

Lucan's Influence on Tacitus' Account of the Civil War between Otho and Vitellius

Previous scholarship has provided some valuable contributions on Tacitus' allusive engagement with Latin epic poetry (Lauletta 1998; Foucher 2000; Leigh 2007; Joseph 2012). Although the interest of most scholars seems mainly focused on Vergil's influence on Tacitus (Schmaus 1887; Baxter 1971, 1972), Lucan's role as a model for the historian has received attention as well. Robbert 1917, by offering an exhaustive list of parallels, has paved the way for a series of interesting studies on the intertextual relationship between Tacitus' *corpus* and the *Bellum Civile*: some of them compare the two authors on large-scale issues, such as the description of the crowds (Borgo 1976) and the characterization of the civil war (O'Gorman 1995); some others discuss echoes of Lucan in single episodes of Tacitus' works (Borgo 1977; Manolaraki 2005; Tzounakas 2005).

Following this line of argumentation, the purpose of my paper is to show that the whole account of the civil war between Otho and Vitellius in Tac. *Hist.* 1-2 is patterned on Lucan's account of the conflict between Pompey and Caesar. First, the characters involved are similar. During the war, Otho, who is always described as a restless and active character, is surprisingly hesitant, whereas Vitellius, usually idle and passive, proves himself to be extremely determined: they seem to forget themselves, and to turn respectively into Lucan's Pompey, static as an oak (*B.C.* 1.135-43), and Caesar, dynamic as a thunderbolt (*B.C.* 1.151-7). Second, the setting of the clashes are also analogous: both Pharsalus (*B.C.* 1.38, 4.803) and Bedriacum (*Hist.* 2.23.2) are described as ill-omened places. Third, the sequence of events of the two conflicts is parallel: similar prodigies foretell the war (*B.C.* 1.561-3, 580-3 / *Hist.* 1.86.1); the Romans display the same panicked reaction when the war breaks up (*B.C.* 1.486-9 / *Hist.* 1.88.2); Vitellius is the one who opens hostilities, following the example of his *alter ego* Caesar; the Vitellian army builds a bridge on the river Padus (*Hist.* 2.34) for the same reasons that drove Caesar to have a bridge built on the Adriatic sea (*B.C.* 2.650-87). Lastly, the outcome of the war is identical: Vitellius wins, and after the final clash he visits the battlefield of Bedriacum and enjoys the sight of the bodies (*Hist.* 2.70), just like Caesar at

Pharsalus (B.C. 7.787-95); Otho, on the other hand, is defeated and determined to commit suicide, but before killing himself he asks for his funeral to be performed quickly, so that his head might not be severed by the enemy (*Hist.* 2.49.3), just as his *alter ego* Pompey (B.C. 8.663-711).

Tacitus' imitation of Lucan can be explained by their analogous interpretation of the two civil wars. Tacitus, in fact, shares with Lucan the idea that both the sides implicated in the conflict are potentially harmful for Rome, and that therefore its outcome does not matter at all: whoever wins will prove himself to be the worst. Tacitus' Lucanian portrayal of the war between Otho and Vitellius is driven by his jaundiced view regarding most of the aspirants to empire in 69 and his preference for Vespasian, during whose reign he embarked upon his career.

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