Translating the Names of Winds in the *Aeneid* and the Limits of Metonymy

Since at least the time of Servius, commentators on the *Aeneid* have often suggested that Vergil uses the name of a specific directional wind (e.g. Auster, Zephyr) when all he really means is “wind.” But treating these names as metonyms forecloses other interpretative possibilities, and means that we run the risk of missing Vergil’s point. This paper will argue that we should rarely—if ever—rely on metonymy when reading or translating the use of named winds in the *Aeneid* by offering some examples of where such an approach has robbed a detail of nuance and thus diminished our understanding of a scene.

Numerous passages in Book 3—which contains the bulk of the Trojans’ sailing—demonstrate Vergil’s care in using the winds’ names, and these unequivocal examples provide support for reexamining passages where commentators have generally argued for metonymy. For instance, when the Trojans leave the Stophades, we are told that the south wind (*Noti*) is blowing, which is desireable because the Trojans sail north (3.268–9). Similarly, the Trojans sail northwest from Buthrotum, and Helenus declares that he does not wish to delay them while the south wind (*Austros*) is blowing (3.480-1). Both uses show that Vergil refers to the correct wind for those particular parts of the voyage.

Because other such references are not as straightforwardly clear, they have been written off as metonymy. For example, when the Trojans arrive at Thrace and attempt to found a colony, they find the land polluted by the metamorphosed corpse of the murdered Polydorus. Vergil expresses the Trojans’ desire to leave by twice referring to *Auster* being blowing (*Aen*. 3.60–1, 69–71), a detail that has led ancient and modern scholars (e.g. Servius, Perkell, Possanza) to fall back on metonymy because the Trojans are going to sail south. But the Trojans’ willingness to sail south and thus against the south wind shows in just how much of a hurry they are to leave

Thrace. While it was possible to sail against the wind, it was difficult, and to be avoided when possible (Casson, Taub). To translate *Auster* in these cases as simply “wind” is to miss Vergil’s point in using this wind’s name twice in the space of ten lines.

The other book dominated by winds is the first book, because of the storm that sends the Trojans to Carthage, and many of the uses of named winds in this book have been treated as metonyms. For example, the first reference to a named wind in the poem comes when Juno visits Aeolus’ kingdom, “a place that is “teeming with raging Austers” (*loca feta furentibus Austris*, 1.51), a reference that is generally treated as metonymic, since Aeolus’ kingdom houses all of the winds. But the choice of specific wind is important for two reasons: 1) along with Eurus, Auster is the defining wind of the storm to come, and 2) the reference to the wind most associated with storms foretells what is to come. The raging Juno (as Feeney notes, Juno/Hera is the goddess of wind) has her anger matched by the stormy south wind that will soon be unleashed on the Trojan fleet. Similar care in the choice of names is evident in the next reference to winds, when Eurus, Notus (=Auster), and Africus all blow during the storm. All three winds are associated with storms, and their simultaneous appearance highlights the extreme and divine nature of the storm. Vergil’s lone reference to *Africus*, the southwest wind, is also proleptic of where the storm will soon deposit Aeneas and his men (Della Corte).

Not all of Vergil’s uses of winds, however, are so readily explained, and it is difficult to tell where to draw the line on metonymy (Labate). But refusing to fall back on metonymy in these and other cases should embolden us to confront the more difficult uses, too, and encourage us to be better critics. In turn, teaching our students not to be content with such simplified answers will make them better readers, too.

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