

HOMERIC ECHOES IN VALERIUS FLACCUS' *ARGONAUTICA*

THE purpose of this article is to illustrate through representative examples the principal ways in which Valerius Flaccus borrowed from Homer. Earlier articles¹ examined Valerius' attitude towards Apollonius and his debt to Virgil. While not nearly as numerous as the Virgilian echoes, those from Homer are unmistakable, deliberate, sometimes erudite, or with a subtle twist. A convenient classification of them may be into (a) verbal usages, (b) situations, (c) similes. Although the last merges with the previous category, it deserves separate treatment, being greatest in size as well as complexity.

(a) VERBAL USAGES

Arg. 6. 689: *domus imperfecta* is Valerius' rendering of *δόμος ἡμιτελής* (*Il.* 2. 701), the adjective in both cases being tantamount in meaning to 'widowed and childless'. The phrase occurs in a similar context in both poets (the death of Protesilaus in Homer, of Caicus in Valerius). *Coniunx miseranda . . . / linquitur* (688-9), while less vivid than the original *ἀμφιδρυφῆς ἄλοχος . . . ἐλείπειτο* (700), proves beyond a doubt that Valerius had this Homeric passage in the forefront of his mind. His own distinctive addition is *primo . . . cubili* (689), making Caicus' death the more pathetic since he was newly wed.

Arg. 6. 340: Gesander's spear is *Edonis nutritum . . . uentis*, which is intended to be not just a local reference, but a translation of Homer's *ἀνεμοστρεφές ἔγχος* (*Il.* 11. 256), allusive enough in itself. The weapon has been nurtured by the wind in the sense that the tree from which it was made was toughened through being swayed by the wind.

Arg. 2. 580: *ueteris . . . Ili* (cf. *Il.* 11. 166 "Ιλου . . . παλαιού). Here Valerius follows Homer in an erudite distinction between Ilus, son of Dardanus, and Ilius, son of Tros, two generations further down the line. It is noteworthy that in both poets the hero's tomb is being passed.

Arg. 1. 561-2: *robur / Herculeum* is presumably not just another inversion of adjective and noun, but an echo of *βίην 'Ηρακληείην* (e.g. *Od.* 11. 601, where also, as it happens, the hero is the object of a verb of perception.)

Arg. 6. 570-1: *nec reddita caro / nutrimenta patri, breuibus<que> ereptus in annis*. At the death of Helix Valerius recalls the Homeric idea of a son repaying the debt owed for his nurture,² closely echoing Homer's words and construction (cf. *Il.* 4. 447-9 οὐδὲ τοκεῦσι / θρέπτρα φίλοις ἀπέδωκε, μινυνθάδιος δέ οἱ αἰὼν / ἐπλεθ'). In both poets the author of the hero's destruction is identified in a similar way: cf. *ἵπ' Αἴαντος μεγαθύμου δουρὶ δαμέντι* (479) and *Nestoris hastae / immoritur* (569-70).

Arg. 5. 540: *namque uirum trahit ipse chalybs* is a literal translation of the Homeric saw *αὐτὸς γὰρ ἐφέλκεται ἄνδρα σίδηρος* (*Od.* 16. 294; 19. 13), but Valerius has given it an original twist. In Homer it refers to the ruffianism of

¹ *C.Q.* N.S. xiii (1963), 260-7; xiv (1964), 267-79; xv (1965), 104-20.

² Cf. *gestamen et illius aevi* (6. 649) for another Homeric idea (*Il.* 5. 303-4; 12.

447-9; *Aen.* 12. 899-900), namely that man's physical strength has declined since heroic times. Yet here Valerius' expression shows striking independence and conciseness.

men, in Valerius to their heroism. Telemachus is told by Odysseus to say that he has removed the arms because their presence might cause a brawl among the suitors; Aeetes uses the saw in an appeal to Jason to take up arms on his behalf.

(b) SITUATIONS

Arg. 5. 378–90: The situation of a hero arriving in a foreign land and addressing an unknown princess inevitably recalls Odysseus' speech to Nausicaa (*Od.* 6. 149–85).¹ Indeed we have here the most sustained Homeric imitation in the whole *Argonautica*, with marked resemblances in expression and sense: the suppliant hero wonders whether the girl, whom he addresses as princess, is mortal or a goddess; he likens her to Artemis (Diana) should she be a goddess, but if she is mortal, then her parents are deemed happy in having such a daughter, and her future husband, too, is greatly to be envied. In Homer this is just a courtly address to be taken, if not at face value, then as a piece of gentle flirtation. But in applying these words to Medea Valerius has given them a grimly ironic twist and incorporated them in a whole series of veiled references to the impending catastrophe.²

Arg. 6. 621–30: Jupiter's grief at the imminent death of a son and his temptation to spare him is a theme taken from *Il.* 16. 431–61. Only the situation and the thought are derived from Homer; verbal similarities are slight (cf. ὦ μοι (433) and *ei mihi* (624) at the beginning of Jupiter's speech). In the Homeric version he asks Hera whether he should remove Sarpedon from the field of battle, and she argues at length that a special favour to his own son would anger the gods whose sons were fighting. Valerius compresses the thought of both these speeches into a brief soliloquy in which Jupiter reasons in precisely the same way.

Arg. 2. 82–91: In explaining Vulcan's connection with Lemnos Valerius gives a brief factual summary, the matter of which recalls two widely separate and emotionally charged passages of the *Iliad*. In a threatening speech to Hera Zeus reminds her of her suspension in mid air (15. 18–24) with a view to deterring her from further mischief, and at 1. 590–4 Hephaestus, in professing helplessness against Zeus, recalls how he was thrown down to Lemnos on an earlier occasion when he had tried to aid Hera. In his narrative passage Valerius does convey the grimness of the punishments inflicted on the two gods, while naturally not reproducing their emotional reaction.

Arg. 3. 707–14 is an interesting example of Valerius' restoring a passage to its Homeric context, so to speak, while borrowing heavily from Virgil (*Aen.* 12. 206–11) in his details and choice of words. In *Il.* 1. 234–44 Achilles swears by his staff that one day the Greeks will miss him and that Agamemnon will regret having scorned him. When Latinus in Virgil pledges peace in Italy he repeats the idea in Achilles' oath that the staff by which he swears will never sprout again. Apparently embarrassed by the coincidence of Latinus' having a staff, Virgil has added an apologetic parenthesis (206): *dextra sceptrum nam forte gerebat*. Valerius harks back to Homer in making the oath refer to the heroes' future regrets at having treated a comrade with scorn—Telamon is arguing against sailing away without Hercules (cf. 240–1 ἦ ποτ' Ἀχιλλῆος ποθῇ

¹ Cf. also *Aen.* 1. 326–34, although Valerius was obviously more aware of the Homeric passage.

² For a detailed discussion of this *leitmotiv* see *C.Q.* n.s. xv (1965), 109.

ἔξεται νῆας Ἀχαιῶν / συμπάντας, 243-4 σὺ δ' ἔνδοθι θυμὸν ἀμύξεις / χρώμενος ὃ τ' ἄριστον Ἀχαιῶν οὐδὲν ἔτεισας, and 713-14 *Herculeas iam serus opes spretique uocabis / arma uiri*). But it is Virgil that Valerius echoes most closely in individual words (cf. *fronde(s)*, *umbras*, *matre* in both poets). In substituting a spear for a staff he surpasses Virgil in verisimilitude, perhaps inspired by Idas' oath of loyalty in Apollonius (1. 466).

(c) SIMILES¹

Arg. 3. 465-8 is a comparatively rare instance of Valerius' adopting a Homeric simile little changed and in a like situation. The return of the Argonauts' good spirits after the obsequies for Cyzicus is likened to the reappearance of light after Jupiter has dispelled a cloud from a mountain top. Homer uses an almost identical simile (*Il.* 16. 297-302) for the relief of the Greeks on saving their ships from the flames. The verbal as well as the structural correspondences within the simile are very striking: cf. ὥς δ' ὅτ' . . . / κινήσῃ . . . στεροπυγέρετα Ζεὺς and *Iuppiter . . . ceu . . . / cum pepulit mouitque; ἀφ' ὑψηλῆς κορυφῆς ὄρεος μέγαλοιο / . . . πυκινὴν νεφέλην* and *urgentem . . . summa Ceraunia nubem / . . . iugis*; ἔκ τ' ἔφανε πᾶσαι σκοπιαὶ καὶ πρόωνες ἄκροι / καὶ νάπαι and *fulsere repente / et nemora et scopuli*; οὐρανὸθεν δ' ἄρ' ὑπερράγη ἄσπετος αἰθήρ and *nitidusque reducitur aether*. Such close imitation is not quite unique in Valerius,² who, let it be stressed, was normally eclectic.

Arg. 6. 631-5 is the best instance of Valerius' conflation of ideas without verbal similarities. The havoc caused by Colaxes rushing into battle is likened to that of a deluge sweeping away rocks and forests until it loses its force and forms a new river. This simile needs to be studied alongside *Il.* 13. 136-46 and *Aen.* 2. 494-9 and 12. 684-90. The four passages have in common the central idea of the similarity between the onrush of heroes and some natural upheaval, a deluge in *Arg.* 6 and *Aen.* 2, the course of a dislodged boulder in

¹ It is clear that the Homeric influence is stronger in Valerius' similes than in any other aspect of his work. A very high proportion of them are to some extent Homeric, but as it is so often impossible to state dogmatically whether Valerius is following Homer or Virgil, I offer no statistics on this point. However, the following more general statistics may be of interest for a comparative study of similes in classical epic. Valerius has 126 similes in his 5,590 lines. The similes have an average length of just over 2 lines, and they arise from 100 different contexts. Of the 126 similes 48 are taken from inanimate nature, 31 from mythology, 26 from animate nature, and 21 from ordinary human activity. Of the 100 contexts embellished with similes 51 have as their subject-matter emotions, 27 actions, and 22 are natural descriptions. (Where emotions and actions were combined I have selected what seemed to be the essential point.)

² In 5. 304-8 Valerius borrows from *Il.* 10. 5-8 not only the physical details of the storm to which his hero's perplexity is likened but even translates the metaphor

πολέμοιο μέγα στόμα verbatim as *magna ostia belli*. However, a comparison of *Arg.* 6. 708-16 and *Il.* 17. 51-8, which it follows closely, reveals one significant alteration: in Valerius the dead hero's locks, now drenched in blood, had been tended not by himself or some unknown attendant, as in Homer, but by his mother. Effective in itself, this additional touch of pathos also adds point to the ensuing simile. In it one is, after all, expected to pity the cultivator's blighted hopes rather than the uprooted olive. Finally, a protest against Mozley's judgement (pp. xvi and xvii of V.F. in Loeb) that 6. 358-60 is 'original to quaintness, even to transgression of good taste'. In likening the heroes tugging at Canthus' body to slaves stretching a bull's hide, Valerius has merely abridged *Il.* 17. 389-93. He has been frankly Homeric and in the process has invested Canthus with the aura of a Patroclus (cf. also *Arg.* 3. 323 and *Il.* 6. 429-30, where the echo of Andromache's farewell to Hector ennobles Clite for the reader and makes her grief more tragic).

Il. 13 and *Aen.* 12. The main point of contact between the Homeric and the Valerian passages is not the description of the upheaval, which receives little stress in Homer, but rather its cessation.¹ The onrush of Hector comes to a sudden end when he runs into a mass of Achaeans, just as a boulder stops rolling when it reaches level ground. Valerius has deepened the significance. The end of the deluge represents Colaxes' imminent death, not just the end of his wild sally. Of the deluge Valerius says *bacchatus . . . / frangitur . . . deficit* (634-5), of Colaxes *in extremo . . . emicat aeuo* (636). For his description of the actual havoc Valerius borrows some features from Virgil. The change from rock to deluge recalls the *Aen.* 2 simile, in which tilled fields are flooded, as in Valerius. But something is owed also to *Aen.* 12: cf. *silvas . . . inuoluens secum* (688-9) and Valerius' *nemorumque . . . ruinas* (633). It is noteworthy, too, that in all four similes the cause of the disturbance has been personalized, and that Valerius is much closer to Virgil than to Homer at this point: cf. Homer ἀναιδέος . . . πέτρης (139); Virgil fertur . . . furens (2. 498) and improbus (12. 687); Valerius *bacchatus* (634).

Arg. 6. 346-7 compares Telamon guarding Canthus' body to a lion protecting its cubs. *Il.* 17. 133-6 uses the same idea where Ajax guards the dead Patroclus. While the general idea is borrowed from here, Valerius has eliminated Homer's description of the lion's physical reaction² and taken the detail that the lion is trapped from *Il.* 12. 42-4 or *Aen.* 9. 551.

Arg. 6. 353-6 likens the fight over Canthus' body to a contest for supremacy between the winds, just as at *Il.* 16. 765-9 the Trojans and Achaeans fighting around Cebriones are compared to contending winds. But in Valerius' simile the emphasis is very much more on the outcome of the struggle (i.e. which wind should eventually reign supreme), while in Homer it is on the immediate devastating effect. Valerius' elaboration is thus his own, yet the original idea is plainly Homeric. A further point to be made here is that Valerius had in mind also two Virgilian similes of contending winds (*Aen.* 2. 416-19 and 10. 356-9), the context in both cases being a battle, not as in Homer and Valerius a fight specifically over a dead body. In the subject-matter of his simile Valerius has remained as independent of Virgil as of Homer, but verbal echoes suggest that both Virgilian passages were at the back of his mind: cf. *Arg.* 6. 353-4 *magno . . . turbine sese / . . . frangunt . . . uenti* and *Aen.* 2. 416-17 *aduersi rupto . . . turbine uenti / configunt*; *Arg.* 6. 354 *ipsius Aeoliae . . . in limine* and *Aen.* 10. 355-6 *limine in ipso / Ausoniae* (just before the simile of the winds); the three-membered anaphora with *nubila* in the centre at *Arg.* 6. 355-6 *quem pelagi rabies, quem nubila, quemque sequatur / ille dies* and *Aen.* 10. 358 *non ipsi inter se, non nubila, non mare cedit*; and just after Valerius' simile (6. 356-7) we have *obnixa uirum sic comminus haeret / pugna* echoing from within Virgil's simile (10. 359) *anceps pugna diu, stant obnixa omnia contra*, and perhaps also *haeret* from 10. 361.

Instances could be multiplied, but little further light would be cast on Valerius' method. Cases of slavish imitation are exceptional. At his best

¹ Cf. *Arg.* 8. 32-5, where the simile likening Medea to a frightened dove is presumably inspired by *Il.* 22. 139-42. But Valerius has altered the emphasis, which in Homer is much more on the hawk's eagerness for a kill. In *Aen.* 11. 721-4 Virgil's sole pre-

occupation is with the gruesomeness of the killing.

² He seems to have it in mind in a different passage: cf. *Il.* 17. 136 πάν δέ τ' ἐπισκύνιον κάτω ἔλκεται ὅσσε καλύπτων and *Arg.* 1. 758 *rictuque genas et lumina pressit*.

Valerius is curiously Virgilian in his way of fusing sources and integrating them into his own context. An acknowledgement of his success *in minutiis* does not imply, however, that his poem viewed as a whole gives evidence of a Virgilian felicity in making a new fabric out of borrowed strands.

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