

Programmatic Aspects of the First Simile in Vergil's *Aeneid*

This paper argues that the first simile in Vergil's *Aeneid* (1.148–53) makes a complex and engaging programmatic statement about art, allusion, and originality. The simile compares Neptune, as he calms the stormy seas harassing Aeneas and his fleet, to a respected public figure soothing a turbulent populace. Several critics have pointed out that the simile looks forward to central themes of the poem, particularly *pietas* and kingship (Pöschl 1970: 20–22, Perret 1977: 11, Harrison 1988; see also Williams 1983: 70–71 and Lyne 1989: 178). At the same time, the simile sets the stage from a literary and artistic perspective, both for similes and for the *Aeneid* overall, but only Hardie 1998 considers the simile as a source of information about how to read the poem (92, where he suggests an allegorical historical reading). Indeed, previous work has almost entirely overlooked a key aspect of this simile: how does it depict the reader's role as an interpreter of the *Aeneid*? Because similes require the reader to supply the connections between a simile and the surrounding narrative, they strongly highlight the process of interpretation. Thus, the first simile provides a superb opportunity for a programmatic statement about allusion and interpretation that – like the *Aeneid* itself – is at once subtle, far-reaching, and ambiguous.

The simile achieves this effect by melding a particularly striking example of Homeric intertextuality with vivid Roman elements. Commentators beginning with Servius have noted a Homeric parallel (*Iliad* 2.144–48) in which the Greek assembly reacting to a speech by Agamemnon is compared to a storm. Vergil's simile inverts Homer's by placing the storm in the narrative rather than the simile. The *Aeneid* simile also challenges Homeric practice in a more fundamental way by reversing the widespread Homeric tendency to use nature similes to illustrate human actions or emotions. The power of this effect moved one commentator to speak of the “shock value” of the simile (Otis 1995: 230). Other readers, in contrast, see a lack of

Homeric antecedents as one of the powerful features of Vergil's simile (Cartault 1926: 103, Pöschl 1970: 20). While the simile clearly *evokes* Homeric similes in general, and may evoke *Iliad* 2.144–48 in particular, it does not have a single, straightforward relationship to Homeric epic.

At the same time, the simile depicts a clearly Roman milieu, again with multiple parallels. Many commentators have noted a comparable simile from Cicero's *de Cluentio* 49, which compares the irrational, easily swayed emotions of the *populus* to a stormy sea. Indeed, Cicero says that this comparison was commonly used (*quod saepe dictum est*). This is both similar to *Iliad* 2 (a crowd is compared to a stormy sea) and different (a nearly contemporary Roman author working in a genre quite distant from epic). Most commentators see the man in our simile as referring to the civil wars of the Late Republic in general, rather than to any specific person, but Pöschl 1970: 20–21 sees a connection to Cato as well as a more general significance. Thus, the Latin parallels, like the Homeric ones, have several possible interpretations that both draw the reader in and prevent him from reaching any facile conclusions about how these references relate to the *Aeneid*.

This innovative combination of a Homeric simile and a strongly Roman setting presents, in effect, a thumbnail sketch of the entire *Aeneid*. Is this simile original because of the way it transforms its Homeric model? Or because it begins a clearly “Homeric” epic with a simile that lacks a Greek antecedent and refers instead to Roman history and oratory? By posing these questions in arresting forms that resist easy answers, the first simile in the *Aeneid* encapsulates the aesthetic outlook of the entire poem.

Works Cited

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