

Robur in Lucan's Elemental Epic

The elemental affiliations of Pompey and Caesar in the *Bellum Civile* have long been recognized. Pompey and his forces are associated in particular with trees. When he is introduced to the epic, he is compared a dilapidated oak (1.136-143), and in death his corpse is implicitly compared to chopped timber (8.674; Ahl 1976). Caesar, on the other hand, is aligned with the opposing forces of lightning, wind, and fire (Nix 2008). These images serve to characterize Caesar and Pompey: Caesar disdains inaction (Philips 1968; Thomas 1988; Augoustakis 2006) while Pompey is inert and hesitant (Rosner-Siegel 1983). In this paper, I argue that the thematic significance of trees resonates in Lucan's use the word *robur*, in its denotations of "power" and "forces," which he applies almost exclusively to Pompey and his allies. Moreover, Lucan's consistent use of *robur* connotes Pompey and his forces as chthonic, which reinforces the epic's gigantomachy-theme. Finally, the traditional *robur* of Pompey and the Republic is presented as being consumed by Caesar in his rise to power.

In the *Bellum Civile*, the word *robur* occurs 61 times denoting oak trees; oak timber and things made of it; strength; and troops. In the latter two senses (24 instances total), *robur* frequently refers to the forces of Pompey and the Senate (2.527; 4.372, 667; 5.18, 362; 6.418; 7.221 and 545). It is used of Pompey himself after Pharsalus (7.669). *Robur* is the old-fashioned strength of Cato (2.245, 379), of Cornelia's noble lineage (8.72), and, according to Lentulus, of the Senate (5.18). Cicero, by extension, gives *robur* to the Republican cause (7.67). By contrast, *robur* is never used of Caesar himself, and only three times of Caesar's troops (1.466; 5.412, 722).

The Antaeus digression demonstrates that *robur* maintains the chthonic connotation of its primary meaning even when it denotes "power" more abstractly; the strength that Antaeus

receives from Earth is *robur* (4.600, 608, 633, 642). *Robur* is also the strength of Varus' troops (*robore...confisus Latio*, 4.667-668), whom Lucan sets up as a parallel to Antaeus. The opposition of Pompey's chthonic *robur* and Caesar's celestial forces is evoked in the early, paired similes of Pompey as oak and Caesar as storm (1.136-43, 151-7), and in later similes that depict winds knocking over trees (*curvato robore*, 1.390) and lightning and wildfire consuming dense forests (*robore densae...silvae*, 3.362-3). These similes are paralleled by literal acts of deforestation committed by Caesar's troops (2.671; 3.395; 4.139). The most striking of these scenes of deforestation is the desecration of the sacred grove in book 3 (*merso violata in robora ferro*, 435) that prefigures the death of Pompey (Rowland 1969). Each deforestation scene prominently features the word *robur*.

Masters has argued that, in the naval battle of book 3, *robur* is used metapoetically—the ships and bodies of the men are the *materia* for Lucan's epic. But the use of the word *robur* is in fact overdetermined by another of the epic's central themes—the gigantomachy (Feeney 1991). This theme appears first in the invocation of Nero (1.36), and again in the lead-up to Pharsalus (7.144-150). But as Feeney (1991) notes, Lucan innovates on the traditional account of the gigantomachy—from Lucan's perspective, Caesar, the usurper, has successfully supplanted the Olympians, and now occupies the heavens. In this inverted cosmos, the overthrown gods, once celestial beings, are now chthonic (at 5.82-101, Apollo lives underground and is compared to the buried Typhoeus). The consistent use of *robur*, with its chthonic connotation, sets Pompey and his allies up as parallel to the Olympians—they are all old powers overthrown by the celestial Caesar.

But *robur* has significance for the *Bellum Civile* beyond the gigantomachy-theme. Gowers (2011) has pointed out that in the imperial period, the death of trees often symbolizes the

end of a regime. After Pompey's body is burned on a pyre of *robur* (8.738, 745, 757), *robur* is not used again in the *Bellum Civile* with the denotation of "strength." The era of Pompey, and of the Senate he represented, is consumed in the pyre.

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