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Similes Within Virgil’s *Aeneid*

Virgil’s *Aeneid*, which details the journey of Aeneas, the mythical original founder of Rome, utilizes a multitude of similes when describing character’s actions, their personalities, and the various natural phenomena in the world. These similes serve the purpose of either expanding on the purpose of the events that take place or aiding in images in the reader’s mind during key moments within the poem. The amount of expression and imagery that is conjured by Virgil through these epic similes is vital to understanding the motives and meanings behind the characters and environments being described, as well as showing the progression of character’s personalities and ideals as the poem progresses.

Epic similes appear as early as the first 200 lines of the poem. Aeneas and his men have just escaped the sacking of Troy and are on the first leg of their journey towards the founding of Rome when a massive storm threatens to cut their lives short at sea. Eurus and Zephyr, summoned by Juno, call forth strong winds and large waves, which in turn angers Neptune who begins calming the storm. As Neptune strides across the sea, calming the roiling waves, he is compared to a righteous man in a riot:

“And just as, often, when a crowd of people

is rocked by a rebellion, and the rabble

rage in their minds, and firebrands and stones

fly fast - for fury finds its weapons - if,

by chance, they see a man remarkable

for righteousness and service, they are silent

and stand attentively; and he controls

their passion by his words and cools their spirits:

so all the clamor of the sea subsided”(Book 1, lines 209-217).

This comparison of the ocean to a violent riot, and of Neptune to a powerful, calming, righteous man who soothes the squabbling crowd begins illustrates how the God’s (with the exception of Juno) want Aeneas to succeed in making it to Italy and founding Rome. Additionally, Neptune’s calming nature is indicative of Aeneas himself, who possesses the same qualities towards his men. The violent nature of the storm paints a vivid image that describes the *furor* contained within Juno towards Aeneas. These two stances, that of calming Neptune and that of furious Juno, show Aeneas’ own uncertainty in what he should do next. Aeneas’ internal conflict is juxtaposed with his destiny to found Rome preventing him from throwing his own life away out of remorse for the loss of Troy. This theme of Aeneas having somewhat of a split position in regards to his founding of Rome is common throughout the numerous similes implemented by Virgil up until Aeneas makes up his mind on his mission at the end of Book 4.

The ambivalence expressed in the previous simile pops up again late in book 1 after Aeneas and his men make landfall at Carthage. Aeneas is seen gazing down at the bustling city, admiring its productivity and liveliness:

“Just as the bees in early summer, busy

beneath the sunlight through the flowered meadows,

when some lead on their full-grown young and others

press out the flowing honey, pack the cells

with sweet nectar, or gathering the burdens

of those returning”(Book 1, lines 611-616).

Aeneas looks longingly at the industrious and prospering Carthage, crying out “How fortunate are those whose walls already rise!”(Book 1, lines 619-620). The comparison of Carthage to a thriving beehive, with its citizens coming and going, is sharply juxtaposed with the tragic sense of loss that Aeneas must feel at that moment for his homeland of Troy, which was so recently lost to the Greeks. The simile stirs up a lot of pity for Aeneas who, just as in the previously discussed simile, is fighting two conflicting emotions within himself: that of longing for Troy, and that of duty towards the founding of Rome. Additionally, this image of a bustling beehive serves as a precursor to Rome’s own greatness and its ties to Aeneas.

Thus far, the similes examined have cast Aeneas in a state of ambivalence, showing him as floating in a state of limbo between his longing for Troy and his *pietas.* These themes are cemented in Book 4, when Aeneas is compared to a sturdy oak tree when confronted by Dido on his decision to leave her in Carthage and continue on to Italy:

“As when, among the Alps, north winds

will strain against each other to root out

with blasts - now on this side, now that - a stout

oak tree whose wood is full of years; the roar

is shattering, the trunk is shaken, and

high branches scatter on the ground; but it

still grips the rocks; as steeply as it thrusts

its crown into the upper air, so deep

the roots it reaches down to Tartarus” (Book 4, lines 606-615).

Just as a tree stretches from below the ground into the sky, so does Aeneas stretch himself between differing levels of personal desires and personal devotion, and Virgil perfectly captures this with the simile of Aeneas, comparing him to a giant tree whose roots reach down to the darkest depths of the underworld up to the highest reaches of the heavens. These polar opposites represent in Aeneas his own personal desire to stay with Dido and rule over Carthage with her (“the upper air”), as well as the definitively harder choice of leaving Dido and pushing onward to Italy and the founding of Rome. However, after Aeneas comes to the realization that his duty to his people outweighs his own personal desires towards Dido, his decision to leave becomes final. This solid decision is portrayed as the sturdy oak tree itself in the above simile, which represents Aeneas’ internal conflicts being pushed to the side in lieu of him taking up the mantle of the founder of Rome. Virgil implants the idea of a choice between desire and duty, and the difficulty of that decision for Aeneas at this point in his journey. The weight behind this decision is shown as through the steadfastness of the tree as it “grips the rocks”, showing that now that Aeneas’ mind is made up on his decision to leave Dido, not even her vicious storm of words can sway him.

Aeneas is not the sole benefactor of Virgil’s use of similes throughout *The Aeneid,* however. The enemies that Aeneas faces are constantly compared to vicious animals or forceful acts of nature when Virgil describes their actions and personalities, such as the comparison of the Greeks and of Turnus to powerful rivers and of Turnus (and Aeneas) to raging bulls. This plants in the reader's mind the barbarous nature of the Trojan’s foes, as well as the breakdown of morality in Aeneas himself.

The greatest example of this barbarous nature being applied to the enemies of the Trojans appears during the battle between the Trojans and Latins. Here, Turnus is compared to the Nile and the Ganges:

“Even as the silent Ganges

that rises high with seven tranquil streams,

or Nile when his rich flood ebbs from the fields

and he at last sinks back into his channel” (Book 9, lines 37-40)

This imagery of a flowing river when compared to Turnus appears at first to be a compliment by Virgil on Turnus’ behalf, stating that Turnus is as tranquil as the Ganges and as life-giving as the Nile. However, when considering that these rivers belong to India and Egypt respectively, the comparison takes on a more negative connotation. During Augustus’s rule of Rome, the Roman Empire expanded to assimilate India, a country that was viewed as less civilized as Rome itself. Also during Augustus’s rule, Rome declared war on Egypt, which as under the rule of Cleopatra at the time. Cleopatra denied Augustus’ rule, and carried on a lengthy affair with Augustus’s main rival Marc Antony, which instigated Augustus’ decision to declare war. Thus, this comparison of Turnus to the Ganges and the Nile in fact jabs at him, calling out his barbarous and forceful nature that was associated with Egypt and India from the Roman perspective at the time that Virgil wrote this poem. This comparison is backed even further considering that earlier in the poem, Virgil compares the Greeks invasion of the House of Priam in Troy to a river with a negative connotation, comparing their brutish actions to a “foaming river”:

“Their soldiers stream across the palace -

less furious than these, the foaming river

when it has burst across resisting banks

and boundaries and overflows, its angry

flood piling in a mass along the plains

as it drags flocks and folds across the fields.” (Book 2, lines 663-668)

This simile of the mass of Greeks surging over the desperate and defeated Trojans conjures the image of a violent, flooding river that threatens to consume all that stands in its way. When observing this simile with the comparison of Turnus to the Ganges and the Nile, Virgil illustrates the savage and uncontrollable nature of Aeneas’ enemies. Turnus is also portrayed as having quick and unpredictable anger that, much like a river that “rises high with seven tranquil streams… [before] at last sinks back into his channel”, can rise unexpectedly and wreak havoc on those that surround him before going dormant once again.

The final major simile in the poem appears in the last few lines of the final book, when Aeneas and Turnus finally face each other in battle. After clashing together, they are compared to raging bulls pit against one another:

“Just as,

on giant Sila or on tall Taburnus,

when two bulls charge together into battle

with butting brows, the herdsmen fall back; all

the flock is mute with fear; the heifers wonder

who is to rule the forest, whom the herds

must follow; and the bulls with massive force

trade wounds;” (Book 12, lines 949-956)

Here, Virgil is not only exemplifying the brutal nature of Turnus, but that of Aeneas as well. This comparison of bulls fighting effectively strips both Turnus and Aeneas of morality, portraying them as base animals capable of brutal acts of violence. This simile further establishes Turnus as one who exhibits traits that contradict those which Rome upholds, including pride, devotion, and duty. However, while Aeneas has, as stated before, been described to be in a state of emotional/dutiful limbo, he has for the most part been painted as the opposite of Turnus; one who displays the Roman ideals listed above in his actions. During the battle with the Latins, however, this view shifts dramatically. Suddenly, Aeneas comes across as a promoter of violence and one who allows emotions to fog his judgement, as seen during his mental breakdown at the death of his close friend Pallas at the hands of Turnus. The bull simile pushes this version of Aeneas to the forefront of the reader’s mind, effectively throwing all morality and *pietas* that Aeneas had portrayed up to this point out the window and instead showing Aeneas succumbing to the base desire of selfish revenge for the death of Pallas. This violent act of passion by Aeneas is not only portrayed through the simile as “two bulls charge together into battle with butting brows”, but also through the surrounding Trojan and Latin soldiers. These bystanders look on at their leaders who “with massive force trade wounds” and wonder who will come out on top, fearing for the consequences of what would happen should their leader fall. Aeneas and Turnus are thus both portrayed as putting not only their own lives in danger, but the lives of their soldiers as well, an act that directly contradicts Aeneas’ previous actions and duties meant to further the Trojan line and found Rome.

Throughout *The Aeneid*, Virgil uses similes to convey the progression of Aeneas’ character, as well as that of others that Aeneas encounters. This is seen from the very beginning of the poem as the violent storm berates Aeneas and his men on the seas, to the very end when Aeneas and Turnus battle with the ferocity and total lack of morality seen in fighting bulls. Without these epic similes, most of the meaning behind Aeneas actions, and the ideas that Virgil is trying to convey in the subtext of situations, would be lost.