Lucan’s Impact on Necromancy

Sextus Pompey’s encounter with the witch Erictho in Book 6 of Lucan’s *Bellum Civile* is one of the most memorable scenes in the work. It is also a scene that has thoroughly been explored in an attempt to identify its place and function within the work as a whole and to identify the ways in which Lucan uses the scene to strongly contrast his work with the *Aeneid*. But while the style of scene and some overarching themes present within it have been considered, little attention seems to have been paid to the necromantic rite itself. This task, though, seems to me to be an important one, since by closely studying Lucan’s portrayal of the necromantic rite we can observe, in part, Lucan’s profound and lasting influence on literature.

Lucan was neither the only nor the first author of Greco-Roman literature to portray a necromantic rite. Necromantic scenes can be found in drama (such as Aeschylus’ *Persians*), history (such as Herodotus 5.92), and even other epic (most notably in the *Odyssey*). Lucan’s necromancy scene does stand apart from earlier necromantic depictions, though. Specifically, necromancy in Lucan is a practice that is without a doubt illicit. Unlike earlier depictions where very few negative comments are said about the practice and it instead presented as a useful and licit method of discovering the future, everything about the necromantic rite in Lucan, including its practitioner, its setting, and its mechanics, is presented in a sinister light. This new view of necromancy as an illicit practice is a profound change from earlier views of the practice and one that has a lasting effect, not only on other Greco-Roman literature, but even on modern views of necromancy. As such, I wish in this paper to explore how Lucan’s portrayal differs from earlier portrayals and distinguishes necromancy as an illicit practice, as well as explore the impact of Lucan’s work that is apparent in later necromancy scenes, specifically Heliodorus’ and Apuleius’.

After a brief overview of necromancy scenes prior to Lucan, I plan to consider the elements in Lucan which stand in contrast to earlier necromancy scenes and that could perhaps be considered as the base of this attitude change where necromancy goes from a licit to an illicit practice. These elements will include Lucan’s choice to depict a reanimation necromancy (where the corpse is brought back to life) as opposed to an evocation necromancy (where only the ghost appears), his portrayal of the practitioner of the necromancy, his general Neronian aesthetics, and some of the over-arching themes of the book which are especially stressed in the necromancy scene. I hope to show that Lucan uses all these elements to emphasize that necromancy is a practice which is at odds with the natural order and that this emphasis as an unnatural practice is at the heart of the change in attitude towards necromancy. After establishing this, I then intend to show how Lucan’s deeming of necromancy as an unnatural and illicit practice impacted later necromantic scenes. Specifically, I will explore the necromancy scenes in Heliodorus’ *Aethiopica* and Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses* and show how they are meant to be read with the attitude towards necromancy that Lucan pioneered firmly in place.

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