) when Curio, eager to benefit from the portentous place, encamps there, and again emphatically later (739–43, *ardua . . . saxa . . . abrupto limite . . . summis collibus . . . colle relicto*) when Curio leaves the heights and enters the flatland (743–45, *patulis arvis . . . mersos . . . in agros*). It is said at that point, on the other hand, that the Numidian calvary took the high ground (747, *conpletis . . . montibus*). Also, in the battle against Varus, it is said that Curio sent his troops into the plain (710–11, *apertis . . . campis*). There is no indication that the terrain gives power to either Curio or Varus, but the flatland is at best neutral for Curio who seems on this occasion to win merely with stronger forces. Yet it is the flatland from which Juba, in contrast to Curio against Varus, draws his strength in the next battle. The engagement with Varus, that is, affirms indirectly the potency of the *Castra Cornelia* for Curio. Or, the narrative presents a distinct sequence drawing attention back to *Castra Cornelia* and its potency for Curio. For Lucan describes first the earth on which Curio might be strong, next land that is neutral for the Roman,

⁷ For this feature of Vergil's catalogue, cf. Adam Parry, "The Two Voices of Virgil's *Aeneid*," in Steele Commager, ed., *Virgil* (Englewood Cliffs 1966) 107–10.

and last the earth which though neutral for Curio is by contrast full of strength for the native Juba.⁸

The point of this attention to terrain is to sketch the role of Curio along the lines of the myth as an unwise, unsuccessful Antaeus in contrast to Juba who acts rather the part of an Antaeus who does everything right with respect to earth. Curio's imprudent descent into the plain and into an area unknown to him but potent for his enemy, and this from earth which in Curio's mind and in fact strategically is full of strength for him, reenacts the forced separation of Antaeus from his life-giving earth, except that Curio foolishly makes the departure. Curio's attitude to the piece of earth he should use is analogous to the attitude which even Antaeus himself thinks better of. For after Antaeus has scorned earth in overcoming various opponents (605–9), he thinks better of the separation and reverts to earth against his main opponent, Hercules. Curio, however, his indifference to his strong point on earth reinforced by an easy victory over Varus where earth is not a factor, persists in meeting his main opponent without strength-giving soil beneath him.

Lucan's fashioning of Curio in the role of an Antaeus separated from earth in this way illuminates a peculiar mentality of Curio, a failure to be in touch with earth in a special sense. On one level, the failure to stay in touch with earth can be interpreted from the standpoint of simple, hard-headed military strategy. As Lucan tells it, Curio has an empty, superficial feeling for earth. He does not value the *Cornelia Castra* out of a soldier's sense of position. He shows no deeply-based instinctive feeling for earth, its high and low places, its contours for soldierly uses. Rather, he sees power in the spot because it has been invested by another general with a potency for victory. This vain, superficial attitude lies behind and explains Curio's easy severance of himself from the earth he should stand upon, i.e., his thoughtless departure into the plain against Varus and Juba. The mentality of Curio, however, has deeper implications. Curio's actions show him as a man out of touch with his natural environment, and hence with its true and fundamental values, or, as we say, a man simply "out of touch." To this man, earth is merely a thing, a component in human calculations without any special character of its own. The superficial mentality of Curio is amplified by the fact that the African earth in this episode is so extraordinarily distinct and vital. Personified in Antaeus, in

⁸ From comparison with Caesar's account of Curio's battles in *B.C.* 2.24–44 it appears that Lucan has greatly simplified things in favor of this strong, consistent contrast between high and low ground, *Castra Cornelia* and plain. The fight against Varus, for example, is mounted from an encampment near Utica, and a valley separating the two armies figures prominently in the action (cf. 24, 26–27, 34). The same is true of the battle against Juba where there is little attention given to terrain (*locis superioribus in campum*, 40; cf. 42). Yet Caesar pointedly observes that Curio was rash to move down from the *Castra* where he was intending first to fight a protracted war from a strong, well-supplied position (37–38).

Juba's people, and in Juba himself, it is an earth virtually alive and able to act on its own behalf in the way that it helps Juba overthrow Curio. It is in keeping with this mentality that Curio so readily exchanges one part of earth with another, *Castra Cornelia* with plains, as if the two were indeed characterless, interchangeable components.

This mentality is important in the episode because Lucan wishes us to see that it extends to Rome. For in 689–92 Curio has two designs, the taking of Africa and the giving of Rome to Caesar, and these are noted as if two equal, interchangeable things without regard for the special character of the places in question. The episode, that is, represents Curio's mentality towards things on a global scale in his treatment of the two kinds of terrain on a small scale. Or, the flatland and the *Castra Cornelia* are models, distinctly different places on a small scale which have analogues in distinctly different places on a large scale. The whole of Africa which Curio wants to take corresponds to Juba's flatlands in the battle sequence, while Rome corresponds to the one part of earth in the episode with special Roman associations, the earth Curio should hold to as peculiarly Roman, the *Castra*. Curio lets go of one, the *Castra*, as easily as he enters into and tries to take the other, the plains of Juba, and so, it is implied, Rome and Africa respectively. There is no more consideration of the distinct characters of Rome and Africa as nations, peoples, or political orders than Curio shows for the peculiar features of earth which distinguish the *Castra Cornelia* from the plain. Inherent in this proposition is the idea that the different national and political identities of Africa and Rome carry a natural authenticity, even as the campsite and the plain in having certain character as distinct parts of earth are part of a natural order, and so are not to be confused or exchanged with one another. Thus the attitude to large as to small is not only grossly oblivious, but in being contrary to earth itself is wrong, or against the natural, self-certifying order of things. For this reason Lucan says that Curio's intention to wrest Africa from one king (*Libyamque auferre tyranno*) while putting Rome under another (*regnum*) violated "heaven and earth" (*superos humanaque polluit*).⁹

Seen in this way, the Antaeus episode belongs to a series of episodes in which Caesar and the Caesareans are depicted as villains in their political designs by virtue of their treatment of nature, always with Rome as the central issue of the depiction. Their treatment of nature shows their aggression to be something *plus quam civile*, aggression not merely

⁹ Curio's attitude fits the view of the episode one would have from Lucan's remarks in the preface (661–65) and epilogue (788–824). Curio's excessive trust in the camp for its omen (664, *indulsit castris*) goes hand in hand with his blindness about terrain. The same blindness leads him into the debacle that makes him an expiatory sacrifice to Carthage (788–98). The insensitivity to earth distinct and peculiarly Roman fits his callous attitude as the seller of Rome (824).

against institutions but institutions that, like the natural places they assault, belong to a natural order of things which is, of course, aligned with Pompey and the Pompeians. As in Africa, the villains are most often marked by their oblivious, arrogant attitude to nature in the form of earth. They alter, abuse, and mutilate earth. It is arrogance towards earth and natural landscape that appears in the crossing of Rubicon, at Brundisium in Caesar's treatment of land and sea and their boundaries, in his treatment of the rivers in Spain, and very prominently in his building of a great siege wall across the land at Dyrrachium where Pompey is emphatically aligned with earth and its native features.¹⁰ With Curio the unnaturalness is merely manifest in a different, more subtle form, or through a gross obliviousness to earth's distinctions rather than in any overt action against it as elsewhere. Yet it is the more artful as it is helped into conception by the figure of Antaeus and his myth with the provocative feature of being separated from earth and thrown into relief by the earth-connected Juba.

Separation from earth is half of Curio's reenactment of Antaeus in defeat. The other half is the act of standing, the particular position in which Antaeus is separated from earth and suffers defeat. As with separation from earth, the standing of Curio has special allegorical significance for the civil war. This standing is expressed as a theme, a series of instances of the word *sto* and its compounds as follows. The first instance is *quamvis stare* (609) which says that Antaeus was superior to all contenders although he did not use his powers from earth but stood upright in combats. At 646, Hercules, having learned the source of Antaeus' power, declares that the giant must stand, *standum est*, and thus be defeated. Outside of the mythical account, *sto* continues to appear in the battle narrative, but here exclusively of Curio or Curio's forces. Thus Curio in thinking about how he will get his troops to fight makes the analogy to gladiators who fight not from loyalty or choice of side but merely because they happen to stand (708, *qua stetit*) on one side or the other. *Sto* appears next in 754 where it is said that the horses of Curio's cavalry stood motionless from great fatigue before the combat with Juba (*stare*), something presumably uncharacteristic of the animals. Then, when the troops of Curio are slain, their corpses are made to stand upright in the press of the Roman ranks upon themselves (787, *stetit omne cadaver*). This last instance of *sto* is very emphatic because the subject of *stetit* is *cadaver*, whose root means "to fall." The rhetorical flourish marks a certain importance to the phrase to which we will return, but the odd feature of standing also claims attention as a kind of oxymoron with the later information that Curio fell (797, *cecidit*) and lay

¹⁰ C. Saylor, "Belli Spes Inproba: The Theme of Walls in Lucan, *Pharsalia* VI," *TAPA* 108 (1978) 245–47.

fallen (803, *iaces*).¹¹ As for *sto* again, there is a certain cruel play on the term when already at 771 in anticipation of the standing death of Curio's forces, Lucan says the battle was not in question using *steterunt*, *nullo . . . discrimine . . . ancipites steterunt casus*, and again with a word whose base means "to fall."

Three additional features seem designed to reinforce the resemblance of Curio to Antaeus in standing. One is the enormous exhaustion of Curio's troops (750–60) which corresponds to the draining of Antaeus' strength before he is revitalized (622–26). Second is sweat, the sweat of Antaeus (623, 630) and later of the horses in Curio's cavalry (754, 758). Third is the compression or squeezing suffered by the Roman troops (773–87) which answers the squeezing Antaeus suffers at Hercules' hands (648, 653, *stricta*).

Now in order to understand what Lucan means by standing about Curio's civil war mentality, we need to return to *qua stetit* in 708. That instance is significant because it occurs between the myth and the battle narrative as if linking the two and setting the perspective in which standing is to be seen in the second. It is also significant because it is the one instance that is from the point of view or in the thinking of Curio himself. Finally, in this instance there occurs first the particular form *stetit* which reappears in the conspicuous phrase *stetit omne cadaver*, hinting at a connection between the two standings, the one in Curio's thinking and the other in the death of the Romans. In the first instance, Curio reasons with *qua stetit* that he can make his reluctant troops fight by not letting them think about causes or leaders but by putting them into battle where they will simply react. Like gladiators, they will automatically favor the side on which they stand, *qua stetit, inde favet*. Now it has been observed that the comparison to gladiators condemns the role of Curio and his troops in Africa. For the civil war here assumes the character of a show in the arena with a vain expending of lives, and thus too in the manner of the arena the deaths of Romans are like an expiatory sacrifice to Carthage.¹² The responson of *qua stetit . . . stetit omne cadaver* within the train of "standing" words, however, points to another, equally important idea, namely that one kind of standing equals the other, or that the rationale of Curio about taking a stand equals death for the Romans. Lucan is attacking mindless partisanship, or the impulse to fight a civil conflict and Curio's adeptness in bringing forth that impulse in his men. The attack is wider than first meets the eye.

¹¹ The phrase *stetit omne cadaver* has special importance, or seems not to be only one more of Lucan's fine *sententiae*, because it appears in the network of *sto* words as described. It is also significant that Caesar's account makes no mention of this standing of Roman troops in death.

¹² Ahl, *Lucan* 97–99.

The "standing" Curio brings about proceeds from the same mentality as Curio's separation from earth. Indeed, as standing and separation are but two ways of expressing the same state of Antaeus in the myth, so in the allegory they describe the same mentality of Curio, or a mentality different only in so far as it shows itself at different ends of the scale of political units. For while standing relates more narrowly to political parties or leaders with whom one might stand, separation has to do with nations, Africa and Rome, in which one might stand. At both ends the mentality is equally groundless and inane since standing is taking a position senselessly, without choice or deliberation, while separation is having no sense of the right place one should stand. Like separation, Curio's idea of standing is unnatural, worse than political, or *plus quam civile*, in failing to observe fundamental distinctions or the order of things. For standing is on the one hand not even a deliberate choice of a wrong party, but on the other a senseless stand against oneself. This is what *stetit omne cadaver* represents in the combat. Only the spectacle of death while standing up, as if a living death, and of a death that is at the same time suicidal, seems able to express the bizarre, unnatural character of Curio's *quastaret, inde favet*, and so that is what Lucan gives us.

At Massilia the peculiar forms of death express the suicidal character of the conflict.¹³ Here it is compression in the Roman ranks that expresses the same thing, and in this respect the description is like that at Dyrrachium. For it has been noted that Dyrrachium shows a concentric movement of Roman troops, a pressing in upon self, which is consistently caused by Caesar and given dramatic expression in the enormous wall and in the main character, Scaeva. There the squeezing represents the suicidal aggression, the turning upon self of Romans, which Lucan saw as a cardinal evil in the war.¹⁴ Here the same point is made, but in the crowding which Curio's men suffer in 777-78, and which answers as a main correspondence the constriction Antaeus undergoes at the hands of Hercules. The army is crushed into a small, dense mass (*parvum spissantur in orbem*, 777), as Roman grinds against Roman. Significantly for the idea of suicide, no one can move in this mass without either stabbing or being stabbed by fellow Romans. Meanwhile, and also significant for the idea of suicide, the forces of Juba have little to see, much less do, to help this catastrophe along. Rather, Juba's soldiers, who might more reasonably be the object of Roman aggression, stand untouched on the periphery, as if external or incidental to a process which is determinedly self-generated and self-destructive.

¹³ Robert J. Rowland, Jr., "The Significance of Massilia in Lucan," *Hermes* 97 (1969) 207-8.

¹⁴ Saylor 252, 256.

The significance of this allegory, the impulse to fight as Roman self-destruction, extends beyond 4.581–824 and touches the whole epic. The same is true of the role of Curio, for the reader can only fully appreciate the importance of Curio's role here by comparing Curio's behavior in his first appearance in 1.266–95. Curio's action in the earlier episode is epitomized in two statements, *utque ducem varias volventem pectore curas* (273), and *sic postquam . . . accendit ducem* (291–92). Curio acts upon a Caesar who is prone to civil war (293–95) yet remains unsure, weighing things. Curio points out that Caesar's enemies are determined to deny him honors and to punish him for his conquests. He can win everything, but only if he acts now. In essence, that is, Curio argues that Caesar has no choice and cannot deliberate, but must take a stand for war (*sto* is not used). Now, it is significant that Curio's rationale of standing in Africa is brought to bear on men who like Caesar are unsure and unready to act. As prisoners from Corfinium and loyal neither to their old nor new commanders, Curio's men are undependable, even deserting, a classic example of men uncommitted (695–99):

et quod Caesareis numquam devota iuventus

 infidusque novis ducibus dubiusque prioris
 fas utrumque putat.

In light of what follows, it is a virtue not to be committed, and certainly not as a partisan of Caesar under Curio's leadership. *Fas utrumque putat* is a sane, commendable attitude which Curio has a talent for converting into a stand.

The parallelism between the scene with Caesar and the African episode is deliberate: hesitancy, Curio's denial that there can be any choice or deliberation, and his action as a catalyst upon the unsure in order to make them stand. The second episode is a reenactment of the first and together they form a connected text on standing. Again Lucan leads us to look at the same rationale at different ends of the political spectrum, first in general terms in Curio's speech at the top of the chain of command, and next at the bottom, in greater detail and in the Roman ranks where the rationale of standing is shown in action. The second episode is complete with a study of the out-of-touch mentality that lay behind the rationale. Lucan merely held over until the African episode with its greater dramatic possibilities his exposition of what standing ultimately and truly was for all Romans in the civil war, Curio's standing, Caesar's standing, and the standing of those who listened to men like Curio.