

Obscena canes: Hecate's Ominous Bitches at Georgics I. 470

In the passage of *Georgics* I where Vergil describes the omens attending the death of Julius Caesar, after describing the darkness that covered the sun, he continues,

Tempore quamquam illo tellus quoque et aequora ponti,
obscenaque canes importunaeque volucres
signa dabant. (*Georgics* I. 469-471)

Although at that time the earth, and the waters of the sea,
and the ominous bitches and ill-omened birds
were giving signs.

As Richard Thomas notes in his commentary on this passage, lines of four words are very rare in Vergil – a fact which draws attention to line 470 and, as Thomas says, gives it a tone of solemnity. Why, though, should the dogs be described as *obscena* – that is, as feminine, rather than with the normal masculine collective plural? Though, according to the apparatus in Mynors' Oxford edition, the reading *obsceni* is found in some manuscripts, *obscena* is clearly the preferred reading. (*Volucris* is regularly feminine, and the reading *importunae* is universally found here.) Female dogs are associated with Hecate, and by including female dogs among the omens accompanying Caesar's murder, Vergil is here alluding to Hecate and her cult.

Female dogs are found in other contexts that include Hecate and bad omens. In *Aeneid* VI, when Aeneas and the Sibyl make the sacrifice, female dogs howl to herald Hecate's arrival: *visaeque canes ululare per umbram / adveniente dea*: "and bitches appeared to howl through the shadows at the approach of the goddess" (*Aen.* VI. 257-258). In *Odes* 3. 27. 2 Horace calls down an obviously female *praegnans canis* as an ill omen upon the evil ones. There is also evidence for the sacrifice of dogs to Hecate. Additionally, when Pompey's younger son describes his father's death, Lucan has him remark, *Nam corpus Phariaene canes avidaeque volucres distulerint ... ignoro*: "For I don't know whether Egyptian dogs and greedy birds tore apart his body" (*De bello civili* IX. 141-42) – again the dogs are described as female, in a context of extreme ill omen, and, as in the *Georgics* passage, they are associated with birds, *volucres*.

Hecate is a goddess of the darkness and of ill omen, and Vergil's inclusion of clearly female dogs – the ominous bitches – among the bad omens surrounding Caesar's death subtly remind the reader that Caesar's murder was attended by Hecate and all of the b(ew)itching omens that accompany her.