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*The Cumaean Sibyl and the Thessalian Witch: A Comparison Between the Styles of Virgil and Lucan*

By Christopher Bungard

Virgil's *Aeneid* and Lucan's *Pharsalia*, or *De Bello Civili*, are both epic poems, yet these poems are quite different. Both the work of Virgil and Lucan share in the most common aspects of the epic tradition. Their epics are full of heroes and battles, and at some point of the epic, the underworld is sought as a place to find answers about what the future holds. It is at this point that the great difference between Virgil's style and Lucan's style is quite evident. In both works, there is a mysterious woman, feared by men, who is able to show a mortal character in the epic just what the future holds, but the woman herself as well as the way she shows the mortal man the future through the use of the underworld is quite different. At the same time that difference is highly reflective of the view of the poet on his society and the potential that that society has.

Virgil's *Aeneid* was composed during the reign of Augustus as the first Principate, or emperor, of Rome. Virgil, as many other Romans of his day would have, remembered a time before the establishment of the Principate by Augustus. The rule of Augustus had its opponents, and thus, Virgil was commissioned to compose his epic as a work that would help legitimize the rule of

Augustus at the expense of the Roman Senate. Augustus always claimed that he was making efforts to restore the Republic, but what actually emerged from Augustus' reign was a new institution. The *Aeneid*, in part, supports the legitimacy of Augustus' reign by telling the story of Aeneas, a man fated to found the race in Italy that would one day emerge as the Romans. All the hardships and fighting that Aeneas endures from the time he leaves the shores of Troy to the time he defeats Turnus in Italy is for the sake of beginning a new race of half Trojan and half Italian blood in Italy, which would one day found the city of Rome. Successive generations of Romans, sprung from the blood of Aeneas, would come to be a powerful nation, and that nation, upon conquering the lands surrounding the Mediterranean Sea, would produce one man, Augustus, who would bring peace to the world. Thus, Aeneas struggles, decried by fate, are justified in that they will one day, despite the immediate effects, bring world peace.

Lucan's *Pharsalia* casts a different light on the potential fruitfulness of the Roman wars. Living in the time of the emperor Nero, Lucan was part of a nation that had not lived in a time without the emperor dominating Roman politics. Lucan had enjoyed a period of time when he was in the favour of the emperor Nero, but for some unknown reason, possibly the turn against Caesarism, and thus, against the current emperor, in Lucan's *Pharsalia*, he fell out of

favour with Nero. Lucan criticises the political system of Rome in his own time, but at the same time, Lucan is unable to offer any alternative to the empire. The main way in which Lucan criticises the Roman state of his own lifetime is through the use of blatantly anti-Virgilian elements. A good example of this can be seen in looking at the difference between the Cumaean Sibyl in Book 6 of the *Aeneid* and her Lucan counterpart in Book 6 of the *Pharsalia*, the Thessalian witch.

The Cumaean Sibyl and the Thessalian witch perform a common role in the epic tradition. For both Virgil and Lucan, these women provide the vehicle by which the events of the future are partially revealed through the use of the underworld. The anti-Virgilian aspects of this part of the *Pharsalia* quickly emerge upon the very introduction of the Thessalian witch. Toward the very beginning of his Book 6, Virgil describes the Cumaean Sibyl as a woman feared by men. Aeneas "arces quibus altus Apollo / praesidet horrendaeque procul secreta Sibyllae / antrum inmane petit."<sup>14</sup> This cave is pocketed with little niches, which reverberate with the sound of the Sibyl's voice when she speaks.

Lucan's Thessalian witch also dwells in a place with many mouths, but these mouths are the mouths of the dead. She "desertaque busta / incolit et tumulos

<sup>14</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid* Book VI, Lines 9-11. In duty bound, went inland to the heights / Where overshadowing Apollo dwells / And nearby, in a

expulses obtinet umbris / grata deis Erebi."<sup>15</sup> These tombs and graves are perversion of the cave in which the Sibyl lives. Like the Sibyl's cave, the tombs and graves that the Thessalian witch inhabits are places that only an unusual being would inhabit, but at the same time, unlike the Sibyl's cave, the witch's abodes are defiled and corrupt.

The second way in which the Thessalian witch acts as an anti-Virgilian element is the relationship between the gods and the witch. The Cumaean Sibyl in the *Aeneid* is an agent of the gods, in particular Apollo. When the Sibyl first speaks on behalf of the gods, Virgil describes the event thus: "cui talia fanti / ante fores subito non vultus non color unus / non comptae mansere comae sed pectus anhelum / et rabie fera corda tument maiorque videri / nec mortale sonans adflata est numine quando / iam proprie dei."<sup>16</sup> The god Apollo inhabits the Cumaean Sibyl, and through her, the god speaks to Aeneas. Nor is she able to simply oust the power of the god at her whim. Virgil notes, "at Phoebi nondum patiens inmanis in antro / bacchatur vates magnum si pectore posit / excuisse deum tanto magis ille fatigat

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place apart — a dark / Enormous cave — the Sibyl feared by men.

<sup>15</sup> Lucan, *Pharsalia* Book VI, Lines 511-513.

dear to the deities of Erebus, she inhabited deserted tombs, and haunted graves from which the ghosts had been driven.

<sup>16</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid* Book VI, Lines 46-51. And as she spoke neither her face / Nor her hue went untransformed, nor did her hair / Stay neatly bound: her breast heaved, her wild heart / Grew with large passion. Taller to their eyes / And

/ os rabidum fera corda domans fingitque  
premodo."<sup>17</sup> Phoebus Apollo inhabits the  
Sibyl, and only when he is done prophesising  
through her does he release the Sibyl from  
his power.

The Thessalian witch has a much  
different relationship with the gods. Instead  
of being a mouthpiece for the prophecies of  
the gods, the witch controls the gods. Lucan  
tells the reader, "Omne nefas superi prima  
iam voce precantis / concedunt carmenque  
timent audire secundum."<sup>18</sup> Lucan's  
Thessalian witch does not use typical and  
acceptable methods to get what she wants  
from the gods. Instead, the witch commands  
the gods, and fearing what another spell may  
compel them to do, the gods submit to all of  
the witch's whims.

Another aspect of the Thessalian  
witch that sets her apart and adverse to the  
Cumaeian Sibyl is the way in which she helps  
those who seek knowledge of the future gain  
it from the underworld. The Sibyls' method  
is very religious and ritualistic, and in the  
*Aeneid* this process is drawn out over the  
span of one hundred forty lines. The Sibyl  
tells Aeneas that the journey to the  
underworld is easy, but the journey back to

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sounding now no longer like a mortal / Since she  
had felt the god's power breathing near.

<sup>17</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid* Book VI, Lines 77-80. But the  
prophetess / Whom the bestriding god had not yet  
broken / Stormed about the cavern, trying to  
shake / His influence from her breast, while all  
the more / He tired her mad jaws, quelled her  
savage heart / And tamed her by his pressure.

<sup>18</sup> Lucan, *Pharsalia* Book VI, Lines 527-528. At  
the first sound of her petition the gods grant every  
horror, dreading to hear a second spell.

the land of the living is a difficult one. In  
order to complete the entire journey, an  
individual needs the golden bough, which  
"ipse volens facilisque sequetur / si te fata  
vocant aliter non viribus ullis / vincere nec  
duro poteris convellere ferro."<sup>19</sup> In the  
*Aeneid*, only the *pious* man can obtain  
knowledge of the future from the  
underworld and return to tell others about  
the events of the future. The golden bough is  
not enough, though. Religious rites must still  
be performed in order to gain the favour of  
the gods. The Sibyl sacrifices four black  
bullocks to Hecatë, and Aeneas too offers  
sacrifices, a black lamb to Night and the  
Earth, a sterile cow to Proserpina, and the  
carcasses of bulls for Pluto. All of these  
sacrifices, the descriptions of which are  
steeped in ritualistic language that would  
have reminded Romans of their ritual  
sacrifices, are necessary to enter into and  
return from the underworld safely.

Lucan's witch does not perform  
these rites to appease the gods, and her  
process is compacted into much fewer lines  
than Virgil's. Because, through her potions  
and spells, she is more powerful than the  
gods, she can simply tell the gods to bring a  
shade back from the dead, and the gods  
comply. The process by which the Thessalian  
witch makes contact with the underworld is  
also a perversion of the actions of the

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<sup>19</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid* Book VI, Lines 146-148. It will  
come willingly, / Easily, if you are called by fate.  
/ If not, with all your strength you cannot conquer  
it, / Cannot lop it off with a sword's edge.

Cumaean Sibyl. This process takes the form of a sacrifice in reverse. A shade brought back from the dead needs a repository, and so, the witch digs up a corpse from the ground. She "pectora tunc primum ferventi sanguine supplet / volneribus laxata novis."<sup>20</sup> Instead of the blood flowing out of the body, and the victim dying, in this scene, the body is cut, and then the blood is poured back into the body. After this, chants and potions are used to bring the corpse back to life, a process very similar to the chants and libations that would be used during a sacrifice. Having been brought back to life, the corpse then proceeds to tell of the events of the future. The method of the Thessalian witch, unlike that of the Cumaean Sibyl, is one which any man, whether *pious* or *impious*, can use.

The most obvious difference between Virgil's Sibyl and Lucan's witch, as the process of gaining information from the underworld shows, is the respect for religion that either of these women have. The very first thing that the Sibyl tells Aeneas to do is to sacrifice seven bulls and seven ewes. After doing this, Aeneas is quickly told that he must pray if he desires knowledge from the gods. The great respect for Roman religious practices of the Sibyl again crops up in the preparation for Aeneas' journey to the underworld. As has already been pointed

out, the Sibyl sacrifices four black bullocks to Hecatē, a goddess of the underworld, and she tells Aeneas to sacrifice to various gods of the underworld. The Sibyl's insistence that religion been respected once again crops up in the underworld itself. In the underworld, Aeneas sees the shade of his helmsman, Palinurus, and Palinurus implores Aeneas to either put dirt over his body or, if it is possible, to take Palinurus across the Styx, a thing which would not be permitted until the body could be properly buried. To this pleading, the Sibyl tells Palinurus, "Unde haec o Palinure tibi tam dira cupido / tu Stygias inhumatas aquas amnemque severum / Eumenidum aspicias ripamve iniussus adibis / desine fata deum flecti sperare precando."<sup>21</sup> The Sibyl insists in the fact that the decrees of the gods are unable to be broken, and thus, Palinurus must wait for his body to be buried before he can cross the Styx.

The Thessalian witch practically mocks all of the tenants of Roman religion. Toward the beginning of his description of the witch, Lucan says, "Nec superos orat nec cantu supplice numen / auxiliare vocat nec fibres illa litantes / novit funereas aris inponere flammas / gaudet et accenso rapuit

<sup>20</sup> Lucan, *Pharsalia* Book VI, Lines 667-668.

Then she began by piercing the breast of the corpse with fresh wounds, which she filled with hot blood.

<sup>21</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid* Book VI, Lines 373-376. From what source comes this craving, Palinurus? / Would you though still unburied see the Styx / And the grim river of the Eumenid s, / Or even the river bank, without a summons? Abandon hope by prayer to make the gods / Change their decrees.

quae tura sepulchro."<sup>22</sup> Lucan then proceeds to list, in lurid detail, the horrible acts of defilement this witch commits on the bodies of people. She kills people who have years left to them by destiny. She mangles corpses entombed in coffins, hanging from the noose, and crucified on the cross. On top of all this, she is not unknown to kill if she cannot slake her thirst for gore otherwise. On occasion, the witch steals babies from their mothers' wombs and places them on altars as a sacrifice. Besides these horrific attacks on the good order of things, the witch is able to command the gods, which would be impossible for other Roman authors to comprehend as the gods, though full of folly, were more powerful than simple mortals. The mockery of the sacrifice presented by Lucan when the witch brings the corpse back to life is yet another way in which the witch of Thessaly insults Roman religion.

For Virgil and Lucan, the Principate form of government holds different possibilities, and the attitudes expressed through the Cumaean Sibyl and the Thessalian witch illustrate this difference. Virgil sees the Roman world in his age and Roman customs as potentially fruitful. Aeneas, full of respect for the religion and customs of his ancestors as well as the decrees of fate, endures, not for his own sake,

but for the sake of the future generations of his descendants, the Romans. Aeneas toils so that one day there may come a time of world peace. Lucan sees this system, which Aeneas endeavoured to enable to exist, as accomplishing nothing. Roman religion and customs only produced civil war, and that war eventually led to Nero becoming the leader of the Roman state. Lucan's main opposition to the events that had taken place in Rome in his lifetime was what he saw as the corruption of the state, ultimately the result of the victories of Caesar, but Lucan can offer no other alternative to this system.

#### Translations

Lucan, *De Bello Civili*, translated by J.D. Duff.

Virgil, *Aeneid*, translated by Robert Fitzgerald.

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<sup>22</sup> Lucan, *Pharsalia* Book VI, Lines 523-526.

She addresses no prayer to Heaven, invokes no divine aid with suppliant hymn, and know nothing of the organs of victims offered in sacrifice; she rejoices to lay on the altar funeral fires and incense snatched from the kindled pyre.