

Sean EASTON ‘Becoming a *Scelerum Vindex* or Why Lucan’s Pompey is Better Off
Dead’

At *DBC* 9.1-16, the ghost of Pompey rises from the ashes, soars to the heavens, but then, strikingly, returns to the world of civil war, entering the bodies of Brutus and Pompey (9.17-18): *et scelerum vindex in sancto pectore Bruti / sedit et invicti posuit se mente Catonis* (‘And, an avenger of crime, he settled in the holy breast of Brutus and placed himself in the mind of unconquerable Cato’). Lucan’s reader has been left – with the apparent encouragement of the poet – to labor for eight books under the misapprehension that Pompey’s part in the civil war concludes on the Egyptian shore. This deviation from audience expectations provokes the reader both to wonder at the poet’s purpose and to review the poem for indications of how to interpret this unanticipated development. In the first part of my paper, I review Lucan’s depictions of Pompey before death and after – in particular how Pompey’s status as an actual *umbra* literalizes Lucan’s introductory characterization of him as the ‘*umbra* of a great name’ (1.131), bringing the actions of Pompey as a literal shade into close connection with his earlier portrait (Hardie 1986).

In the second part, I extend this line of inquiry to include 9.17-18 and the first section of the poem in which Pompey speaks and acts (2.531-736). I illustrate three points of contact. First, the description of Pompey at 9.17 as a *scelerum vindex*, which strongly recalls Pompey’s first words in the poem (Wick 2004) (2.531): *O scelerum ultores*; second, the bull simile with which Lucan characterizes Pompey’s retreat after he fails to rouse his soldiers to fight Caesar. This simile contains an explicit meditation on Pompey’s victorious return to the realm of civil war (2.605-7): *mox reddita victor / quoslibet in saltus comitantibus agmina tauris / invito pastore trahit...* (‘soon, a conqueror, he brings / his restored battle lines to the glades he prefers, as the bulls follow along, / though the herdsman is unwilling’). The suggestion of Pompey’s return as *victor* blatantly conflicts with the facts of history. This has been explained as the slippage of Pompey’s own expectations into the narrator’s account (Fantham 1992), but it must be noted that in Book 9, when Pompey enters the host-bodies of Brutus and Cato (9.17-18), the situation changes radically. Brutus – and now Pompey with him -- will return to Italy and slay Julius Caesar. Third, I examine how the story of Brundisium’s foundation (following the simile) serves as a signal that the audience should suspect accounts of Pompey’s defeat. The city’s first settlers had been the bearers of a false message of a hero’s fall (2.610-12). Coming from Crete, their sails had falsely signaled Theseus’ defeat (2.612: *victum Thesea*). Although dead, Pompey is far from defeated.

After death, Pompey obtains revenge on Pothinus, architect of his assassination (10.333-37), manipulates the conflict at Alexandria, preserves Caesar from an inappropriate death in Egypt (10.6-7), and enters the body of Caesar’s slayer (9.17). Pompey’s greatest streak of uninterrupted success occurs after he dies. The passage of his ghost into Brutus and Cato marks not an epilogue to his narrative, but the reification of the role he wished to claim with his first words in the poem: avenger of Caesar’s crimes.