

The Homeric Pretext for Vergil's *Aeneid* 7.483-502

The purpose of this talk is to identify an overlooked Homeric allusion in Vergil's *Aeneid* 7.483-502. In book seven, Vergil crafts Ascanius' shooting of Silvia's stag as the *casus belli* that begins the struggle for supremacy on Italian soil. Previous scholarship has yet to discover a Homeric model for this account (Fordyce 1977, Griffin 1979, Putnam 1998); however, based on the likeness of Silvia's stag and Ovid's tale about Cyparrisus (*Met.* 10.106-54), some have proposed that the two were inspired by a lost Hellenistic poem about Cyparrisus (Hügi 1952, Heinze 1957, Connors 1992). Nicholas Horsfall (1993) has variously offered Meleager *AP* 7.207 as a source for Silvia's intimate relationship with her stag, but has also suggested a piecemeal conglomeration with subtle hints of Cato, Meleager, Aeschylus, and Apollonius (1990).

I suggest that a Homeric pretext does indeed exist and that Vergil modeled this scene on *Od.* 10.156-63, where Odysseus kills a deer that he encounters as he descends the promontory from which he surveys Circe's island. This scene has accurately been proposed as the model for the first deer hunt in the *Aeneid* (1.180-94). This designation, however, has also likely dissuaded scholars from considering it as the model for Silvia's stag in book seven. Likewise, in detecting a Greek model, scholarly attention has been overly concerned with the deer's outlandish attributes at the expense of surrounding details. While it has encouraged the proposal of later models, this misplaced emphasis has discouraged identification with its Homeric template.

If we examine the Homeric and Vergilian passages in unison, the two have several points of contact. The basic content of both passages is clearly in agreement: a character hunts a deer conspicuous for his antlers. Homer's creation is large with tall antlers (ὑψίκερων

έλαφον μέγαν, *Od.* 10.158), while Silvia elaborately decorates her deer's antlers (*mollibus intexens ornabat cornua sertis*, *Aen.* 7.488). Both poets similarly contextualize their subjects: each stag frequents the forests, but at the exact moment of his fatal encounter, a stream has diverted his attention. Perhaps the clearest allusion in the two texts is the stags' motivation for visiting these streams. Both have come to relieve the heat of the day (*aestus...levaret*, *Aen.* 7.495; δὴ γάρ μιν ἔχεν μένος ἡελίοιο, *Od.* 10.160). Horsfall (2000, 332) briefly notes this similarity, but does not press the issue. There are also points of comparison surrounding the death of the two stags. Their demise is divinely motivated. Odysseus surmises that this encounter is no happenstance, but the result of some god's pity. Ascanius is wholly unaware of any divine involvement, but his hunt is engineered by Allecto, who is working on behalf of Juno. Two more subtle points pertain to the actual shooting of the stags. Both poets describe two points of impact on their victim (*perque uterum...perque ilia*, *Aen.* 7.499 ; κατ' ἄκνηστιν μέσα νῶτα, *Od.* 10.161), and both emphasize the hunter's true shot. Homer does so with the adverb ἀντικρὺ (*Od.* 10.162), while Vergil's Allecto steadies Ascanius' hand to guide his shot (*nec dextrae erranti deus afuit*, *Aen.* 7.498). Finally, the poets personify the deer in their deaths. Homer's stag falls dead in the dust, moaning (μακόν, *Od.* 10.163), while Silvia's groaning stag returns to the stables, his wailing inciting the Latins to war (*Aen.* 7.501-02).

An examination of these texts in detail highlights their correspondence, making *Od.* 10.156-63 an excellent candidate as the Homeric model for Vergil's scene. As Wendell Clausen (2002, 37) suggests, in the tradition of Hellenistic poetry, Vergil likes "to imitate two, or even more, poets simultaneously, or to add to his imitation of one poet from another." The hard work of past scholars and the identification of this Homeric pretext lend credence to such a comment. We now have not only potential later Greek models for Silvia's stag, but also its

Homeric example, allowing us to appreciate more fully Vergil's selection of details for 7.483-502 and how he elaborates upon his predecessors' works.

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