

Hesitation and Taking Sides in the *Bella Civilia* of Lucan and Seneca

This paper analyzes the theme of hesitation during civil conflict in Senecan drama and Lucan's *Bellum Civile*. I demonstrate that both Seneca and Lucan use the theme of hesitation to illustrate the difficulties inherent in choosing sides in civil war and to foreground the consequences of such decisions during the fighting.

Seneca's influence on his nephew Lucan extends far beyond their similar stylistic features and artistic or literary figures (Due 1962, Ahl 1976), occasional thematic or topical resemblances (Diels 1886, Ambühl 2010), and (possible) representations of Stoic doctrine (Ahl 1976, Bartsch 1997, Sklenář 2003). Both authors more significantly use their literature to examine a particularly timely theme: civil war. Each feels that such struggles are so inherently wrong that taking sides in them presents an almost insurmountable challenge—for while both parties are morally in error, defeat in such engagements is still preferable to victory over one's fellow citizens (Sen. *Ep. Mor.* 14.13; Luc. 1.366, 7.706). Unsurprisingly, then, Lucan shares conventions of depicting civil wars and the difficulty in choosing sides in them with similar portrayals of civil strife in Seneca's *Phoenissae*, *Thyestes*, and *Medea*. Both authors label these conflicts civil wars and depict them similarly, adorning them with natural catastrophes, lack of divine presence, and all-encompassing natures. But the similarities of these internal hostilities and the predicaments faced by those engaged in them most clearly manifest themselves through instances of hesitation throughout the four accounts. Not only do both authors use hesitation as a literary motif throughout their works, they also depict their characters—both the leaders and their followers—hesitating at key moments and before their most egregious acts.

For example, hesitation as a general theme appears prominently not only in Lucan (Masters 1992) but also in these tragedies, where Tantalus is literally “dragged” (*extrahit*, *Thy.* 1)

onstage and naturally indecisive characters like the blind, fumbling Oedipus begin the stories. Moreover, troops on both sides of the struggles hesitate as they proceed to battle, advancing slowly or just fleeing or mutinying (*Phoe.* 419; *Luc.* 4.694-700, 5.261ff.). These occasions highlight a disconnect between leaders and led, perhaps emphasizing that the soldiers—those forced to take sides in this civil conflict—possess and display through their irresolution an awareness that they are committing acts of *nefas*. But in the most serious instances, hesitation pervades even the highest echelons of one or both parties. Medea experiences some of the most revealing instances of such hesitation. Before slaughtering each son, she questions her own actions and admits her doubt and emotional insecurity about her dedication, asking why her anger and her love lead her in opposite directions (937-39, 988-91). Medea's repeated questioning of her *animus* and admission that she is wavering, miserable, and ashamed reveal her deep-seated reservations about her horrific doings, an uncertainty that has hovered in the background for the whole tragedy only to reveal itself at the culmination of her offenses. At Pharsalia, Pompey and Caesar are equally hesitant as they prepare for their showdown. Pompey momentarily desires to quit his position as leader or win rather through a bloodless victory, while across the battlefield Caesar stands in doubt as his "very eager madness for weapons grew weak" (7.245-46). For a brief time, a window into these various characters' minds is opened: they too admit to agreeing with Lucan and Seneca's distaste for a struggle that they cannot win—for victory comes at the cost of one's morality and harm to one's fellow-citizens and country.

Though the violence eventually commences with its customary assuredness, the audience still understands that on some level these atrocities are being committed only unwillingly. These moments of hesitation are only a sign of deeper struggles being waged within those who are drawn into declaring support for one side or another in a civil conflict.

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