

Similes in the *Aeneid* — How to Count Them

Many fine studies of similes in Vergil have been published within the past hundred years, of which I will mention only three here: In 1921 Eliza G. Wilkins published three articles identifying similes in Homer, Apollonius and Vergil; R. Rieks discussed Vergil's similes in a long examination in 1981; and Deborah Beck recently analysed the nature of similes in Homer and Vergil (2014). Many others could be cited. My goal is to examine one small aspect of this topic: the identification and enumeration of similes in Vergil's *Aeneid*. In referring to similes or listing them, most commentators include the lines of the entire passage. Thus in Book 5, for example, Rieks refers to the passage beginning at 519 and ending 14 lines later (532) as a simile comparing Acestes' arrow to a shooting star. But the actual simile takes only a verse and a half (527-28: "as often flying stars, unloosed from the sky, speed across and drag their hair" - *caelo ceu saepe refixa / transcurrunt crinemque volantia sidera ducunt*). This difference produces some exaggeration in the calculation about how many lines are devoted to the thirteen similes in this book. Also the total number of similes in the *Aeneid* provided by scholars differs widely from 101 (Beck) to 163 (Wilkins). My calculation is 137: 97 "scene" similes and 40 short clauses and phrases.

In analyzing the text of similes as distinct from the verses of the surrounding context, we come to an interesting conclusion. Traditionally (ever since the lecture of I. A. Richards in 1936) the main parts of a simile have been called *tenor* and *vehicle* (an odd choice of terms): Acestes' arrow [*tenor*] is like [*prothesis*] a shooting star [*vehicle*]. Sometimes a concluding word (*thus*) or phrase (*even so*) is added, which I have named an *apothesis*. (Beck calls them "thus" words). In Vergil the arrow is described as catching on fire as it soars through the clouds and then vanishing in the wind (525-27). Only then comes the figurative comparison which we call a

simile. Thus the simile has a life of its own, attached to a context which Vergil probably had composed before creating the simile. (We cannot know this.) At any rate, the *vehicle* is the crucial part of the simile; the *tenor* would remain even if the simile itself were omitted. Therefore it seems appropriate to make this distinction as we talk about similes.

Furthermore, brief similes are often not considered in scholarly calculations even though there may be several in every book. Scholars rightly distinguish between 'epic' similes and shorter versions, but the overall listing ought to include even short similes. Two other aspects of studying similes will be discussed here: (1) distinguishing figurative similes from literal comparisons and (2) recognizing similes that do not begin with the usual *protheses* (*velut* and *ceu*), such as the spear in Book 12 (923) that *flies like a black whirlwind* (*volat atri turbinis instar*) or the boat in Book 10 (248) that sailed *faster than a javelin* (*ocior et iaculo*).

Similes may be considered added features to the narrative, since they appear to be removable with only minor changes needed in the text. (The majority consist of complete hexameters of two-four verses.) Vergil varies their use with ingenuity. A good example may be found in the two figures near the end of Book 12: one a simile and the second a literal transformation (856-60). First *the Dread One* flies to earth *like an arrow* (856: *non secus ac . . . sagitta*), described in the next three verses; then she changes her shape into that of a small bird that perches at night on tombs and in this form (865) the fiend torments Turnus. Vergil could have expressed this also as a simile but chose to make it part of the narrative.

In preparing this paper I have made a complete compilation of similes in the *Aeneid* (about 40 pages) consisting primarily of the verses that contain the actual comparison; also an abbreviated chart like that in Rieks (four pages). My handout will have an example or extract from each.

Bibliography

Beck, Deborah. (2014) "Simile Structure in Homeric Epic and Vergil's *Aeneid*," *Between Orality and Literacy: Communication and Adaptation in Antiquity*, ed. Ruth Scodel, 244-288.

Rieks, R. (1981) "Die Gleichnisse Vergils," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* 2.31, 2, 1011-1110.

Wilkins, Eliza G. (Apr. 18, 1921) "A Classification of the Similes in Vergil's *Aeneid* and *Georgics*," *The Classical Weekly* 14, 170-174.