The Destruction of the Eye in Book 6 of Lucan’s *Bellum Civile*

In book 6 of Lucan’s *Bellum Civile*, the poet carries out a long, seemingly unnecessary, excursus on the nefarious proclivities of the witch, Erichtho, before she gives prophecy to Sextus Pompeius. Within this description, the poet describes an exceedingly gruesome dismemberment in which Erichtho takes great necrophiliac pleasure at ravaging a corpse’s eyes (6.541-3). This eye extrusion coupled with the long description of the witch’s crimes exposes the problematic nature of the witch herself and her role in the epic as many scholars have noted, and they find her at once comic, exaggerated and even “tasteless” (Johnson 1987; Masters 1997). This paper seeks to offer one solution in reconciling Erichtho’s problematic status as character and consequent detestable eye extrusion with the poet’s presentation of pervasive dismemberment throughout (Bartsch 1997).

I argue that the disregard for and even delight in destruction of the human face extends to sexual behavior (6.564-9), and Erichtho’s misplaced erotic desire for a corpse translates into the trope ‘marriage to death’. Erichtho’s attraction to and destruction of the corpse is a mystery that may be resolved with the erotic gaze of the lover and its opposite, the evil eye (Bartsch 2006; Barton 1993). My contention is that Erichtho conflates the amatory gaze and the deployment of the evil eye while substantiating the two in a physical destruction of a corpse’s face. In this way, we can reconcile the erotic and the destructive, the sexual and malicious.

Throughout these lines, the poet juxtaposes erotic imagery with that of mourning. Erichtho subverts the readers’ expectations continuously: she occupies the role of the bride and the groom. In addition, she is depicted as a mourning widow, thereby fast-forwarding the marriage to its endpoint. The widow is hanging in the balance between life and death, because she wishes to accompany her beloved to the under-world. Erichtho, in her appearance and actions, mimics, exaggerates and perverts this role, as is her custom, for she perpetually lives in a liminal state between life and death literally and metaphorically.

While a grieving woman might throw herself onto the grave of her beloved because she wants the deceased to be alive, Erichtho throws herself onto the corpse in order to sexually interact with it and destroy it. She occupies multiple roles: mourner, necrophiliac, grim-reaper and hastener of decay (by mangling the flesh of the deceased). Erichtho personifies, amplifies and mocks death and all of the rituals that surround it, and the result is that we see a jumble of confusing, overlapping imagery. This imagery of sex, mourning and decay seems to fit together, but it is so distorted, so convoluted, that the readers see a blurry, horrifying kaleidoscope of the familiar and the unfamiliar, the canny and the uncanny. In Erichtho’s world, sex, violence and delight in the dead become an obscene caricature of love, affection and the somber, serious rituals surrounding mourning and funerals. The ruptured eye of the corpse serves as a sign that is critical in understanding the multilayered and distorted state of relationships in the epic as a whole. This paper concludes that Erichtho’s extrusion of the eye in book 6 will initiate further study on the malformation of relationships with regard optics, sexuality, dismemberment and their destabilizing affect on the fluctuating status of humanity in the *Bellum Civile*.