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Confronting Civil War under Nero: the Case of Seneca's Tragedies and Lucan's Bellum Civile.

Civil war was ancient Rome's national trauma. Both during the final decades of the Republic as well as during the entire history of the Empire, the fabric of the state frequently unraveled into a destructive struggle for supreme power between two or more strong men, which would not end before one of them had emerged victorious and (re-)established order. This paper offers a brief overview of the treatment of the theme of civil war in poetry written under Rome's first Imperial dynasty (27 BCE – 68 CE). It focusses on Seneca and Lucan, two poets writing in the final years of this dynasty, just before the outbreak of another civil war, from which the Flavian dynasty would emerge (69-96 CE).

In what are most likely to have been his final plays, probably written in the early sixties of the first century CE, the philosopher, politician and tragedian Seneca explored the strained relationships between brothers in two legendary royal families, putting the cities that they ruled on the brink of civil war. More or less simultaneously, his nephew Lucan was writing an epic on the far more real Roman civil war between Caesar and Pompey, a century ago by his time. This paper will concentrate on both authors' reflection on the relationship between civil war and the principate and the way in which the latter could easily unravel into the former – and vice versa. In both authors' works, the power of the ruler is absolute, as is the chaos that precedes the establishment of his rule or accompanies its dissolution in an inescapable cycle. However, there are also major differences between Lucan and Seneca in their moral and poetic evaluation of these principles.