

Caesar and Erictho in Lucan's *Bellum Civile*: Parallelism and the Corruption of Power

The monstrous inhumanity of Erictho, the necromantic witch in book 6 of the *Bellum Civile*, parallels that of the protagonist Caesar. At first glance, the witch appears to be Caesar's complete opposite: Erictho possesses a warped effeminacy, while Caesar possesses an all-encompassing masculinity; Lucan portrays the witch as completely un-Roman and barbaric while Caesar is entirely Roman, although he acts against Rome's interests. When looked at more closely, however, the two characters are very similar: Erictho reflects the Roman leader's tyrannical attributes and even represents what he might become. Both monstrous characters rule over their kingdoms with complete lack of regard for everyone and everything – Erictho over the Thessalian graveyard, and Caesar over Rome and its people. While Erictho's monstrosity is completely manifest – her appearance, her actions and the company she keeps, Caesar's monstrosity is more subtly drawn. Lucan focuses on his transgression of political, geographical and physical boundaries and his overwhelming appetite for power.

First, I examine Erictho's tyrannical monstrosity. Erictho transgresses the boundaries of humanity in every way: she is everything that a Roman woman should not be. Instead of representing production and fertility, she stands as a symbol of deconstruction and death (6.510-513). While Roman women characteristically present themselves with modesty and the appropriate amount of shame, Erictho is brazen and shameless (6.550-556). Although she is physically repugnant, Lucan portrays the witch as a bizarrely sexual character who is unable or unwilling to reproduce (6.557-569); in this, she demonstrates the ultimate corruption of a woman's role in society. Erictho rules over her kingdom of the dead like a merciless tyrant, completely alone and alienated from the rest of humanity. She does what she wishes with corpses to achieve her goals of predicting the future or simply to satisfy her visceral pleasure in defiling the dead (6.550-556). In her final scene in book 6, she revives an unwilling young Roman soldier from the dead, uses him, and then discards him when she finishes with him (6.750-762).

Lucan depicts Caesar as parallel to Erictho. He is a tyrannical monster who takes over the Roman world, satisfying his appetites for power and pleasure and perverting established Roman norms. The Roman leader is portrayed as super-human and takes liberties that only gods do — he follows no treaties, thereby alienating himself from other people, just like Erictho who is alone in her kingdom of the dead (1.225-227); he despoils Rome's own treasury, placing his greed and needs over Rome's, also similar to Erictho's greed and extreme, selfish behavior (3.154-168); he gloats over the piles of Roman dead at the battlefields of Pharsalus, having used and expended Roman youth for his own political and personal advantage, just as Erictho does with the Roman dead (7.787-796). The author portrays two of his most prominent characters as filthy, corrupt and evil, and he demonstrates what can happen when the pursuit and acquisition of power goes too far: those who rule become monsters and those who are ruled are expendable. The locus of this pursuit of power, Rome and its battlefields, becomes a graveyard where there is no humanity left.