

LUCAN'S PARTHIANS IN NERO'S ROME

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FOR AN EPIC THAT RECOUNTS the horrors of civil war, Lucan's poem refers with surprising frequency to an enemy far removed from the realm of Roman power: the eastern kingdom of the Parthians, a vast empire beyond the Euphrates ruled by the Arsacid royal family. No other foreign polity figures so prominently. The Parthians are said to have unleashed the strife between Caesar and Pompey by killing Crassus, the only man capable of suppressing the rivalry between the two commanders (1.98–108). They escape vengeance for Carrhae as Rome sinks into civil war (1.10–12, 7.431). And the nature of their realm is debated at length by Pompey and Lentulus in a pair of speeches that dominate the eighth book of the epic—a passage reinterpreted here in its Neronian political context (8.202–455).

Commentators usually read the Parthian debate as an illustration of Pompey's character or as a demonstration of Lucan's rhetorical skills. But few studies have attended to the contemporary resonance of the speeches in the context of Roman-Parthian relations during Nero's reign, and no treatment has fully appraised the diplomatic background.¹ Lucan lived and wrote through a protracted Roman war with the Arsacid empire (54–63 CE), a conflict over Armenia that was the main preoccupation of Neronian foreign policy.² This war ended not with a decisive battle, but with a brokered settlement that involved negotiation, compromise, and wary cooperation. In this historical context, Pompey and Lentulus' debate can be read as a dramatization of a central concern of Roman foreign relations under Nero: the anxiety over whether Parthia—a land so often viewed with prejudice, apprehension, and fear—could be relied on as a diplomatic partner.

In a field still deeply interested in the question of Lucan's dissidence and the political orientation of the *Bellum civile*, Lucan's own view of Parthia is worth exploring, even if it may ultimately be irrecoverable.³ Perhaps more importantly, however, his two characters can shed light on the varying Roman responses to

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1. Illustration of Pompey's character: Ahl 1976, 170–73; Bartsch 1997, 82–87; Fantham 2010, 55; Lintott 1971, 501–2, 505; Kimmerle 2015, 66. Rhetorical contest: Postgate 1917, 38–40; Mayer 1981, 118–41; Narducci 2002, 329; cf. Radicke 2004, 443. For previous studies that have explored the angle of contemporary Roman-Parthian relations, see Sanford 1937, 97–98; 1938, 259–63; and more recently Pogorzelski 2011, with a focus on geography.

2. For a comprehensive overview of this war, see Heil 1997.

3. See the discussion and the literature cited below, nn. 85–86.

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Nero's détente in the east. Pompey emerges as a pragmatist who views engagement with the enemy as the best (or at any rate the least bad) option, Lentulus as a hard-line conservative who views any accommodation as tantamount to surrender. For scholars of Lucan, a fuller understanding of the Parthian debate can be achieved through attention to the passage's contemporary moorings, which help explain why the epic's eighth book grapples so urgently with the looming menace of the Arsacid kingdom.

RHETORIC AND REPUBLICAN HISTORY

Compared to the other works that recount Pompey's steps after his defeat at Pharsalus, Lucan's poem betrays a pressing concern with the role of Parthia. Both historiographical and rhetorical texts speak of a meeting in Cilicia (perhaps at the town of Syhedra), where Pompey and his allies discussed how to proceed.⁴ Like Lucan, Plutarch and Appian say that Pompey's initial desire to petition the Arsacid king was overruled. Plutarch credits Theophanes of Lesbos, not Lentulus, with the decisive counterargument; Appian attributes it to Pompey's "friends."⁵ Dio rejected the idea that Pompey considered fleeing to the Parthians, though he clearly encountered the story in one of his sources.⁶ Caesar himself says nothing about Parthia, remarking only that Pompey was dissuaded from taking refuge in Syria after he learned of the defection of Antioch (*B Civ.* 3.102–3). Velleius Paterculus relates that the Republican forces debated whether to flee to Parthia, Africa, or Egypt, the last of which options Pompey himself favored (2.53.1). Quintilian also frames the debate in terms of these three destinations, citing it as a textbook case of a *triplex suasio*, a *deliberatio* among three choices (3.8.33; cf. *Auct. ad Her.* 3.2.2). The second-century-CE epitomator Florus also writes that these three options were discussed, though neither he nor Quintilian specifies who argued for which destination (2.13.51).

Given Lucan's noted interest in declamation, it might first be asked whether his concern with Parthia in this passage merely adheres to the conventions of an established rhetorical exercise.⁷ But while Quintilian cites the Syhedra debate as an example of a threefold *deliberatio*, it is striking that this structure does not map onto Lucan's text particularly well—a surprising discordance, given Quintilian's well-known contention that Lucan was an author "to be imitated by orators rather than poets."⁸ To be sure, both Pompey and Lentulus do mention the three destinations referenced by Quintilian, even if "Libya" takes the place of "Africa." But neither speech has a tripartite structure; Parthia dominates the discussion to such an extent that Libya and Egypt nearly vanish. It takes Pompey a mere two lines to eliminate Egypt from consideration, and only six more to dispense with Juba and the Libyans. The rest of his speech dwells on

4. On the location, see Radicke 2004, 443 and n. 50.

5. Plut. *Pomp.* 76.4–9; App. *B Civ.* 2.83.349–51: τοῖς φίλοις. Cf. Mayer 1981, 125; Radicke 2004, 442–43.

6. Cass. Dio 42.2.5. All citations of Dio in this article refer to Cary's (1925) Loeb edition.

7. See Bonner 2010, esp. 103–4, where the author emphasizes the overlap between Lucan's Syhedra debate and the classic *suasoria* mentioned by Quintilian. Bonner suggests that the currency of these *suasoriae* as rhetorical exercises predated Lucan; on this question, see also Mayer 1981, 118–19; Fantham 1992, 14–15 and n. 39.

8. Quint. 10.1.90: *magis oratoribus quam poetis imitandus*. See further Ahl 2010.

Parthia for nearly forty lines.⁹ Lentulus, in turn, spends almost the entirety of his speech—over one hundred lines—arguing against Parthia, and just twelve arguing for Egypt. Libya barely rates a mention.¹⁰ In short, Lucan's text is less a *triplex suasoria* than it is a referendum about a single topic: Parthia.

If rhetorical conventions cannot fully explain why Pompey and Lentulus dwell at such length on Parthia, what about history? Was Pompey's desire to flee to Parthia a prominent and contentious issue when the Republicans regrouped in Cilicia to debate their next steps? The evidence from historiography is ambiguous. The absence of Parthia from Caesar's text might cast doubt on the historicity of Pompey's intention to flee to the Arsacids, since he is the only contemporary source for the episode.¹¹ Caesar does record Pompey's dispatch of the senator C. Lucilius Hirrus to the Arsacid king Orodes as an envoy, and in another passage he faults Scipio for leaving Syria exposed to Parthian attacks.¹² The omission of Parthia from his account of Pompey's post-Pharsalus deliberations might indicate, then, that the eastern kingdom was never a serious option.

But the other historiographical sources do mention that Parthia was under consideration, and the possibility cannot be rejected out of hand. The Augustan author Velleius' description of a debate over Parthia, Libya, and Egypt means that the tradition must have predated Lucan, although Velleius does not summarize any of the arguments that were made. The accounts of Plutarch and Appian resemble Lucan's in certain places, especially in the Republican argument that Pompey's wife Cornelia could not be allowed to fall into the hands of the Parthians.¹³ It cannot be ruled out that these later authors were influenced by Lucan, though it may also be the case that all three drew on an earlier source, perhaps Livy or Asinius Pollio.¹⁴ At any rate, there appears to be some basis in historiography for the discussion of Parthia at the Republican council at Syhedra.

The historical tradition only explains so much, however, because Lucan's paired speeches go considerably further than either Plutarch or Appian in discussing the positive and negative aspects of the Parthian kingdom. Plutarch has Theophanes reproach Parthian treachery, and Appian's Republicans call the Arsacids arrogant from their victory over Crassus.¹⁵ Lucan's characters, by contrast, take on themes that range much further afield. Pompey discusses Parthia's geography, military prowess, and possible equality with Rome; Lentulus' speech touches on Parthian dress, religion, and sexual mores. It is possible, of course, that a common source like Asinius Pollio or Livy included these issues in their own

9. Egypt: 8.281–82. Libya: 8.283–88. Parthia: 8.289–327.

10. Parthia: 8.331–439. Egypt: 8.441–53, with Libya quickly dismissed on 442–43.

11. See Hillman 1996, 388–91; Nabel 2019, 333–35; cf. Lerouge 2007, 87.

12. Hirrus: Caes. *B Civ.* 3.82.4. Scipio: 3.31.3–4. Cassius Dio (41.55.3–4, 42.2.5) seems to imply that Hirrus was sent to petition the Parthians for aid in the civil war, though this motive has been questioned: see Seager 2002, 167–68; Hillman 1996, 391–94; Gelzer 1959, 241.

13. Concern for Cornelia's sexual purity: Plut. *Pomp.* 76.6; App. *B Civ.* 2.83.

14. For Livy, see Masters 1992, 14–20; Lintott 1971, 488 and n. 6 with literature; see also the more recent discussion in Radicke 2004, 9–43, 443. For Asinius Pollio as a possible source for Lucan, Plutarch, and Appian, see Hillman 1996, 395–97 and n. 51; Radicke 2004, 39.

15. At Plut. *Pomp.* 76.5, Theophanes calls the Parthians an ἀπιστότατον γένος; Appian (*B Civ.* 2.83) has the dissenting Republicans claim that “the Parthian” is θυμώμενον ἐπὶ τῇ Κράσσου συμφορᾷ.

versions of the debate at Syhedra, but that would raise the question of why Plutarch and Appian omitted such material, while Lucan chose to draw on it. Neither the biographer nor the historian saw fit to include a full assessment of the Arsacid kingdom in their accounts of the Syhedra council. Lucan did, and it is worth asking what the assessment adds to his text.

NERO'S PARTHIAN WAR

One reason for Lucan's interest in the Parthian empire may have been Nero's war with the Arsacids for control of Armenia. This conflict was a deep and abiding concern of Neronian foreign policy; it figured prominently in the emperor's propaganda; and it was coming to a head just as Lucan began work on the final books of the *Bellum civile*.¹⁶

Contemporary evidence for the war is slight, though some epigraphic, numismatic, architectural, and artistic material survives and offers important testimony for the place of the conflict in Neronian propaganda. The only texts to supply detailed narratives are Tacitus' *Annals*—far and away the most important source—and Dio's history, which has been transmitted only in fragments from later excerptors.¹⁷ Tacitus' account supports the chronology that scholars have traditionally used to reconstruct the course of events, though Everett Wheeler has redated certain aspects of the war's first phase.¹⁸ As usual with Arsacid history, the exiguous historical record from Parthia adds little to the Graeco-Roman literary sources, though coinage sheds some light on developments within the kingdom's territory.¹⁹

The chain of events that led to the war began in 51 CE, when the Arsacid king Vologaeses I took advantage of Armenian political instability by invading the country and attempting to put his brother Tiridates on the throne.²⁰ Roman involvement began in 54 with Nero's dispatch of Gnaeus Domitius Corbulo to the east; fighting was intermittent until 61, when the actions of Rome's candidate for the Armenian kingship precipitated a new round of hostilities.²¹ The humiliating entrapment and capitulation of Corbulo's colleague Paetus at the Battle of Rhandeia in 62 was a heavy blow to Roman prestige that Tacitus compared to the ancient Roman disaster at the Caudine Forks.²² Nero and Vologaeses eventually moved toward an accommodation: Tiridates could rule Armenia provided he came to Rome to receive his crown from the emperor.²³ This agreement was initially reached after a high-profile diplomatic conference in 63 CE. Three years

16. Cf. Sanford 1938; Pogorzelski 2011, 149. For the chronology of the poem's composition, see below, p. XXX.

17. For the relevant excerpts, see Heil 1997, 28 n. 3 and the collection in Barrett et al. 2016, 77–117. On the preservation of Dio generally, see Millar 1964, 1–4; on Xiphilinus' reworking of Dio, see Mallan 2013.

18. Wheeler 1997.

19. For the numismatic evidence from Parthia during the reign of Vologaeses, see Sinisi 2012, 15–23, noting possible points of contact with Tacitus' account.

20. Tac. *Ann.* 12.50.1. On Vologaeses and Tiridates, see Karras-Klapproth 1988, 179–84, 192–98.

21. Tac. *Ann.* 15.1.2; Cass. Dio 62.20.2. The Roman nominee was Tigranes VI, on whom see Heil 1997, 98–100. On the date, see Wheeler 1997, 397.

22. Tac. *Ann.* 15.10–16 (with comparison to the disasters at the Caudine Forks and Numantia at 15.13.2); Cass. Dio 62.21.

23. According to Tacitus, Corbulo had first proposed this condition years earlier (*Ann.* 13.37.5), but the Parthians did not agree to it until 63 CE (*Ann.* 15.24.2, 29.1; cf. Cass. Dio 62.22.3–23.4).

later, Tiridates arrived in Rome and participated in a coronation so opulent it would be dubbed “the Golden Day.”²⁴

The role of diplomacy and rapprochement in the conclusion of the war was paramount. Because neither Parthia nor Rome was able to deal a knockout blow to the other, the conflict ended with a settlement that delicately negotiated questions of prestige, supremacy, and trust. The ultimate solution was a compromise that involved concessions on both sides. Since the reign of Augustus, Rome had the prerogative of installing its preferred candidate on the Armenian throne, a measure intended to keep the kingdom out of Arsacid hands.²⁵ The Parthians had challenged this arrangement twice before Nero’s accession, but they failed both times.²⁶ Under Nero, the two states would split the difference: Tiridates, the brother of the Parthian king Vologaeses and a member of the Arsacid family, obtained Armenia. But he would have to go to Rome to “receive” the kingdom from Nero, creating the appearance if not the reality of continuity with earlier Roman appointments.

Lucan would not live to see Tiridates’ visit, but he would have been at work on the later books of the *Bellum civile* during the king’s negotiations with Corbulo in 63 CE.²⁷ The narrative sources emphasize the uneasy coexistence of mistrust and collegiality that characterized these proceedings. The final conference took place at Rhandaia, the very location where the Parthians had recently overcome Paetus (Tac. *Ann.* 15.28.2; Cass. Dio 62.23.2). Corbulo handed over two temporary hostages, including his own son-in-law, as a guarantee against treachery; before he departed, Tiridates would do the same with his daughter (Tac. *Ann.* 15.28.3, 30.2). Armed men on both sides oversaw the proceedings.²⁸ The atmosphere was surely tense: a few years earlier, a proposed conference between the two men had miscarried when neither could overcome his fears of an ambush (Tac. *Ann.* 13.38.1–39.1).

On this occasion, however, mutual trust prevailed. Corbulo and Tiridates shook one another’s right hands, a meaningful gesture of good faith in both Mediterranean and Iranian traditions; they kissed at the end of their meeting; and they dined together following the conclusion of the peace.²⁹ Tacitus and Dio both speak of an elaborate ceremony in which Tiridates laid his diadem before an effigy of Nero with the understanding that he could not formally take

24. Cass. Dio 63.1–8 (with the appellation “Golden Day” at 63.6.1); Suet. *Ner.* 13; Tac. *Ann.* 16.23.2–24.1; cf. Plin. *HN* 30.17.

25. For Augustus’ installation of Tigranes III, see *Mon. Anc.* 27.2; Vell. Pat. 2.94.4, 122.1; Strab. 17.1.54; Tac. *Ann.* 3.2; Suet. *Tib.* 9.1; Joseph. *AJ* 15.105; Cass. Dio 54.9.4–5.

26. The first instance was during the reign of the Arsacid king Phraataces, who in 2/1 BCE backed an Armenian revolt against Rome. Augustus sent Gaius Caesar to manage the situation: Cass. Dio 55.10.18–21, 10a.4–7; Vell. Pat. 2.100–102; Tac. *Ann.* 2.4.1; cf. Plin. *HN* 6.141; Plut. *Mor.* 207e; for discussion, see Debevoise 1938, 146–47; Chaumont 1976, 73–83; Luther 2010, 103–8. The second was the attempt of Artabanus II to put his sons on the Armenian throne in 35 CE, which Tiberius was able to foil: Tac. *Ann.* 6.31–35; Joseph. *AJ* 18.96–98; Cass. Dio 58.26.1–3; cf. Philost. *Vit. Apoll.* 2.2; discussion in Levick 1976, 146–47.

27. See below, pp. 609–10.

28. Twenty cavalrymen attended Corbulo and Tiridates during the initial meeting, and a display of Corbulo’s legions set the stage for the conclusion of the peace: Tac. *Ann.* 15.28.3, 29.2.

29. Right hands: Tac. *Ann.* 15.28.3; cf. 12.47.2. On the clasp of right hands in an Iranian and Zoroastrian context, see Wolski 1969, 320–21; Boyce and Grenet 1991, 317–18, 484; for the Graeco-Roman context, see Bayliss 2013, 157–58; Torrance 2014, 144–45. Kiss: Tac. *Ann.* 15.29.1; cf. Müller 2014, 303 and n. 164. Banquet: Tac. *Ann.* 15.30.1.

it up again until he was crowned by the emperor himself (Tac. *Ann.* 15.29.3; Cass. Dio 62.23.3). The king eventually honored his promise in 66 CE, one year after Lucan's death. His coronation in Rome was yet another elaborately choreographed diplomatic procession that delicately balanced Arsacid and Roman claims and, perhaps more importantly, the prestige and reputation of the leaders on both sides.³⁰

As a resident of Rome, Lucan would have been familiar with Neronian propaganda that celebrated the emperor's management of the Parthian war. As early as 54 CE, when the Arsacid king Vologaeses temporarily withdrew from Armenia to deal with a domestic rival, the Senate declared Nero the victor of the contest. They voted him days of thanksgiving, the right to wear triumphal garb, an ovation, and a statue in his likeness "of equal size to that of Mars Ultor, and installed in the same temple."³¹ Several years later, Nero's "victories" were commemorated with a Parthian arch on the Capitoline hill, perhaps to celebrate Corbulo's destruction of the Armenian capital Artaxata.³² The arch also featured prominently on *sestertii* minted in Rome and Lugdunum from 64–67 CE.³³ Tacitus mentions the premature construction of Parthian trophies in 62 CE when word reached the city about Paetus' embarrassing defeat (*Ann.* 15.18.1).

For all the regime's efforts to present the war against the Arsacids as a Roman victory, however, the reality of ongoing and unresolved conflict in Armenia might have been difficult to reconcile with the official narrative. It was not until both sides were ready to compromise that a lasting solution to the conflict was reached. To settle the Armenian question, Rome had to work with the Parthians, and both sides had to make concessions that had not been on the table at the beginning of the war. While Nero and his handlers sought at all costs to preserve the image of Roman domination over the Parthian east, the final settlement was a matter of peace between equals far more than a victory over a subdued foe.³⁴

It was against this backdrop of diplomacy, negotiation, engagement, and compromise that Lucan composed the eighth book of his epic and the Parthian debate. The chronology of his progress on the *Bellum civile* is not ironclad, but the basic outline is clear enough for the present purposes. Following Miriam Griffin's antedating of Lucan's quaestorship to 60 or 61 CE,³⁵ the most recent consensus holds that the poet presented the first three books of the *Bellum civile* in 62 or 63, after which he composed the rest; earlier treatments put the publication of

30. On the role of diplomacy in the resolution of the conflict, see Campbell 1993, 230–32.

31. Tac. *Ann.* 13.8.1: *effigiemque eius pari magnitudine ac Martis Ultoris eodem in templo censuere*.

32. Tac. *Ann.* 13.41.4. Furneaux (1907, 339) suggested that this was the same structure mentioned by Tacitus at *Ann.* 15.18.1, but this is rejected by Koestermann (1968, 194; cf. Kleiner 1985, 70). On the topography of Nero's arch, see La Rocca 1992, 408–11.

33. Kleiner 1985, 72, 99–153; Champlin 2003, 216–17.

34. On the conciliatory nature of the Neronian compromise with Parthia, see Griffin 1984, 227; Heil 1997, 139–41; Wheeler 2002, 289; Lerouge 2007, 131; Müller 2014, 302.

35. Griffin 1984, 158. Traditionally a Roman had to be at least twenty-five to assume the quaestorship, but Griffin argues that the usual rules may well have been bent in Lucan's case. Along with Lucan's public recitation of the first three books of the *Bellum civile* and Nero's later ban on his performances, the quaestorship is one of the keys to the chronology of Lucan's final years, since the poet was presumably still in favor with the emperor when he assumed the position (Ahl 1976, 351).

the first triad in 64.³⁶ Whichever reconstruction is preferable, it seems that the eighth book was composed after 63 CE—that is, after Corbulo’s conference with Tiridates, after the conclusion of the settlement, and after Nero became the first emperor to countenance Parthian rule over Armenia. It remains to explore how these developments might have shaped Lucan’s Parthian debate.

THE PARTHIAN DEBATE: *FIDUCIA*, *FIDES*, *FOEDUS*

In the paired speeches of Pompey and Lentulus, the matter of engagement and negotiation with the Arsacid kingdom is at the heart of the discussion. Their arguments foreground three key terms, all of which were part of the Roman vocabulary of international relations: *fiducia*, *fides*, and *foedus*. The two speakers stake out different positions based, in large part, on their understanding of these terms as applied to the Roman-Parthian relationship. Pompey cautiously favors rapprochement with the Arsacids, at least until Caesar is defeated. He acknowledges that putting faith in the Parthians is not without risks, but still finds collaboration preferable to the Republicans’ other options. Lentulus, however, will not hear of reconciliation with Rome’s hated foreign enemies, whose barbarian qualities make them fundamentally untrustworthy. With the battle of Carrhae unavenged, he will never trade war for a dishonorable peace.

The centrality of the terms *fiducia*, *fides*, and *foedus* to Lucan’s discussion of Parthia is clear from the beginning of Book 8. As the Republicans assemble, Pompey sends the Galatian king Deiotarus to the Arsacids to ask for help.³⁷ The grounds for the appeal is a prior agreement concluded during Pompey’s eastern campaigns (8.218–20):

... si foedera nobis
prisca manent mihi per Latium iurata Tonantem,
per vestros astricta magos

If our former treaty remains in force—the one that I swore in the name of the Latin Thunderer, and that was ratified by your magi . . .

Pompey did conclude an agreement with the Parthian king Phraates III in 66 BCE, so the words have some historical basis.³⁸ But no other text mentions ratification by Parthian magi (Zoroastrian priests), and the detail is likely to stem from Roman-Parthian interaction in Lucan’s own day. Tiridates, Armenia’s Arsacid claimant, was himself a magus, and his religious scruples figured prominently in the negotiations between the Arsacid family and Nero: he initially refused to travel

36. For the current consensus, see the discussion in Fantham 2011, 12–14, summarizing the conclusions of Griffin 1984, 157–60 and Rudich 1997, 107–85. Rose (1966, 384–87) put the publication date of the first three books in 64 CE, with the rest composed thereafter. But see also Masters 1992, 220–21, who raises important questions about the initial publication of the poem’s first three books. See further Ahl 1971, 14–16; 1976, 346–48; Kimmerle 2015, 110–17. On the chronology of composition in relation to the Parthian war, see Sanford 1938, 261; Pogorzelski 2011, 149.

37. In a recent (2016) article, Jonathan Tracy interprets the Deiotarus episode in light of the king’s later defection to Caesar. He concludes that Lucan uses this embassy “to highlight not Deiotarus’ fidelity but rather Pompey’s pathetic naiveté and misplaced trust in the people around him, particularly easterners” (p. 610).

38. Sources for this agreement include Plut. *Crass.* 16.3; Cass. Dio 36.45.3, 51.1; Livy *Per.* 100.4; Flor. 1.40.31, 46.4; Festus *Breviarium* 3, 16; Oros. 6.13.2. Like Lucan, the Latin authors use the word *foedus* to describe the agreement, but the existence of a formal treaty has been contested: see Wheeler 2002, 290, *contra* Ziegler 1964, 28–32.

to Rome out of reverence for the Zoroastrian belief that sea travel defiled the element of water.³⁹ During his meeting with Corbulo, Tiridates is said by Tacitus to have “made sacrifices according to custom” before laying his diadem at the feet of Nero’s effigy—perhaps an indication that the ceremony incorporated elements from both Roman and Zoroastrian religious traditions.⁴⁰ For a Roman observer, then, the agreement obtained by Corbulo in 63 CE was, in fact, ratified by a magus, namely Tiridates himself. Lucan’s Pompey thus describes his Arsacid treaty with details that evoke Neronian developments in Roman-Parthian relations.

In his speech to the assembled Republicans, Pompey’s interest in a *foedus* leads to an attendant concern with Parthian *fiducia* and *fides*, terms that highlight the importance of trust and good faith to the debate. After ruminating on the enemy’s military prowess, Pompey laments that Arsacid victories over Rome have furnished such devastating proof of Parthian skill and effectiveness. His words are a forceful acknowledgment of the power of the eastern empire (8.306–8):

o utinam non tanta mihi *fiducia* saevis
esset in Arsacidis! fatis nimis aemula nostris
fata movent Medos, multumque in gente deorum est.

Oh, if only my trust in the savage Arsacids were not so great! A fate that rivals Rome’s moves the Medes, and there is much of the gods in their race.

J. P. Postgate wanted to emend the text here, but the meaning is relatively clear in the context of the preceding lines.⁴¹ Pompey is ashamed of his belief in the military capabilities of the Arsacids because their excellence has been proven against Roman troops; he knows the skill of the Parthian mounted archers because Crassus’ soldiers were felled by their arrows. Rome has learned of Arsacid prowess through the slaughter of its own legionaries.⁴²

But as Pompey’s subsequent words make clear, the concept of *fiducia* entails more than belief in the military skill of the Parthian foe. Trust is a precondition for treaty-making; without it, neither signatory can rely on the other to carry out its obligations. And the trustworthiness of the Parthian kingdom was a question of critical importance for Nero’s regime, which had just recently, in 63 CE, concluded an agreement with the Arsacid family. The fragility of Roman-Parthian trust during the negotiations of that year is plain to see in the accounts of both Tacitus and Dio. The former notes the presence of armed guards and the exchange of hostages to safeguard against treachery.⁴³ The latter tells of a meeting between Corbulo and a Parthian named Monaeses on a bridge over the

39. Tiridates is designated a magus by Pliny (*HN* 30.16), who also mentions the Zoroastrian prohibition against sea travel. According to Tacitus (*Ann.* 15.24.2), Tiridates claimed that the conditions of his priesthood prohibited his travel to Rome. Tiridates’ brother, the Parthian king Vologaeses, used the same excuse to avoid meeting Nero in person: Cass. Dio 63.7.2; cf. Tac. *Ann.* 15.2.1. The Zoroastrian reverence for the purity of water is well attested in other Graeco-Roman texts and in extant Zoroastrian literature: see de Jong 1997, 416–17.

40. Tac. *Ann.* 15.29.3: *caesis ex more victimis*; cf. Cass. Dio 62.23.3. On the religious aspects of Tiridates’ coronation in 66 CE, see Cumont 1933; Griffin 1984, 217; Méthy 2000; Champlin 2003, 167–71; Müller 2014, 300–301; Sonnabend 2016, 196–204.

41. See Postgate 1907, 78–79; 1917, 70, who proposed changing *tanta* to *tota*.

42. Cf. Isaac 2004, 375.

43. See above, p. 608.

Euphrates river—with the center section destroyed to protect the negotiators from ambushes.⁴⁴ Pompey's anxiety about Parthian trustworthiness resonates with the diplomatic concerns of the Neronian age.

Moreover, Nero and his general Corbulo had more to worry about than ambushes at the negotiating table. Once a deal was struck, it remained to be seen whether the Arsacids would abide by its terms—a concern that is also represented in Pompey's speech. After exhorting his companions to put their faith in the Arsacids, the commander admits the possibility of betrayal (8.311–13):

quod si nos Eoa *fides* et barbara fallent
foedera, vulgati supra commercia mundi
naufragium Fortuna ferat.

But if the loyalty of the East and the treaty struck with barbarians fail us, let fortune bear my ruin beyond the traffic of the known world.

Alliteration highlights the key terms; all the subjects and verbs begin with the letter *f*. The lines show the importance of *fides* to the maintenance of a *foedus*. When a treaty is broken, the logic shows, so too is the trust that underpinned it. The verb *fallere*, meanwhile, simultaneously exhibits its meanings of *to fail* and *to deceive*: if the treaty fails, Parthian deception will be to blame. Pompey is acutely aware of his vulnerability to Arsacid treachery. If Parthia breaks faith with him, he is resigned to his own ruin. His political future is at the mercy of the Arsacid king.

These concerns would have been well-known to Roman observers of the eastern frontier under Nero. Scholars debate whether the diplomatic proceedings of 63 or those of 66 CE resulted in an official *foedus*—no source explicitly says so, though it may be implied.⁴⁵ But it is clear that a negotiated settlement was reached, and that Nero, like Pompey, put his faith in an agreement. Faced with the choice of prolonged war or diplomatic compromise, the emperor and his regime chose the latter. Nero too had a vested interest in the “loyalty of the East” and “a treaty struck with barbarians.” And while a Parthian betrayal might not have brought “ruin” on his reign, the emperor nevertheless faced failure if his arrangement with the Parthians broke down, unleashing further violence and necessitating another deployment of Roman forces.

Lentulus' speech echoes Pompey's in its emphasis on *foedus*, *fides*, and *fiducia*, the last of which terms he uses no fewer than three times. He argues against the notion that a Roman can put his faith in the Parthians, even as a matter of last resort. One of his main strategies is a repudiation of Pompey's

44. Cass. Dio 62.22.2. For another example of a diplomatic conference on a broken bridge, see Tac. *Hist.* 5.26, with Ziegler 1964, 71 n. 200. See also the negotiations between Philip V and Quintus Flaminius, in which the Macedonian king refused to disembark from his ship to meet the Roman on shore: Polyb. 18.1.6–10; Livy 32.32.12–16.

45. Tacitus speaks of Vologaes' “reverence for the unbroken treaty” (*continui foederis reverentia*, *Ann.* 15.1.1) in 62 CE, but does not use the word for events after 63. Suetonius attests the same king's desire to renew a Roman-Parthian *societas* after Nero's death, but there is no mention of a *foedus* (*Ner.* 57). On the question of an official *foedus* in 63 or 66, see Ziegler 1964, 72–78; Dąbrowa 1983, 146–47; Heil 1997, 121–24, 136–41. Wheeler (2002, 290; cf. 2007, 242–43) presents “an extreme case for the non-existence of a *foedus Parthicum* before 218 CE,” including the end of Nero's war, though he allows for the possibility of less formal agreements. However one wishes to label the agreement of 63 CE, it seems the arrangement was later renewed by Vespasian: see Tac. *Hist.* 4.51; Suet. *Vesp.* 6.4; with Ziegler 1964, 78; Barrett et al. 2016, 280 n. 61.

fiducia in the Arsacid family, a trust that Lentulus is keen to expose as baseless (8.359–62):

qui solus regum fato celante favorem
defuit Emathiae, nunc tantas ille lacesset
auditi victoris opes aut iungere fata
tecum, Magne, volet? non haec *fiducia* genti est.

Will the one king who was absent from Emathia with fate's verdict still hidden now challenge the enormous power of the victor once he's found out who won, or link his fate to yours, Magne? Their race has no such trustworthiness.

Lentulus' immediate point is that the Parthians will not now back Pompey in defeat if they withheld their support while the outcome of Pharsalus was still undecided. But the line also harkens back to Pompey's use of the word *fiducia*, countering the commander's earlier admission of begrudging trust. Where Pompey placed his faith in the Arsacids as ferocious allies whose mettle had been proven in battle against Rome, Lentulus argues that the very nature of Parthian *fiducia* renders them unreliable partners.

Lentulus circles back to the concept of *fiducia* twice more in his speech. The second mention once again concerns the Parthians. Having established what Arsacid *fiducia* is not, the speaker now offers his view of what it is (8.388–90):

nulla manus illis, *fiducia* tota veneni est.
credis, Magne, viros, quos in discrimina belli
cum ferro misisse parum est?

Their trust is not in their hands but entirely in poison. Do you put your faith, Magnus, in men whom it is not enough to send into the hazards of war with the sword?

In a literal sense, Lentulus returns to the notion—already mentioned by Pompey in his own speech—that the Parthians smeared their arrows with poison.⁴⁶ In a broader sense, though, the close juxtaposition of *fiducia* and *venenum* is a more general indictment of the treacherous nature of Parthian loyalty. Arsacid *fiducia* is an insidious poison. Unable to achieve their ends openly and at close quarters, the Parthians resort to deception and guile to conquer their honorable Roman foes. The military tactics favored by the Arsacids point to more pervasive moral failures, including duplicity and treacherous cunning.

Having denigrated both Pompey's *fiducia* in the Arsacids as well as Parthian *fiducia* itself, Lentulus closes his argument by revisiting the concept yet again. As he makes his brief case for Egypt, the notion of trustworthiness appears once more (8.446–47):

terra suis contenta bonis, non indiga mercis
aut Iovis: in solo tota est *fiducia* Nilo.

The land [of Egypt] is content with its own resources, and requires neither imports nor rain.⁴⁷ All its trust is in the Nile alone.

46. Luc. 8.304. The idea of poisoned Parthian arrows has parallels elsewhere in Latin poetry; cf. Verg. *Aen.* 12.857–58.

47. On the use of *Iuppiter* with the meaning "rain," see Postgate 1917, 86; Mayer 1981, 139.

This is the only positive mention of *fiducia* in the speech, and the one instance where *fiducia* is not misplaced. Lentulus is speaking of the Egyptians, of course, and of their faith in the Nile. But his point is that Pompey should trust the Egyptians as the Egyptians trust their river, and that the self-sufficiency of the country makes it a better destination for the Republican cause.⁴⁸ In the speech's closing lines, he argues that Ptolemy's youth makes him worthier of *fides*—thus completing, in just a few short lines, the transfer of the Republicans' *fiducia* and *fides* from the Parthians to the Egyptians.⁴⁹

Along with his repudiation of Pompey's *fiducia* in the Arsacids, Lentulus also mounts an attack on the conclusion of a *foedus* with the Parthian kingdom. Where Pompey's discussion of his Parthian *foedus* acknowledged the possibility of Arsacid betrayal, Lentulus rejects the idea of a Roman-Parthian treaty altogether. Summoning up the ghost of Crassus, Carrhae's unburied victim, Lentulus has the deceased commander complain to Pompey (8.433–35):

... “tu, quem post funera nostra
ultorem cinerum nudaē speravimus umbrae,
ad foedus pacemque venis?”

... “You, whom we unburied ghosts hoped to have as an avenger for our ashes after our deaths, are you coming to make a treaty and peace?”

The statement repudiates any Roman accommodation with Parthia as long as battlefield defeats remain unavenged. Once again, there are clear implications for the Neronian present. While Lentulus points to the disastrous battle of Carrhae as a blot on Rome's honor, Lucan's readers would have had Paetus' recent defeat at Rhandaia as an additional reference point. Crassus' lament echoes beyond the history of the Late Republic. If Rome has suffered a military defeat, vengeance can only be obtained on the battlefield, not at the negotiating table. Revenge requires victory, not peace.

In a broader historical perspective, Crassus' lament also highlights the Julio-Claudian family's failure to avenge the defeat at Carrhae by military means. From the beginning of the dynasty, the word *ultor* had a specific connotation in the context of confrontation with Parthia. Augustus originally promised to dedicate the temple of Mars Ultor in 42 BCE after his defeat of Julius Caesar's assassins, but the building would later advertise his management of the Parthian east. It was here, in 2 BCE, that the emperor installed the Roman standards he had recovered from the Arsacid king Phraates IV, which included those lost by Crassus.⁵⁰ The event was widely celebrated in coins, art, and building projects, including a Parthian arch.⁵¹ A series of *denarii* from 19/18 BCE even showed a statue of the god clasping one of the recovered eagles in his hand.⁵² But such celebration

48. See Tracy 2014, 47, on the “sharp contrast between [Lentulus'] idealized Egypt and his vilified Parthia.”

49. Luc. 8.450: *ne iura fidemque / respectumque deum veteri speraveris aula*. The implication is that Pompey can count on these things at the court of a young king like Ptolemy.

50. *Mon. Anc.* 29: *ea autem signa in penetrali, quod est in templo Martis Ultoris, reposui*. For Augustus' promise to erect the building, see Suet. *Aug.* 29.2. Cf. Cass. Dio 54.8.3, who mentions the installation in the temple of the standards recovered from the Parthians, and the discussion in Dowling 2006, 156–58.

51. See Rose 2005, 22–36.

52. *RIC* I 28, 39 = Sutherland and Carson 1984, 43–44; cf. Zanker 1988, 186–87. The god's statue is shown standing within a shrine; on the identification of this structure, see Cooley 2009, 244–45.

concealed that the achievement was one of diplomacy, not war. The standards were returned as part of a negotiated settlement, and no battles with Parthia were ever fought during the Augustan Principate.⁵³

Like Lucan, the Augustan poets had their eyes on the east, and Augustus' quest to avenge the defeat at Carrhae rated several mentions in the poetry of his age.⁵⁴ Ovid in particular dwelt on the theme of vengeance, and Mars Ultor figures prominently in those of his verses that touch on Parthia. In the *Fasti*, Ovid connects the Parthian return of Rome's eagles to Augustus' dedication of the temple to Mars. "Justly has the temple been given to the god," the poet says, "along with the name of 'Avenger,' which he has earned twice over."⁵⁵ Ovid's emphasis on Mars Ultor as the deliverer of vengeance is again front and center in the *Ars amatoria*, where the poet looks forward to Gaius Caesar's upcoming Parthian campaign: "You will pay the penalty, Parthian. Rejoice, you buried Crassi, and you standards that have ill-endured barbarian hands! An avenger is present."⁵⁶ But while this passage confidently predicts the conquest and annexation of the Arsacid kingdom, Gaius' brush with Parthia would eventually end with a diplomatic conference on the Euphrates river that did no more than reaffirm the status quo.⁵⁷ Yet again, the rhetoric of vengeance clashed with the mundane pursuit of a workable peace.

Nero's regime too found itself on the horns of this dilemma, and Mars Ultor played a central role in the imperial propaganda that dealt with the Parthian east. As noted above, the Senate had a statue of Nero erected in the temple alongside that of the god; the equal size of the two artworks might have suggested that the emperor's "defeat" of the Arsacids matched the accomplishments of Augustus himself.⁵⁸ Moreover, coins that Nero's Parthian arch on the Capitoline featured a statue of Mars on a pedestal in one of the side niches. The figure would have connected Nero's efforts with those of Augustus, and the chariots atop the Parthian arches of both emperors might have further underlined the continuities between their initiatives.⁵⁹ In imperial propaganda, then, the figure of Mars Ultor and the theme of vengeance continued to dominate, though the regime's diplomatic accommodations with the Parthians were rather less martial than the imagery featuring the god of war might have suggested.

Lentulus' ventriloquism of Crassus is therefore not only a harsh indictment of Pompey's conduct; it can equally be read as an illustration of Nero's shortcomings. By the time Lucan was composing the eighth book, the emperor had

53. Wheeler 2002, 289; Wiesehöfer 2010, 187. On Augustus' peaceable relations with Parthia, see the discussion in Schlude 2015, with further literature at 139 n. 2.

54. See Hor. *Carm.* 4.15.6–9; *Epist.* 1.12.27–28; 1.18.56; 2.1.256; Prop. 3.4.5–9; 4.6.75–84. Virgil may reference Augustus' management of Parthia in his statement that "the Euphrates was now running with quieter waves" (*Euphrates ibat iam mollior undis*, *Aen.* 8.726; cf. *Aen.* 7.601–6).

55. Ov. *Fast.* 5.595: *rite deo templumque datum nomenque bis ulto*. Cf. Ov. *Trist.* 227–28: *nunc porrigit arcus / Parthus eques timida captaque signa manu*.

56. Ov. *Ars Am.* 1.179–81: *Parthe, dabis poenas: Crassi gaudete sepulti / signaque barbaricas non bene passa manus / ultor adest*.

57. Ov. *Ars Am.* 1.177–80: *ecce, parat Caesar domito quod defuit orbi / addere*. On this line, see further Luther 2010, 111–13. On the conclusion of Gaius' campaign, see Vell. Pat. 2.101; Cass. Dio 55.10a.4; cf. Plin. *HN* 6.141; Plut. *Mor.* 207e; Strab. 1.1.17, with Drijvers 1998, 290.

58. See above, n. 31.

59. See Kleiner 1985, 78–84.

connected his management of the Parthians with the legacy of eastern vengeance that Mars Ultor represented. But the end of Nero's war against Vologaeses was a matter of negotiation, not conquest. Treaty-making, Lentulus implies, is not the work of an *ultor*; an avenger obtains his victories on the battlefield. The conclusion of a *foedus* with the Parthians amounts to a betrayal of the Romans who died fighting them. For Lentulus, this means the unavenged ghosts of Carrhae. Neronian readers, however, had the much fresher defeat at Rhandaia to reflect upon.

Parthian *foedera* are also under attack in Lentulus' discussion of Arsacid marital customs. The treacherous and profane nature of the Arsacids extends to the bedroom, the speaker argues, and their wantonness threatens Cornelia with a fate worse than death. "Are we unaware," he asks, "of that barbarian passion which, in the blind manner of beasts, has polluted the laws and the treaties [*foedera*] of marriage with countless wives?"⁶⁰ In love and marriage, the Parthians are violators of the treaties that govern proper conduct between man and wife. As Bill Gladhill asks, "should Pompey trust Parthian *foedera* when the Parthians themselves organize society on violations of human *foedera*?"⁶¹ As with military tactics, crookedness and perfidy are hardwired into Parthian social life. These qualities inevitably poison agreements in the realm of international relations.

The ignominy of a shameful peace concluded over the bodies of unavenged Roman dead seems to weigh heavily on Lentulus. In one of his speech's most extreme assertions, he claims that the military resources of the entire empire should have been engaged in avenging Crassus' defeat at Carrhae—even if such a campaign meant the neglect of the northern frontier and the exposure of the western provinces to German or Dacian attacks (8.422–26). The speaker still awaits the day when Rome will have its revenge on the Parthian kingdom, and when a state of peace no longer prevails between the two empires: "Fortune, we pray for an end to the peace with the Parthians" (*Assyriae paci finem, Fortuna, precamur*, 8.427). Lentulus' use of the word "Assyrian" here is typical of Latin poetry, which commonly applied the names of the Arsacids' Near Eastern forerunners to the Parthians themselves.⁶² But the antique label would not have hidden the implications of this statement for the Neronian period. To celebrate the end of Corbulo's negotiations in 63 CE, Nero took the rare step of closing the doors of the Temple of Janus, a declaration that the Roman empire enjoyed peace everywhere on both land and sea. Suetonius, the only literary source to mention the event, dates the closure to 66 CE, after the coronation of the Arsacid Tiridates.⁶³ But coins struck as early as 64 CE prominently feature the doors of the temple along with the legend "peace [*PACE*] for the Roman people having been obtained on land and sea, he closed the [Temple of] Janus

60. Luc. 8.396–400: *num barbara nobis / est ignota Venus, quae ritu caeca ferarum / polluit innumeris leges et foedera taedae / coniugibus . . . ?*

61. Gladhill 2016, 194.

62. The terms Medes, Persians, and Achaemenids are also common. See Sonnabend 1986, 281 n. 85; Schneider 1998, 110–13; 2007, 70 and n. 91; Luther 2010, 109; Shayegan 2011, 336 and n. 14; Isaac 2004, 375–76; Postgate 1917, lxxviii–lxxx.

63. Suet. *Ner.* 13.2. See further Townend 1980; Griffin 1984, 122; Syme 1989, 118.

by decree of the Senate.”⁶⁴ Precedent once again mattered here, for Augustus too had closed the temple after his own settlement with the Parthians in 19 BCE.⁶⁵

Against this backdrop, Lentulus' exhortation flies in the face of the Neronian regime's initiatives. By closing the doors of the temple of Janus and featuring the event on his issues, the emperor trumpeted the conclusion of a Parthian peace as a banner achievement on par with those of Augustus himself. But Lentulus prays for the disruption of peace with the Arsacids, not its establishment: because of Rome's recent disaster at Carrhae, peace is inappropriate, and war is still needed to obtain revenge.⁶⁶ The logic is not confined to the historical setting of the epic. For Lucan's Neronian audience, the substitution of Rhandaia for Carrhae would have been a natural reading, as both battles were ignominious Roman defeats at the hands of Parthian armies. Lentulus thus repudiates the type of peace that the Neronian regime wanted to celebrate.

Throughout his speech, Lentulus' line on Parthia is uncompromising, the stance of a hardliner. Where Pompey cautiously advocated détente with the Arsacids as the best way out of a difficult situation, Lentulus will not hear of rapprochement with Rome's most hated foreign enemy. Even the complete and total victory of Caesar is less odious an outcome. “[The Parthians] are the only people on earth I would be happy to see Caesar defeat,” Lentulus says, an indication that no domestic quarrel could possibly justify accommodation with the Arsacid foe.⁶⁷ From this perspective, it seems weak, naive, and even traitorous to advocate collaboration with Parthia. Lentulus derides as weakness the ingredients that lead to successful negotiations: a modicum of trust, a willingness to compromise, and a refusal to demonize the enemy. Even with Pompey's caveat that he will approach the Parthians with his eyes wide open to the risks, Lentulus is unmoved. Braced by the desire for revenge and a distrust of foreigners, his arguments against rapprochement win the day.

POETRY AND POLICY: LUCAN'S VIEW OF NERO'S PARTHIAN WAR

If, as the above has argued, Pompey and Lentulus represent accommodationist and hardline positions in Rome's fraught relationship with the Parthian empire, where does Lucan himself stand on the matter? Does the poet wish to steer his readers to one side or the other? What, if anything, does his staging of the Syhedra debate reveal about his opinion of Nero's Parthian policy? To be sure, any answers to these questions will ultimately be speculative, and scholars have amply demonstrated that “resistance” in Latin poetry is better explored as a matter of a text's possible valences rather than its author's ultimate intentions.⁶⁸ But the

64. *PACE P R TERRA MARIQ IANUM CLUSIT S C*. For this legend (sometimes with minor variations), see the types cited in Champlin 2003, 307–8 n. 92 (*RIC* 150–51, 58, 263–71, 283–91, 300–11, 323–28, 337–42, 347–50, 353–55, 421, 438–39, 468–72, 510–12, 537–39, 583–85 = Sutherland and Carson 1984, 153–84). See also Barrett et al. 2016, 115–16.

65. The date of the closure is not entirely clear, but a connection to the Parthian settlement seems likely in light of Hor. *Carm.* 4.15.6–9; *Epist.* 2.1.253–56. See Syme 1989; Wardle 2014, 180–82.

66. Cf. Luc. 8.429: *ad Parthos, qui vicit, eat*.

67. Luc. 8.429–30: *gens unica mundi est / de qua Caesareis possim gaudere triumphis*.

68. See, e.g., Kennedy 1992, 38–39; Lyne 2007, 181–82.

apparent points of contact between Lucan's dissident biography and his politically charged epic continue to fuel scholarly debate.⁶⁹ If the *Bellum civile* evokes Neronian developments in Roman-Parthian relations, it is worth asking whether such evocation was connected to the poet's growing hostility to the emperor—even with the recognition that, in the end, the matter is beyond verification.

It may first be helpful to consider, more generally, the sources that might illuminate the reception of Nero's eastern policy among Lucan's contemporaries. First, what evidence is there that the diplomatic settlement of 63 CE was positively received? Senatorial honors aside, the only broader indications come from literary accounts of Tiridates' visit to Rome in 66 CE, when the Arsacid dynast received the Armenian crown from the emperor's hand.⁷⁰ No extant text discusses the reception of the settlement at length, but the ancient authors are unanimous that the pomp and spectacle of the coronation drew massive crowds.⁷¹ The onlookers are supposed to have cheered as Tiridates and his retinue were brought forward and the king prostrated himself before Nero. Whatever the realities of power behind the settlement of 63 CE, the optics of the ceremony surely made Tiridates appear the emperor's inferior, and the Roman audience may have thrilled to see the Arsacid dynast's obeisance. A similar impression emerges from an apparent reference to Tiridates' visit in the *Octavia*, a work of uncertain authorship written perhaps not long after the end of Nero's reign.⁷² In a long monologue that looks forward to her son's death, Agrippina weighs Nero's superiority to the Parthians against his future dethronement: "Let the Parthians seek his blood-soaked right hand as suppliants [*supplices*] . . . there will come a day and a time when he will pay for his crimes with his guilty soul."⁷³ The lines must have conjured the memory of Tiridates, whose public submission to Nero could easily have earned him the label *supplex*.⁷⁴ The text seems to acknowledge the importance of the coronation as a domestic display of Nero's power. The Parthian treaty was no battlefield victory, but perhaps the regime's canny stage management spun it as a positive outcome.⁷⁵

The evidence for a negative reception of the 63 CE settlement is not particularly robust, but there are some passages that deserve consideration. Recounting the numerous disasters of Nero's reign, Suetonius describes the Parthian war and the loss at Rhandaia as a "disgrace in the east, with the legions in Armenia sent under the yoke and Syria barely retained."⁷⁶ An equally bald statement is found in the fourth-century-CE epitomator Festus, who writes that "Nero lost the two Armenias" and bemoans the Roman armies sent under the yoke at Rhandaia

69. See the literature cited below, nn. 85–86.

70. On the sources for this event, see above, n. 24.

71. Tac. *Ann.* 16.24.1; Cass. Dio 63.4.2; Suet. *Ner.* 13.

72. See most recently the discussions in Kragelund 2016, 144–46 (authorship), 297–360, esp. 307 and n. 36 (date); Ginsberg 2017, 183–87. Kragelund favors a date of composition under Galba, though as Ginsberg notes the reigns of the following emperors are also possibilities.

73. *Oct.* 627–30: *supplices dextram petant / Parthi cruentam. . . veniet dies tempusque quo reddat suis / animam nocentem sceleribus*. The grammar depends on the *licet* of line 624.

74. For the passage's connection to Tiridates' visit, see Whitman 1978, 102; Ferri 2003, 303; Boyle 2008, 226.

75. See the discussion in Heil 1997, 134–35.

76. Suet. *Ner.* 39.1: *ignominia ad Orientem legionibus in Armenia sub iugum missis aegreque Syria retenta*.

“with extreme disgrace for the Roman name.”⁷⁷ Suetonius also preserves a lampoon in verse that allegedly circulated during Nero’s lifetime: “While our [leader] stretches tight his lyre, and the Parthian his bow, ours will be the singer of Paeans, and the other the Far-Shooter.”⁷⁸ The couplet mocks Nero’s pretensions to Apolline godhood in its observation that he is adept with only one of the god’s stringed instruments, the lyre.⁷⁹ The bow, Apollo’s favored weapon in war, is the implement not of Nero but of the Parthian enemy in the east. The lines contrast the soft artistry of Nero with the martial efficacy of his Parthian counterpart—perhaps a jab at an emperor whose military efforts against the Arsacids had fallen short.

There are also hints in several texts that the emperor was on unusually good terms with the Arsacid family, possibly as a result of his overly generous concessions in Armenia. According to Suetonius, Nero considered fleeing to the Parthians as the extent of the uprising against his reign became clear.⁸⁰ The same author writes that, after Nero’s death, the Arsacid king Vologaeses asked the Senate to cherish his memory; a later epitomator even records that the Parthians saw to the erection of a monument for him.⁸¹ The fourth and fifth Sybilline Oracles also imagine Nero fleeing to the Parthians, and the former prophesies his return from the east at the head of a Persian army.⁸² Of the three Neronian pretenders to emerge after 68 CE, two are supposed to have rallied support in Parthian territory—another possible indication of his popularity in the Arsacid kingdom.⁸³ None of these reports bear directly on the reception of the 63 CE treaty, of course, and some of the sources are far too late to shed much light on Neronian era responses. But they do hint at a close alignment between Nero and the Parthians and, when combined with the view that Nero had capitulated over Armenia, they give the impression of an emperor whose relationship with Parthia was perhaps warmer than was prudent.⁸⁴

Where does Lucan’s Parthian debate fit into this murky picture? The question engages a lively scholarly discussion about the nature and consistency of Lucan’s political stance in the *Bellum civile*. Broadly speaking, one set of commentators maintains an anti-Caesarian and anti-Neronian interpretation of the poem, especially for Books 4–10; these scholars tend to read with the biographical tradition in mind, and they try to reconcile problematic passages with an overarching

77. Festus *Breviarium* 20.1: *Nero, quem turpissimum imperatorem Romana est passa respublica, amisit Armenias duas. tunc Romanae legiones duae sub iugum a Parthis missae, extremo dedecore Romani nominis, exercitus sacramenta foedarunt.*

78. Suet. *Ner.* 39.2: *dum tendit citharam noster, dum cornua Parthus / noster erit Paeon, ille Hecatebeletes.* On the dating of these pasquinades, see Bradley 1978, 237–39; *contra* Townend 1960, 104.

79. Miller 2009, 31–32; Slater 2014, 303–4.

80. Suet. *Ner.* 47.2; cf. Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 5.14. But see Sansone 1993, which casts doubt on the historicity of Suetonius’ account of Nero’s final hours.

81. Suet. *Ner.* 57.2; [Aur. Vict.] *Epitome de Caesaribus* 5.8.

82. *Orac. Sibyll.* 4.119–24, 130–39; 5.147. The two books achieved their final form at different points in time and reflect different traditions surrounding Nero; see Syme 1936, 144–45; Champlin 2003, 12–17; Jones 2011, 173–243.

83. The first “false Nero” emerged in 69 CE and was killed by one of Galba’s subordinates: Tac. *Hist.* 1.2, 2.8–9; Cass. Dio 63.9.3; Zonaras 11.15.45. The second, a certain Terentius Maximus, was active in Parthia during the reign of Titus: Cass. Dio 66.19.3b; Joann. Antioch. frag. 104. The third is said by Suetonius to have arisen twenty years after Nero’s death (88 CE): Suet. *Ner.* 57. See further Gallivan 1973; Tuplin 1989, esp. 394–96; Jones 2011, 179–81.

84. See further Sanford 1937, 100; Müller 2014, 302–3.

anti-Caesarian agenda.⁸⁵ Another set emphasizes the multifaceted and contradictory nature of the *Bellum civile*, and renounces the reconstruction of a political program from an inconsistent and “fractured” text.⁸⁶ This is not the place to resolve this debate, but it is necessary at this juncture to add another variable to the mix. Lucan’s dissidence, if dissident he was, is usually imagined as a matter of domestic politics; his opposition to Nero is said to have been rooted in his scorn for the *Caesarea domus* as a form of government that trampled on Republican *libertas* and the traditional rights of senatorial elites.⁸⁷ But Parthia was an external power in the domain of foreign policy.⁸⁸ Was Lucan critical of the emperor on foreign affairs, and specifically of his management of the Arsacids on the eastern frontier?

If one begins from the premise that Lucan used his poetry to criticize Nero, it is tempting to conclude that his own position on détente with the Arsacids essentially aligns with the views expressed in Lentulus’ speech. This would have been an ideal occasion to mount an attack on the emperor’s lackluster performance in Armenia. An opponent of Nero could easily have made the case that the war with the Parthians had dragged on for nearly a decade, had witnessed one of the most crushing humiliations of a Roman army since the Caudine Forks, and had concluded with an ignominious treaty instead of a clear battlefield triumph. Lentulus argues that the leader of the Roman world has an obligation to pursue vengeance and victory against the Parthians and to reject peace at any cost. Whatever the relative merits of the 63 CE treaty, Nero did not adopt this approach in his dealings with the Arsacid kingdom. Lucan may have used the victor of his Parthian debate to raise troublesome questions about the emperor’s foreign policy in the east.

Moreover, even if one presupposes nothing about Lucan’s political leanings, it cannot be denied that Lentulus’ claims are very close to what the poet of the *Bellum civile* says about Parthia in his own voice. The narrator speaks at greatest length on this subject during the proem, where he castigates the Romans for fighting each other “while proud Babylon needed to be despoiled of its Ausonian trophies, and the shade of Crassus wandered unavenged.”⁸⁹ He goes on to lament that civil war diverted military might that could have been used for foreign conquests in the east—a sentiment with clear antecedents in Augustan poetry.⁹⁰ The proem does not go so far as to say that a Parthian defeat would be worth a Caesarian victory, as Lentulus does. But the alignment between the two passages is nonetheless clear. Both express disgust with civil war for obstructing the redress of Roman grievances in the Parthian east. By contrast, the speaker of these lines

85. Ahl 1976, esp. 35–47; Leigh 1997; Bartsch 1997; Rudich 1997, 107–85. For an example of earlier scholarship that saw Lucan as neutral or pro-Neronian, see Lebek 1976.

86. Feeney 1991, 277–85; Masters 1994; 1992, 87–90 and n. 95; Roller 1996; O’Hara 2007, 131–39; Kimmerle 2015, 14–19, 110–16. Related but distinct is Sklenář 2003, where Lucan’s lack of political opinions is described as the coherent outlook of a nihilist.

87. On Lucan’s “senatorial sensibilities” and hatred for the *Caesarea domus* (Luc. 4.823), see Rudich 1993, 94; 1997, 184–85; Quint 1993, 156.

88. Lucan’s conception of Parthia as an external power is clear in his descriptions of the Arsacid kingdom as another world; see Pogorzelski 2011, esp. 154–67; Tracy 2014, 17–25.

89. Luc. 1.10–11: *cumque superba foret Babylon spolianda tropaeis / Ausoniis umbraque erraret Crassus inulta*. The references to Babylon and Crassus make it clear that the poet has Parthia in mind; see above, n. 62 on ethnonyms used to refer to the Parthians in Latin poetry.

90. Hor. *Carm.* 1.2.21–24, 51–52; 1.12.53–54; 1.35.29–40; 2.1.29–32; 3.2.1–4; 3.3.44; 3.6.9–12; cf. Roche 2009, 114.

seems unlikely to be swayed by Pompey's argument that the Republican cause is best served by collaboration with the Arsacid kingdom.

The narrator is even more condemnatory just a few lines later, where the Arsacids are now not just the spectators but also the *cause* of Rome's civil war. Recounting the chain of events that began the violence, the poet describes Crassus as the dam that held back the flood of civil strife. His death at Parthian hands, however, removed all restraint (1.103–8):

. . . ubi saeva
arma ducum dirimens miserando funere Crassus
Assyrias Latio maculavit sanguine Carrhas,
Parthica Romanos solverunt damna furores.
plus illa vobis acie, quam creditis, actum est,
Arsacidae: bellum victis civile dedistis.

When in his piteous ruin Crassus, who was keeping the savage arms of the leaders apart, stained Assyrian Carrhae with Latin blood, the damage inflicted by the Parthians unleashed Rome's madness. You have accomplished more than you think with that battle, Arsacidae: you gave civil war to those you conquered.

As Paul Roche points out, this is an idiosyncratic interpretation of the war's outbreak, since Pompey and Caesar continued to fruitfully collaborate for some two years after Crassus' death.⁹¹ But the peculiarity of the narrator's historical claim only further underlines his particular animus against the Arsacid kingdom.⁹² The poet of the *Bellum civile* indulges in a favorite tactic of hardliners: blaming foreigners for his country's domestic problems. On this logic, Pompey's intended collaboration with the Arsacids in the eighth book is, in effect, a proposal to win the civil war by means of the very foreigners who started it. By contrast, the poet's words agree in spirit with Lentulus' view that civil war is a lamentable distraction from the pursuit of eastern vengeance.⁹³

But if Lentulus' views are close to Lucan's own, it would follow that the poet intended the second speech in the Parthian debate to be stronger and more persuasive than the first—a possibility, but by no means a certainty. To be sure, at 122 lines to his opponent's 65, Lentulus' speech is certainly longer than Pompey's.⁹⁴ He is able to rebut all of Pompey's arguments at length, and he exploits deeply ingrained anti-Parthian prejudices to do so.⁹⁵ Lentulus also has the advantage of arguing against an opponent at his worst; Pompey's adoption of Caesar's prayer "Rome, favor my endeavors" (*Roma, fave coeptis*) has revealed an ugly ambition within him—a desire to hold onto power no matter what the cost, and a willingness to stoop to Caesar's level in order to do so.⁹⁶ Finally, Lentulus persuades the text's internal audience. His judgment prevails, and the assembled Republicans decide not to cross the Euphrates.

91. Roche 2009, 164–65.

92. Cf. Masters 1994, 151: "When [Lucan] does distort history, we have good reason to suppose that he is doing so deliberately."

93. Cf. Luc. 7.431: *quod semper seras debet tibi Parthia poenas*. The *semper* makes it clear that vengeance is still owed in the poet's own time; see Pogorzelski 2011, 155–57.

94. Note, however, that this is also true of the paired speeches in Plutarch's life of Pompey: Postgate 1917, xl.

95. Ahl 1976, 22, 172.

96. Luc. 8.322; Caesar speaks the words at 1.200. See Postgate 1917, 72; Ahl 1976, 172. For a discussion of Lucan's view of Pompey at this point in the poem, see Bartsch 1997, 82–93.

Yet Lentulus' is a hollow victory, because any ancient reader of the *Bellum civile* would have known that, whatever the merits of his arguments, he gives the wrong advice. The speaker's obdurate refusal to engage with Parthia leads to Pompey's death in Egypt and, by extension, a mortal blow to the Republican cause.⁹⁷ Part of Lentulus' ethos as a speaker comes from his putative ability to cut through Pompey's naivete about the Parthians, exposing their perfidiousness and the unreliable nature of their *fiducia*. If, as the reader knows, his assessment of Egyptian trustworthiness leads to disaster, then his judgment of the Arsacid kingdom is drawn into question. The little that Lentulus says in favor of Egypt turns out to be utterly misguided. Is his condemnation of Parthia any better?

Perhaps the point is that Lentulus' assessment of Parthia, though right, leads to disastrous results. Many commentators would now agree that the world of Lucan's epic is chaotic, random, and "antirational"⁹⁸—a world where Rome's traditional bearings are lost in the destructive vortex of civil strife. As discussed above, Lentulus' anti-Parthian stance was a distinguished tradition in Roman foreign policy that drew on deep-seated prejudices and made a potent appeal to Roman honor. His speech puts principles over pragmatism, and it even seems aligned with the sentiments that the narrator himself expresses in the proem. But in spite of the fact that honor, patriotism, and tradition are on his side, Lentulus' take on the Arsacid kingdom leads to death for Pompey and devastation for the Republicans. In a world turned upside down by civil war, the precepts that have guided Roman foreign policy in the east seem to have lost their validity.

In the end, it may be best to avoid reading a clear foreign policy prescription in the Parthian debate, and instead to see the paired speeches as an expression of contemporary political anxieties. When it came to the Arsacid kingdom, Rome had always been torn between the ideal of *imperium sine fine* on the one hand and the reality of an unconquerable eastern neighbor on the other. Lucan's two speakers give some sense of the poles around which this tension revolved, of the extremes on the spectrum between accommodation and contestation. Pompey's pragmatism supports a vision of the Roman-Parthian relationship guided by cautious engagement and judicious diplomacy; Lentulus' hardline stance demands the pursuit of vengeance on the battlefield and the military subjugation of an inferior eastern enemy. For the Republicans, this debate was a fraught contest to properly evaluate a foreign power that inspired fear, disgust, and hatred, but sometimes also grudging respect. For Lucan, too.

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97. Cf. Ahl 1976, 173; Bonner 2010, 103.

98. Sklenář 2003, 3; cf. Most 1992, 397.

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