Lucan’s Tale of Two Leaders:
Rhetoric and Syntax Preceding the Battle of Pharsalus

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The Great Roman Civil war which was fought between 49 and 45 BC catalyzed the end of the Roman Republic and the eventual establishment of the Roman Empire. The war’s contenders were Julius Caesar with his supporters and Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus (or Pompey) with his more conservative followers. After winning, Caesar became Rome’s perpetual dictator. After Caesar’s assassination in 44 BC, civil wars ensued with Caesar’s son leading them, and ultimately ending the Republic. Marcus Annaeus Lucannus (Lucan) was a Roman poet who wrote over a century after Caesar and Pompey’s civil war. He and his contemporaries lived in the Roman Empire, under the rule of a long line of emperors, so his telling of the civil war is retrospective.

In Book 7 of Lucan’s epic poem De Bello Civili, the impending Battle of Pharsalus, the main event of his poem, is about to take place. Before the battle occurs, each leader, Pompey (in lines 85-150) and Caesar (in lines 235-329), gives a speech to his troops, as he realizes that one of the most pivotal moments in Roman history is about to commence. As Classicists debate how Lucan, writing over a century after the battle, intended to portray Pompey and Caesar, this event is an ideal one to draw legitimately based claims about his intentions from. In analyzing how each leader acts immediately before the premier event of the poem, we discover a dichotomy: Pompeian versus Caesarian. The two men are in the exact same situation, and how each one handles such a significant situation allows the reader to evaluate how Lucan characterizes them. These parallel scenes reveal Pompey as an apprehensive leader who cares for the Republic but has given up hope and Caesar as a selfish but charming and convincing leader who will doubtless come out on top.

Scholars like Berthe Marti acknowledge that this setting of the Battle of Pharsalus is critical on an interpretive level, with much to be extracted about the individual leaders and their legacies:
[Lucan] chose for the setting of his poem a crisis in Roman history close enough to his own time for the men involved to be vividly remembered, as giants perhaps, but also as real, living heroes; and one in which events had been of such proportions that some of these heroes had already become idealised types who had acquired universal significance. If the plot was limited in time and space, the real theme was eternal.

This work was important to its contemporary audience in how it conveyed the different types of “heroes”, from their inspiring attributes to their fatal flaws. These were the very men who catalyzed the tyranny under which Lucan’s contemporaries lived. The Pharsalia allows readers to get more from the work than just the historical facts of the war, or as Eva Matthews Sanford puts it, it conveys “a theme more than academic”. In reading Lucan the audience extracts meaning from motives, and answers to the question of why the war occurred instead of how it occurred. Sanford agrees that “the causes of the war...were futile and trivial after all compared with the war itself.” Lucan thought that the people deserved the causes and circumstances that created their political world.

From the outset of his speech, Pompey feels anxious about and unwilling to enter the battle. Before Pompey even begins his speech, Cicero gives a speech of his own just to convince him that action is necessary. Even after Cicero eloquently and passionately informs Pompey that the popular demand from his troops is for immediate action, Pompey reluctantly responds with a “groan” (ingemuit, 7.85), a sure sign of unwillingness. Now that Pompey knows the battle is inevitable, he has the opportunity to rally his men who clearly are ready to participate in this war. This moment is a golden opportunity to feed off their readiness and make the most of a fighting chance for the Republic.

Pompey opens his speech by separating his personal opinion from his troops, disuniting them in a moment when unity is most crucial. What, according to effective rhetoric standards, should be a powerful and purposeful *exordium* or introduction to a speech, is a feeble and uncertain conditional statement. On an interpretive level, this holds Pompey as a representative of Rome’s current state of affairs. Pompey says: “If this pleases you all, and if time needs Pompey the soldier, not Pompey the leader, I will not delay the fates further” (si...morabor, 7.87-88). The *exordium* is critical in speeches, since it establishes
the orator’s credibility and conveys his passion to his audience, but here Lucan portrays Pompey as making no effort to excite his men. While Pompey is a leader who would rather represent what the majority wants regardless of personal opinion, and is thus democratic, there is weakness in the half-heartedness he conveys as he concedes to his own people, acting like he has been defeated by his own men. Pompey, “who [for Lucan] embodied Rome’s last hopes of liberty,” has grown weak and hopeless, with liberty growing weak and hopeless along with him. His unwillingness is nearly palpable. The opening of his speech in no way rouses his men for battle.

Caesar, on the contrary, is eloquent, cunning, and a master of rhetoric. He inspires his men with his exordium, a real example of a man who knows how to employ pathos, or an appeal to a particular emotion. “Conqueror of the world, soldier, the fortune in all my affairs is present, an abundance of battle desired so often” (domitor...pugnae, 7.250-251), cries out Caesar to his men. He instills confidence in them by presupposing them as the war’s victors, and inspires them to fight by emphasizing that this is a war which they have wanted, establishing a sense of unity Pompey fails to arouse. He addresses his troops with the vocative singular (domitor and miles), stressing the importance of each individual as opposed to referring to them as a mass. This opening is sure to capture his troop’s attention, excite them for the battle in which they are about to partake, and make them feel that Caesar is fully united with them. Why does Lucan, who resents what Caesar has created for him and his contemporaries, show his audience this brilliantly articulate Caesar, an admirable orator? Sanford suggests: “Caesar is hated as the conspicuous aggressor in the war, as the champion of a new and non-republican era, but that is no occasion for belittling his energy and prowess.” In fact, this representation of Caesar almost makes it understandable how he was able to rise to power and start the monarchy; he has all the qualities of a successful and charismatic leader.

Caesar continues to speak in perfect Roman rhetoric, as he moves on to a narratio, which summarizes the events leading up to the point at hand. Pompey’s narratio, while technically still a summary, does not contain the same modes of persuasion (ethos, pathos or logos) as Caesar’s. Caesar reminisces on the crossing of the Rubicon, and links past events to what is about to occur. He seamlessly blends his narratio with his partitio, which contains the actions or events that the speaker believes should follow, whether on his own part or on the audience’s part.
Lucan portrays him as brilliantly convincing, going so far to claim he is: “desiring to return to private life” (ipse...vitae, 7.266), a real example of humility and an employment of ethos, which appeals to his “good” character. Lucan shows his contemporary audience why so many people sided with Caesar and partook in the civil war that would result in tyranny. Caesar employed incredible sophistry. He convinces his men there is no wrong in their partaking in this war and that bloodshed will be minimal (nec...petitis, 7.269-270). He compares the other side of the civil war to barbarians, lessening the guilt they would feel about killing their countrymen, and reminding them why they need to defeat Pompey. Caesar, in his narratio and partitio, continues to strengthen the bond he has with his troops through his inspiring eloquence.

Pompey, on the other hand, remains resistant. Any influence he has on his men is negative through his discouragement and disapproval. Instead of employing persuasive tactics, he admits that there is nothing for them to look forward to, that their fighting will avail to nothing: “I declare that Magnus has accepted the day on which all things will perish” (testor...diem, 7.91-92). Pompey knows that no matter what, the day of the war will be the end of everything as they know it. The decision has been made, seen by the perfect tense of accipio. This word choice furthers Pompey’s overly emphasized point that entering the war is not by his volition; he “accepted” the day, but he does not condone it. He continues by engaging in the opposite of good pathos, when he instills guilt on his own men, emotionally conflicting them and furthering their disunity: “This work of war might have ceased without slaughter from you” (potuit...belli, 7.92-93), he shouts. The use of tibi instead of nobis denotes Pompey’s separation from his troops. He asserts that they, unlike him, are to blame for the unfolding events. He adds insult to injury by calling them “blind men” (o caeci, 7.95), as if they are blundering idiots for their desire to fight. Pompey’s idea of a partitio is further questioning why they are entering this battle in lines 95 and beyond. At no point does Pompey show the slightest inkling of hope for his men, nor for Rome as a nation.

While both Pompey and Caesar make several references and allusions to fate (fata) and fortune (fortuna) as perpetrators, they view it in opposite lights. Pompey views these forces negatively and Caesar treats them positively. Bartsch explains the significance of fortune and fate: “Lucan’s much-bemoaned tendency to be repetitive in his choice of
vocabulary...is significant, bringing into play contradictory notions by using a noun in divergent senses in such proximity that the clash cannot but be noticed.” Pompey says to his men, “Let fortune envelop the nations in one downfall” *(involutat...ruina, 7.89)*, admitting that what happens is not up to him, but some higher power which is not on his side. By employing the jussive subjunctive, Lucan portrays Pompey as crestfallen and submitting to what will come. Later in his speech, he references fortune again, saying: “Does it please fortune to give up these prosperous things of the Republic, to submit the critical moment of the world to the sword?” *(placet...discrimen, 7.108-109)*. Lucan depicts Pompey as frustrated with fortune for his audience. Pompey is horrified that fortune finds delight in the seemingly inevitable mass bloodshed. He desperately cries out to fortune one more time, “You had given me the Roman state to rule over, Fortune, take it now being greater and watch it during Mars’ blindness” *(res...tuere, 7.110-111)*. Here, *fortuna* is in the vocative; this use of apostrophe brings fortune to life, and shows the audience how Pompey truly felt that fortune was intentionally working against him. Pompey hopelessly attempts to command things of fortune which are clearly in vain. In this desperate moment, we feel Pompey’s pain and see (what Lucan thinks are) his true motives and thoughts about war.

While Pompey’s relationship with fortune seems like parasitism, with fortune feeding off of his failure, Caesar’s is more in line with commensalism, with Caesar thriving because of fortune. Things always seem to work in Caesar’s favor, as is evident from the very beginning of this passage, even before he addresses his men. Lucan describes Caesar as “having left his position on that day by chance” *(illo...relicta, 7.235)* when he sees Pompey and his men marching towards him. In his being at the right place at the right time “by chance” *(forte)*, fortune allows for Caesar to prepare for battle and gives him adequate time to rally his troops. Lucan portrays Caesar as well aware that fortune is on his side, and acknowledging that this opportune moment is “the moment he sought for himself in a thousand prayers” *(votis...tempus, 7.238-239)*. He continues this notion of fortune favoring him when he says, as mentioned above: “the fortune in all my affairs is present” *(rerum...adest, 7.250-251)*, revealing the utmost confidence he holds in his fortune. In an interesting parallelism to what Pompey says to his men, Caesar shouts to his own, “Summon fate now with your sword” *(iam...ferro, 7.252)*. As mentioned above, Pompey thinks fortune is
submitting by turning to the sword; Caesar thinks it is upholding itself by doing so.

A decent speech can be remembered as remarkable if the final points are able to resonate with the crowd. Possibly the most important part of a speech, the orator’s final chance to leave any impression on a group of people, is the end, the *peroratio*. Lucan’s Caesar seems aware of this importance while Lucan’s Pompey remains steadfast in his indignation. In fact, Pompey’s *peroratio* hardly differs from the rest of his pessimistic disquisition; he is true to his opinion that there is nothing right about the civil war nor is there any good that will come from it. Pompey goes so far as to convey that he would rather die than partake in the war. The only thing that stops him from fully wishing for it is knowing his party would disintegrate without him (*prima...feriat*, 7.117-119). He knows that regardless of who wins, Rome will be ruined. This realization causes his apathy towards winning, “for victory will not be happier for Pompey” (*neque...laetior*, 7.119-120). He concludes his speech, unsurprisingly, on a negative note: “All the guilt will be on the victor” (*omne...erit*, 7.123). Pompey is resolute (and correct) that whoever wins will carry the weight of the end of the Republic. As scholar Shadi Bartsch notes that through civil strife they paradoxically “destroy the system that gives them life.”

Caesar’s *peroratio* is full of *pathos* and *ethos*. It is a true example of Roman oratory, though his words are emptier than Pompey’s, who stays to his beliefs. Having already established credibility through his convincing words about fate and fortune, Caesar seizes the opportunity to rally his men and to convince them that regardless of the substantially smaller number of men in their army, they can and will win. He has his men picture each other being crucified, and himself decapitated (*Caesareas...Campi*, 7.304-306), invoking fear about what will happen if they lose. His energy level is high, and he fully prepares them for the worst. His final words are, “We will pitch our tents in that rampart, from where their troops come about to perish.” (*vallo...venit*, 7.328-329). The tenses in this final line are critical: the future tense of *tendo* conveys a sense of command without being as harsh as the imperative. The first person plural also ties together the entire speech’s sense of unity. Caesar is one of them (contrasted against Pompey’s aforementioned use of *tibi*). The use of *venio* in the present shows the audience that Pompey’s men are coming right now; it is now or never. Finally, the future tense of *pereo* reveals that Caesar is confident about his
victory and Pompey’s future. Everything about the end of his speech connects the important points he has made throughout it.

Though Pompey does not dazzle with his words, he does correctly predict that the civil war will be the end of Rome as it is. Sanford summarizes a point made by Sidonius when she says: “...the war between Caesar and Pompey, as Lucan told it, was made to seem a greater loss to Rome than all her former losses.” In later lines, immediately before the battle commences, Pompey addresses his troops one last time, this time with more passion. He throws his prior words aside and desperately cries out words of encouragement to his men, but it is too late. In a crucial moment, Pompey already told his true thoughts to his men. They carry this hopelessness with them, namely the guilt and uncertainty he heaped upon their shoulders, as they lose the battle.

What is the purpose of these characterizations of Pompey and Caesar? For Lucan, by combining history and poetry, and using different rhetorical and grammatical tactics for each leader, he succeeds in creating “a double theme, the obvious historical one of the vicissitudes of the struggling armies and their generals, [and] the deeper and far more important one of the tribulations of humanity.” As someone speaking out against monarchy, Lucan portrays its cause, Caesar, as a much more likable character than Pompey, but for good reason: “the war between Caesar and Pompey was waged indeed between the body and soul of the Roman state, and to lovers of the Roman past it seemed that the body could recover more readily than the soul.” Caesar, the body, is able to thrive with fate on his side while Pompey, the soul and the Republic, cognizant that the Republic is on its way out, is destroyed. Thus, a strong, well-spoken Caesar and a weak, defeated Pompey are perfect characterizations of the overarching conflict in the scene of the Battle of Pharsalus.
Bibliography


