

Lucan's Erictho: the *Plus Quam* Witch

Lucan's *Bellum Civile* is the poem of hyperbole (Martindale 1976, 45): the civil war is the most significant and destructive event in the whole of Roman history, and therefore all the episodes, places, and characters connected with it are inevitably described as *plus quam*, i.e. more outstanding than any other. The description of the witch Erictho at 6.507-830 is no exception. The purpose of this paper is to show that the character of Erictho is created by Lucan to be the most impious and powerful witch of the whole of Latin literature, the *plus quam* witch. In order to do so, I have examined all the potential models of the Lucanian passage, namely all the other episodes of witchcraft present in the works of Lucan's predecessors: Verg. *Buc.* 8.64-109, Verg. *Aen.* 4.478-521, Hor. *Epod.* 5, Hor. *Epod.* 17, Hor. *Sat.* 1.8, Tib. 1.2.41-64, Tib. 1.5.47-56, Prop. 4.5.1-18, 63-78, Ov. *Her.* 6.79-108, Ov. *Am.* 1.8.1-20, Ov. *Am.* 3.7.27-36, Ov. *Met.* 7.159-351, Ov. *Fas.* 2.572-83, Sen. *Med.* 670-848. Although previous scholarship has already provided some valuable studies on the relationship between Erictho and other individual witches, like Seneca's Medea (Paratore 1974) or Horace's Canidia (Lugli 1987-8), an exhaustive comparative analysis of all the episodes of witchcraft has never been attempted.

I carry out my analysis by dividing the material I discuss into three sections:

- 1) the description of the witch (with a focus on both her physical aspect and her behaviors);
- 2) her areas of expertise and powers;
- 3) the means she uses to accomplish her purposes.

I compare each of these sections of the Erictho-episode with all the other passages, in order to find:

- a) the points in common between the Lucanian narration and its models;
- b) the elements which are mentioned only in the Erictho-scene, and are neglected in the other passages (I define these elements the *plus*-part);

c) the elements which are mentioned in one or more other passages, and are neglected by Lucan (the *minus*-part).

The *plus*-part establishes that Erictho is the most powerful witch, since it demonstrates that she has something more than the others. In particular, when Lucan adds innovations to his models, they function to underline the strong connection between the witch and the realm of Death (as illustrated by the murder of a fetus at ll. 6.558-9), and to show her impiety, which manifests itself in the transgression of the traditional magical rites.

The *minus*-part, instead of contradicting this program, as one might expect, reinforces it, and reveals itself to be another *plus*-part: the poet, in fact, erases all the elements which could contradict his sinister image of Erictho, removing not only every possible connection with love and, consequently, generation – despite the fact that love (especially, even though not exclusively, in the elegiac genre) was the most common and productive area of expertise of witches – but also every object related to the respect for ritual property; he is also careful to get rid of every comic and ridiculous detail from Erictho's portrait, in order to make her as dreadful as possible.

My conclusion is that Lucan creates this deadly and impious character in order to let her perform the most deadly and impious magical practice: necromancy. No other prophetic practice, in fact, would dare to foretell the victory of Caesar, the most deadly and impious man. Disclosing the calamitous outcome of the war is sacrilegious; it should remain hidden: it is *nefas*. The prophecy of Book 6, in fact, is the only certain and clear prediction in the entire poem. This prediction will soon reveal itself to be completely trustworthy, since Caesar will actually win, and his success, in Lucan's view, will allow impiety to dominate in a world doomed to death, with no hope for regeneration, a world whose best representative is undoubtedly Erictho.

Works cited:

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