Euander's curse, and the 'long death' of Mezentius (Verg. *Aen*. 8.483-8, 10.845-50)

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The atrocious 'long death' inflicted by Mezentius on his enemies is one of the most repugnant and perverse instruments of death ever devised by the human mind. Previously attributed by Aristotle to Etruscan pirates, but by Virgil specifically ascribed only to the Etruscan king Mezentius, this practice consisted of tying a living body to a cadaver, overlapping their limbs so that the decomposition of the latter advanced progressively upon the former: in other words, a slow 'contagion' of death.[1] The detailed description of this torment[2] is intended to give the measure of Mezentius' brutality, and not coincidentally is uttered by Euander, a character whose ethical profile is quite different from that of the Etruscan king (Verg. *Aen*. 8.478-88):

Haud procul hinc saxo incolitur fundata uetusto
urbis Agyllinae sedes, ubi Lydia quondam
gens, bello praeclara, iugis insedit Etruscis.
hanc multos florentem annos rex deinde superbo
imperio et saeuis tenuit Mezentius armis.
Quid memorem infandas caedes, quid facta tyranni
effera? *di capiti ipsius generique reseruent*!
mortua quin etiam iungebat corpora uiuis

[1] Cf. Thome 1979, 202 ff.; Briquel 1995, 182 and n. 18 (on this and other atrocities attributed to Etruscans cf. also Gras 1985, 446-50).

[2] A torment that has had its admirers and imitators throughout history, from the emperor Macrinus (*Hist. Aug*. 15.12.8-9) to the French Revolution. Some references on Mezentius' literary fortunes in Di Fazio 2005, 62.

componens manibusque manus atque oribus ora,
tormenti genus, et sanie taboque fluentis
complexu in misero longa sic morte necabat.

Euander, the Arcadian 'good king', reacts to the atrocities perpetrated by the Etruscan tyrant with a curse in the form of a prayer to the gods, that they may bring down that same ferocity "on his head and his offspring".

Mezentius – as is known – has no other offspring than Lausus, whose tragic death (as a consequence of his brave effort to protect his wounded father) triggers the final combat with Aeneas and the death of Mezentius himself. As soon as the Etruscan ruler, gravely wounded and withdrawn from the field, sees Lausus' companions bearing his corpse, his desperation erupts into the typical gestures of mourning:[3] conscious that Lausus has sacrificed himself to save his father, Mezentius pours dust on his grey hair, raises both hands towards the heavens[4] and throws himself upon the lifeless body of his son (10.841-56):

at Lausum socii exanimem super arma ferebant
flentes, ingentem atque ingenti uulnere uictum.
agnouit longe gemitum praesaga mali mens:
canitiem multo deformat puluere et ambas
ad caelum tendit palmas et *corpore inhaeret*.
'tantane me tenuit uiuendi, nate, uoluptas,
ut pro me hostili paterer succedere dextrae,
quem genui? tuane haec genitor per uulnera seruor

[3] The most thorough analysis in Thome 1979, 117-39.
[4] A gesture the significance of which has been (since Servius) much discussed: cf. Sullivan 1968; Kronenberg 2005, 412 and n. 30.

morte tua uiuens? heu, nunc misero mihi demum
exitium infelix, nunc alte uulnus adactum!
idem ego, nate, tuum maculaui crimine nomen,
pulsus ob inuidiam solio sceptrisque paternis.
debueram patriae poenas odiisque meorum:
omnis per mortis animam sontem ipse dedissem!
nunc uiuo neque adhuc homines lucemque relinquo.
sed linquam.'

The deep meaning implied by *corpore inhaeret* seems to have been generally overlooked by Virgilian scholars: by clinging to the *dead* body of his son, Mezentius in fact actualizes the curse put on *him and his offspring* by Euander.[5] The phrase, in my opinion, is much more than a simple description of a gesture of intense grief (like that of Euander over the corpse of his son Pallas, 11.149-50 *feretro Pallante reposto / procubuit super atque haeret lacrimansque gemensque*): in the form *corpore inhaerere* it is without parallel,[6] and as such drew the attention of Servius.[7] It stresses the *complexus*, the close match between the two bodies, the living and the dead one: it is the symbolic gesture of contact/contagion between life and death.

As Mezentius knows very well, from the moment he cleaves to his son's

[5] Just a hint in Nethercut 1975, 34-5, who observes "the phrase *corpore inhaeret* echoes ironically the practice which Mezentius pursued when he wished to punish his enemies", and, without connecting it to Euander's curse, interprets it as evidence of Mezentius' 'spiritual regeneration'. Cf. also Kronenberg 2005, 412, who, in her allegorical reading of Mezentius as an Epicurean, interprets the gesture as a symbol of his philosophic characterisation ("Mezentius' torture might also be interpreted as symbolizing the Epicurean/materialist embrace of the incarnate life", 409).

[6] The only other recurrence, in the Christian poet Cyprianus Gallus (5th cent.), *Iud*. 391, seems a quotation from Virgil. Similar phrases in Ov. *met*. 4.369-70 *commissaque corpore toto / sicut inhaerebat* (Salmacis, whose tight embrace with Hermaphroditus verges on turning them into a single body); *trist*. 1.3.79 *coniunx umeris abeuntis inhaerens*; 1.6.3 *pectoribus quantum tu nostris, uxor, inhaeres*.

[7] Serv. *ad* 10.845 *CORPORE INHAERET aut inhaeret Lauso suo corpore: aut certe hysterologia est, ut sit 'haeret in corpore': melius tamen est ut sit antiptosis pro 'corpori', ut* <361> *"haeret pede pes" pro 'pedi'.*

dead body, he begins to die (*nunc misero mihi demum* / *exitium infelix*).[8] This is the truly lethal wound (not the one inflicted by Aeneas at 10.783-6), the only one that cannot be healed: in the typical Virgilian stylistic device of the *dicolon abundans*,[9] the second half of the sentence (*nunc… uulnus*) reiterates and varies the first half (*nunc… exitium*). So, from this point on Mezentius' life is drawing to an end:[10] he knows that he is still alive in consequence of Lausus' death (*tua… per uulnera seruor*), but his life is now infected by that death. *Morte tua uiuens* thus sounds tragically ambiguous: Mezentius lives, certainly, *thanks* to his son's death, but also *in contact with* it,[11] and he suffers from its contagion.

So, the gesture at l. 845, *corpore inhaeret*, literally actualizes Euander's curse (Mezentius and his offspring, Lausus, replay the gruesome punishment inflicted by the Etruscan tyrant on his enemies), that he live in physical contact with death, and graphically represents Mezentius' painful condition, the 'long death' he suffers by continuing to live after the loss of his son.

If we recognize the narrative mechanism that connects Mezentius' downfall and the retaliation that crushes him,[12] what we have first and foremost is, of course, confirmation of Virgil's mastery in constructing his work: Euander's curse – a sort of 'Chekhov's gun' that reveals its dramatic necessity, along with the prophecy of the dying Orodes at 10.739-41 (*non me, quicumque es, inulto,* / *uictor, nec*

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[8] Therefore the alternative reading *exilium* is also weaker, *pace* Harrison 1991, 273, who finds it "undoubtedly right"; among editors *exilium* is accepted by Sabbadini and Geymonat, while for *exitium*, of the best mss., are Ribbeck, Nettleship, Mynors, Conte (a long list in Rivero García *et al*. 2011, *ad loc*.). Cf. also Kronenberg 2005, 414-5.

[9] On this cf. Conte 2007, 30 and 100-1.

[10] Harrison 1991, 273 seems not to grasp the point here: "*exitium infelix* makes no sense here, for death is now a more rather than less attractive prospect for Mezentius, as 855-6 imply." The sense of Mezentius' words is that for him, the death of his son is tantamount to his own death (*exitium infelix* is a stereotype modeled on the Homeric λυγρὸς ὄλεθρος: cf. Conte 1993, 209).

[11] Cf. Gotoff 1984, 202: "All this is summed up in the phrase *morte tua vivens* - an uncompromising statement of interdependence."

[12] On the principle of *lex talionis*, that is, a principle of natural justice, inspiring the curses in many ancient literary texts cf. Watson 1991, 42-6, 65-7 and 160-6.

longum laetabere; te quoque fata / prospectant paria atque eadem mox arua tenebis) – thus has its intended effects, as does Dido's famous curse (at 4.607-29) against Aeneas and his people, the *aition* of the historical enmity between Rome and Carthage.[13] But we are also invited to encompass and contextualize Mezentius' death within a more general plan of events, in which victors and vanquished continuously alternate roles,[14] victims of higher forces that overwhelm them all.

Certainly, Mezentius' death is invoked by Euander's curse, in which the gods seem to intervene – i.e., it could be reasonable to presume that the *contemptor divum* Mezentius, the cruel tyrant who despises them and the entire system of values they represent, here receives his just punishment at the hands of the gods.[15] We might then think that the tyrant-giant, the very epitome of human self-righteousness and impiety,[16] is also a victim not just of Aeneas, the instrument of human justice, but of a higher, divine revenge. But it is difficult to discern any clear higher plan in the tragic story of Mezentius, who seems to be subjugated by the same fate as all of his victims: this is why Mezentius, coming to an awareness of his own wrongdoing and meeting his destiny – garners a certain tragic sympathy, the natural, human pity for someone destroyed by an awful force. Titanism, the rebellion against established power, and the tragedy of the defeated, never ceases to fascinate and to elicit human understanding and sympathy.

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[13] On details of how Dido's curse allusively comes up in later books of the *Aeneid* as well cf. the insightful analysis by Lyne 1987, 130-2.

[14] Euander and Mezentius, too – exiles who both suffer the death of an only son.

[15] From this perspective, the punishment inflicted by the gods on Mezentius could act as a confirmation of the 'objectivity' of Euander's account of Mezentius as well, doubted by some authors, like Burke 1974 and Kronenberg 2005, 410.

[16] On the giant-like character of Mezentius cf. La Penna 1980; Leach 1971; Hardie 1986, 97 and 155; Kronenberg 2005, 407-8, who sees in him a positive, "subversive Epicurean kind" of Gigantomachy, diverging from the traditional use of the Gigantomachy as a symbol of the victory of order over chaos (so "the reader has a choice in evaluating Mezentius: she can view him as an impious villain who, like so many Roman villains, is granted a noble defeat, or she can take an Epicurean turn and explore the piety of *impietas*").

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