

Sea-Storm Openings in Roman Epic

This paper will examine the significance of the sea-storm episodes found in the openings of several Roman epic poems and the ways in which this trope has evolved from earlier Greek epics, particularly the *Odyssey*. In a series of case studies of various epic poems, the symbolism of the sea will be taken into account, particularly the positive and negative connotations that the author assigns to the sea, and how these connotations and descriptions compare with those of other epics. The role of this trope as a method of beginning an epic will be considered for how it is used uniquely in the Roman tradition compared with its predecessors in the Greek tradition.

The symbolism of the sea within Roman poetry and the ways in which various authors have viewed it was covered by Mona Hodnett in her 1919 article, “The Sea in Roman Poetry.” Hodnett provides a good overview of how some Roman poets viewed the sea, but the scope of the article is quite broad, and she gives little attention to any epic poets besides Vergil. Maria Pilar Garcia Ruiz more recently expanded upon Hodnett’s article to discuss specifically the connotations of the word *aequor* in Vergil (Ruiz 2014). These articles help to establish the perspectives of Vergil on the sea, and this paper will expand upon these by applying this perspective to the opening of the sea-storm and Juno’s wrath specifically, as well as how other epic poets share in Vergil’s perspective. This paper intends to connect these themes with the historical background of Roman epic, especially building upon the work of Matthew Leigh, who has argued for the importance of Rome’s naval engagements in the First Punic War in shaping early Roman epic (Leigh 2010). This paper will also consider Andrew Zissos’ work on the importance of the sea-storm within Book I of Valerius Flaccus’ *Argonautica* (Zissos 2006). Mark Morford has written on the sea-storm in Book V of Lucan’s *Bellum Civile*, and his work will be

considered in this paper in order to compare Lucan's sea-storm to the sea-storms which appear in the other mythological epics (Morford 1996).

Because this paper is meant to examine the place of the sea-storm opening within Roman epic as a whole, it will require an examination of several different epics. Vergil's *Aeneid* will be a particular point of focus, as it contains one of the earliest surviving examples of such an episode in Roman epic, and it would be emulated repeatedly by later epic poets. The story of the flood in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is arguably part of this same trope, and so its significance will also be examined. Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica* will be important as well, since maritime themes play an important role throughout the epic on account of its subject matter. Even epics that lack a standard sea-storm episode in their first book, such as Lucan's *Bellum Civile*, will be considered for the ways in which they could have potentially drawn inspiration from this trope and the significance of the placement of these episodes in later books. Book V of the *Odyssey* will also be an important source in this paper for the ways in which it influenced Vergil and other Roman epic poets.

Overall, with these poems considered, a picture of the importance of the sea-storm episode and how it plays uniquely within the scope of the Roman epic specifically can be made. Roman epic poets drew significant inspiration from Homer and Hellenistic-era epic poets, but certain tropes and themes seem to have been presented in Roman poetry uniquely from how these earlier predecessors presented them. With this considered, it would be unsurprising if the choice to introduce an epic poem with such a scene differently from earlier Greek poems was intentional.

Works Cited

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