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## Vergilian Renovation: Diomedes Quelled

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## Vergilian Renovation: Diomedes Quelled

Lucy Campbell '25

Ambo animis, ambo insignes praestantibus armis  
hic pietate prior. Coeant in foedera dextrae,  
qua datur; ast armis concurrant arma cavete.’  
Et responsa simul quae sint, rex optime, regis  
295 audisti et quae sit magno sententia bello.”  
Vix ea legati, variusque per ora cucurrit  
Ausonidum turbata fremor: ceu saxa morantur  
cum rapidos amnis, fit clauso gurgite murmur  
vicinaeque fremunt ripae crepitantibus undis.

Both were renowned in courage and preeminent in arms, and this one (Aeneas)  
Was marked first with piety. May you join him in a contract with your right hand  
As it is given, but beware meeting his arms with (your own) arms.  
*Optime* king, you have heard the response just as it was and what the thoughts of the king are  
concerning this great war.  
Scarcely the ambassadors (had said this), when a changing (i.e. diverse) roaring sound rushed  
through the troubled Ausonian faces  
Just as when rocks delay a rushing stream, and there is a murmur from the (churning of the)  
closed off whirlpool  
And the nearby banks roar with rattling waves. (*Aeneid* 11.291-9)

In his commentary on *Aeneid* 11, Nicolas Horsfall points to the image of a whirlpool as a rare example of a Vergilian simile without a Homeric or Apollonian analogy.<sup>1</sup> However, when considered in light of *Iliad* 5, this simile is a typical example of Vergilian renovation. He takes an image once associated with Diomedes in Homeric tradition, and adds an element that harnesses the power of the original and directs it towards a new purpose. Most crucially, he proves that the establishment of Rome is in agreement with fate.

Besides Andromache and Aeneas, Diomedes is the only human main character from the *Iliad* who also plays a large role in the plot of the *Aeneid*.<sup>2</sup> For most of the Roman epic, his character is consistent with the reader’s existing notion of Homeric tradition. For example, in Aeneas’ first speech, he wishes that he had died by the hand of Diomedes in Troy. By identifying

Diomedes as the mightiest of the Greeks (*Danaum fortissime*, 1.96), Vergil acknowledges Diomedes' reputation as a warrior capable of killing even Aeneas had it not been for the intercession of his divine mother.<sup>1</sup> The simple reference to Diomedes' might carries a flood of associations to the many similes that describe him in the *Iliad*.

In a particularly vivid image in *Iliad* V, Diomedes is described as a “swiftly flowing” river (*ὄκα ῥέων*, 5.88). He bursts unrestrained across the plain of the battlefield, slaughtering so explosively that he is not able to be differentiated as a Greek or a Trojan (5.84-86). He is a force of battle and an icon of bloodshed even at the expense of ordering his destruction towards some structured purpose. The simile is made more vivid by describing the river as “swollen from rain and melted snow” (*χειμάρρω*, 5.88). The thawing remnants of winter charge up the river so that it is released all the more powerfully. The sudden release of stored up force emphasizes how unbounded Diomedes' path is.

Vergil's callback to this Homeric description of the battlefield of Troy plants an image of Diomedes that is later overturned in *Aeneid* 11. After envoys deliver a message from Diomedes, troubled murmurs rush through the assembly (11.296-7). The sound is compared to that of a “rapid river” (*rapidos amnis*, 11.28). The Oxford Latin Dictionary defines the adjective *rapidum* as “(of rivers, etc.) flowing so violently as to carry along anything in its path, strong-flowing.” This adjective succinctly references the power and intensity once attributed to Diomedes' ruthlessness. Furthermore, the placement of this adjective directly after a scene expressing Diomedes' concerns confirms that the image is a direct reference to Homer's simile. Finally, in his commentary on *Aeneid* 11, Horsfall points out that it is “striking and unusual” that just over

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<sup>1</sup> Grummond (1967) 2.

one line of text receives almost three lines of simile description.<sup>2</sup> Vergil is drawing special attention not only to this scene, but also to this particular choice of simile.

In his analysis of *Aeneid* 3, Ralph Hexter explores how Vergil “revisits [a] particular spot of Homeric landscape and revises the original, thereby showing us, from within the microcosm of the poem, what true renovation is.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in *Aeneid* 11, Vergil does not just reuse a Homeric simile, but rather reframes and alters it in order to create something new while still taking advantage of existing tradition. For example, in the *Iliad*, Homer gives special attention to the “dams” (γεφύρας, 5.88), which the river completely “scatters” (ἐκέδασσε, 5.88). These bridges were built for the purpose of holding back water and yet are completely ineffectual in the face of the rivers’ power. In the *Aeneid*, however, the sound of the river is produced because rocks restrain it (11.297). The power of the river has not diminished, but the reader is introduced to the idea that it can in fact be controlled.

Vergil builds further on this image by describing the river in relation to “enclosed spaces” (*clauso*, 11.298) and “closeby banks” (*vicinae ripae*, 11.299). It rushes, still powerful, but only within these strict boundaries. This is in definitive contrast to Homeric tradition in which the fences of the threshing floors, built specifically to keep water out, did not hold back the flood (5.90). While once the landscape was crushed “under” the force of the river (ὄπ’ ἀύτοῦ, 5.92), it is now the principle that channels the force. The banks “echo” (*fremunt*, 11.299) the river back into itself.

Both Homer and Vergil also identify the effects of the rampage. In the *Iliad*, the Trojan battle lines were driven about by Diomedes (5.93). The chaos of the word “κλωθέοντο”, a verb with an inherent connotation of commotion, contrasts sharply with the highly ordered battle lines

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<sup>2</sup> Horsfall (2003) 199.

<sup>3</sup> Hexter (1999) 9.

of the Trojans, the “*φάλαγγες*.” In the Homeric case, chaos prevails over regulation. In contrast, Vergil’s Diomedes orders that the Italians enter into the offered treaties and beware of war (11.292-2). All conflict is rejected in favor of ordered agreements.

Vergil enhances the effectiveness of the rocks where Homer’s dams failed. He gives control to the enclosing landscape of the banks where once Homer’s river trampled all enclosures in its path. He paints a picture of a careful, thoughtful leader where once stood a champion of carnage. The simile in the *Aeneid* does not describe Diomedes, but rather how the crowd reacts to his words. Diomedes is still the river in this analogy. The crowd is the gushing sound that is produced from a rock planted in the middle of the river. Here, fate stops Diomedes in his tracks. He is heroic enough to submit to it.

Vergil reinvents the implication that the divine is involved in the force of the river. In *Iliad* 5, the river bursts as suddenly as rain falls “from the gods” (*Διός*, 5.91). In the context of the Trojan War, Diomedes’ violence is fitting and thus fueled by the divine; Troy is destined to fall and the gods fuel his destruction. In the *Aeneid*, however, Diomedes warns that Aeneas is “preeminent in pietas” (*pietate prior*, 11.292). Vergil emphasizes that the war that Turnus is promoting is not endorsed by the gods. It is intended to be waged against Aeneas himself, who is righteously loyal to the gods. Additionally, war would challenge the future of Rome, which Jupiter has up to now continuously showed himself to be biased toward. Through all of these changes, however, the power of the river remains. By ordering the power of homeric tradition towards a new roman tradition, by taming the river, by enclosing the stream, Vergil accomplishes something entirely new.

While this enhanced simile clearly shows the larger epic theme that the creation of Rome is fated to such an extent that it actually restrains the power of mankind, it also brings up several

other important questions. When the power of the river is curtailed, a gurgling whirlpool is left. The water rushes around both sides of the rock and crashes together creating a vortex. While the chaos is now limited to within the banks, the power still remains and creates internal discord. Perhaps Vergil is continuing to hint that Rome is inherently built upon conflict. Dissension is built into its very foundation. The civil wars of his time are not a new phenomenon, but have rather been there since the very beginning. Nevertheless, the control reflects that Rome still has the ability to exist and to function. Despite internal discord, Rome can still thrive. The foundation has been established, the discord contained.

Regardless of these symbolic understandings, the emotional value of having a foremost former enemy denounce continued bloodshed can not be overlooked. Here, even the most ruthless of warriors permits Aeneas to take Italy at a pivotal moment in his journey. The Greek past gives way to the Roman future. The river is redirected.

## Endnotes

1. Horsfall (2003) 198.
2. Grummond (1967) 1.

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