

Successive Similes in Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica* 4. 682–688*

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This article tackles a string of similes in Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica* 4. 682–688. To secure the possible sources of what seems to be a successive simile, I discuss the semantic complexity of the expression *detorquet in ilia*, the syntactic function of *invito* and *cornu*, and the problem of interpretation of *Vulcanius ardor*. Building on several scholars' opinions on the meaning of *detorquet in ilia* and *coercere* (v. 683) I suggest that there are two successive actions to this simile: a man tames the bull and then yokes a pair of them; accordingly, *ilia* stands for the man's, not the bull's groin. *Invito cornu* is taken as an ablative of means. An overview of scholarly opinion on the interpretation of *Vulcanius ardor* allows it to conjecture that it is the work going on in Vulcan's forge, the activity resulting in waves and roar. The list of possible sources of the second simile is supplemented by the passage from the *Aeneid*, 3. 554–557. The phenomenon of successive similes is absent in Virgil's *Aeneid*, but can be found in Homer's *Iliad* (8. 455–483). By contriving such strings Valerius Flaccus refers both to Homer and further develops this technique in his own way.

Keywords: Roman epic poetry, Valerius Flaccus, *Argonautica*, successive similes.

As is well known, Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica* is based on a long literary tradition culminating in the *Aeneid*. Still, in some aspects it differs noticeably from its immediate models, that is both from Apollonius of Rhodes and Virgil. In particular this applies to the use of similes. Among literary devices characteristic of an epos this one is of special importance, since it allows to greatly amplify the individual mode of expression. Hence epic poets increase the quantity of *tertia comparationis*, develop the imagery, unite similes in groups etc. Typical for Valerius Flaccus' approach are similes that follow one another. The phenomenon is absent in Virgil, but can be observed in the *Iliad* (e. g. 8. 455–483) which of course is extremely rich in similes of all kind. Thus, in making suchlike groups Valerius might have followed Homer, but he seems to develop the technique in his own way.

Two successive similes woven into the Symplegades episode¹ (*Arg.* 4. 682–688) are telling. In the first one Juno and Minerva preventing the rocks from clashing together are compared to a man yoking his bulls, vv. 682–685:

... hic <Iuno> praecepsque ex aethere Pallas
insiliunt pariter scopulos: hunc nata coercet,

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¹ Informative on the Symplegades myth is: Pickard 1987, 2–5.

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*hunc coniunx Iovis, ut valido qui robore tauros
sub iuga et invito detorquet in ilia cornu.*²

“Hereupon Juno and Pallas together swiftly leap from the sky on the rocks; the daughter checks this one, the spouse of Jove — the other, as one who with mighty strength [brings] the bulls beneath the yoke, and by the unwilling horn bends them to his side.”³

The syntactic linking of *sub iuga* and the exact meaning of *detorquet in ilia* require an adequate interpretation. The latter is generally explained the way J.H. Mozley has it in a note to his translation: “the heads must be forced downwards till they are turned towards their bellies”.⁴ P. Murgatroyd conveys this idea as follows: “as *ilia* can denote groin, guts and side, the head is brought down in the process of yoking, either straight down towards the belly, or wrenched to the side”.⁵ However, the simile is likely to relate successive actions: one tames each bull to then yoke a pair of them. This finds a parallel in *Arg.* 7. 587–596: the bull is tamed, then both bulls are yoked.⁶ It’s highly doubtful, further, that *sub iuga* is linked to *detorquet*. *Detorquere sub iuga* is not attested elsewhere and yoking does not exactly match the semantics of the verb. Accordingly, one could suggest that *sub iuga* depends on the elliptically omitted predicate, this most probably being *coercet* of v. 683, with a very slight semantic shift; cf. *OLD* s. v. 5: “to keep under physical control... (*horses etc.*)”. Similarly, *cogo* in 7. 596 describes the yoking of the fire-breathing bulls: *cogitque trementes / sub iuga aena toros*.

G. Liberman in his recent translation renders yoking and turning the bull’s head as separate actions and interprets the latter as bringing down the resisting head to an angle of rotation.⁷ M. Pindemonte explained *invito detorquet in ilia cornu* in much a similar way: by turning one horn up and the other down the animal’s head is bent to the iliac area; in this posture the upper part of the neck becomes weak, so the bull is then forced to be yoked.⁸ The question is, whose *ilia* are meant. In my opinion, a bull’s groin is here out of range, being too far from the horns, whereas that of a man who stands next to the bull forcing its head to bend close e. g. to his right side turns to be entirely appropriate. The anatomic term is perhaps chosen to make the picture more accurate. In fact, holding a bull from behind by its horns and bending its head down so that its head almost touches its master’s groin is a veterinary practice for fixating the animal,⁹ and rodeo cowboys take similar actions.

Concerning the syntactical arrangement of *invito cornu*, various suggestions were made, starting from Giovan Battista Pio who as early as 1519 explained it as *retractante servitium jugi*.¹⁰ P. Murgatroyd takes *invito cornu* to be “an ablative absolute with concessive force or an ablative of instrument/means”.¹¹ G. Thilo conjectures *invitum*¹² which ob-

² Here and further on the text cited is that of Ehlers 1980.

³ Translation mine, unless otherwise stated.

⁴ Mozley 1958, 236; cf. Wagner 1805, 145; Langen 1897, 333.

⁵ Murgatroyd 2009, 327–328.

⁶ Just watching the process of yoking bulls, we can observe a clear sequence of actions, for, while being yoked, bulls do not change position of their heads.

⁷ Liberman 2003, 141.

⁸ Pindemonte 1851, 1450.

⁹ Chubar’ 1951, 56

¹⁰ Pius 1519, xc.

¹¹ Murgatroyd 2009, 327.

¹² Thilo 1863, xcii.

vously links the adjective to *cornu*. Though that would nicely suit the interpretation given above, I do not think it necessary to alter the transmitted text: the ablative of means is perfectly explainable. Note that in any case a hyperbaton emphasizes “the horn” by which the bull is grabbed.

The simile is thus constructed as a *hysteron proteron* and has two tenors and two vehicles: both the goddesses and the bull-tamers employ much force and overcome resistance. An additional semantic link between the tenor and the vehicle is *cornu* which in certain contexts applies to the rocks (= “peak”: TLL III5i). The picture is drawn from the point of view of those playing an active part. Presumably, Valerius Flaccus’ source was the Symplegades episode of the *Argonautica* by Apollonius Rhodius (2. 598–600):¹³

καὶ τότε Ἀθηναίη στιβαρῆς ἀντέσπασε πέτρης
σκαίῃ, δεξιτερῇ δὲ διαμπερὲς ὥσε φέρεσθαι.
ἢ δ’ ἰκέλη πτερόεντι μετήορος ἔσσυτ’ οἰστῶ.

“And then Athena kept the strong stone with her left hand, with her right one pushed [the ship] through to rush. And she, like a winged arrow, rushed high in the air.”

The lexical parallels are fairly evident (ἀντέσπασε — *coerces*; πέτρης — *scopulos*; στιβαρῆς — *valido*). Valerius Flaccus supplements Juno, Jason’s guardian-goddess. This is explained as a means (1) to develop the character of Jason;¹⁴ (2) to make the number of goddesses equal to the number of rocks;¹⁵ (3) to improve on the description of Apollonius in which Athena “holds one rock back with one hand and pushes the Argo through with the other”.¹⁶ Clearly, Valerius emphasizes the great difficulty of holding the rocks, stresses the force used for restraining them.¹⁷ To my mind, this alone could provide the motive for introducing the second helper. Another source is Ov. *Her.* 6. 97, pointed out by U. Gärtner,¹⁸ a verse from Hypsipyle’s letter to Jason: *Scilicet ut tauros, ita te iuga ferre coegit* (“As known, she made both the bulls and you be yoked.”) Despite easily discernable lexical overlapping, the locus is related not to the Symplegades simile but to the passage from book 7, where Jason yokes the fire-breathing bulls (the same is true of v. 10: *Isse sacros Marti sub iuga panda boves*; and v. 32: *Narrat aenipedes Martis arasse boves*).

In the second element of the simile string, 4. 686–688, the Clashing Rocks, being restrained, are compared to the “Vulcan’s heat”:

*inde, velut mixtis Vulcanius ardor harenis
verset aquas, sic ima fremunt fluctuque coacto
angitur et clausum scopulos super effluit aequor.*

“Then, just as Vulcan’s heat disturbs the waters mixing them with sands, so the depths roar and the locked space [sc. between the rocks] is compressed by the collected wave, and above the rocks the water flows out.”

¹³ Cf. Langen 1897, 333; Murgatroyd 2009, 327; Spaltenstein 2004, 368–369.

¹⁴ Murgatroyd 2009, 327: “here a second helper makes Jason seem even more a favourite of heaven”.

¹⁵ Spaltenstein 2004, 369.

¹⁶ Murgatroyd 2009, 327; see also Hershkowitz 1998, 48.

¹⁷ See Lüthje 1971, 175; Venini 1972, 365.

¹⁸ Gärtner 1994, 329.

The tenor and vehicle are related with boiling in the depths of the sea, churning water with sand, and a roar; *tertia comparationis* are water turbulence and noise. Now the simile is presented from an inverse point of view, the Symplegades playing an active part. *Vulcanius ardor* (also attested in *Sil. Pun.* 9, 608 meaning quite simply the flame of fire¹⁹) is mostly interpreted as referring either to volcanic action in general²⁰ or to underwater eruption in particular.²¹ However, the result of any eruption is the release of debris, ash and the outpouring of magma which are not mentioned here. A. Augoustakis convincingly explains *ardor* as the heat of Vulcan's forge. To be sure, the god is represented as a smith in both Roman and Greek traditions,²² and the fire is indeed indispensable for the forge just like water and sand (that creates an additional parallel between the tenor and the vehicle). Yet, in my opinion, it is the work itself that makes waves and a roar.

Several sources of the simile are discussed in literature. Augoustakis²³ cites Apoll. Rhod. 3, 1299–1304, where the fiery breath of bulls is compared to the fire in a forge:

ὥς δ' ὅτ' ἐνὶ τρητοῖσιν ἐύρρινοι χοάνοισιν
 φῦσαι χαλκῆων ὅτ' ἐ μὲν τ' ἀναμαρμαίρουσιν,
 πῦρ ὀλοόν πιμπρᾶσαι, ὅτ' αὖ λήγουσιν ἀυτμῆς,
 δεινὸς δ' ἐξ αὐτοῦ πέλεται βρόμος, ὅππότε' αἶξιν
 νεῖοθεν: ὥς ἄρα τῶγε θοῆν φλόγα φυσιώωντες
 ἐκ στομάτων ὀμάδευν...

“As when bellows from good skin move quickly near the furnace with holes, kindling a destructive fire, or hold their breath, and then a terrible noise from the fire arises when it rushes from the depths, so two bulls, exhaling the rapid flame from the mouths, roared.”

Both similes refer to the forge, and there are lexical correspondences between them (πῦρ, φλόγα — *ardor*; βρόμος, ὀμάδευν — *fremunt*; νεῖοθεν — *ima*). The idea of a noise is present, but the idea of turbulence, reflected in the verses of Flaccus, is absent in Apollonius, and the contexts are different. Another probable source is *Aeneid* 7. 462–465, cited by P. Hofman Peerlkamp and F. Spaltenstein.²⁴ It describes the wrath of Turnus:

...*magno veluti cum flamma sonore*
virgea suggeritur costis undantis aëni
exsultantque aestu latices, furit intus aquai
fumidus atque alte spumis exuberat amnis,

“As when the flame from [burning] brushwood is made with strong noise under the walls of the boiling cauldron, and the liquid boils from the heat, the steaming water rages inside and puffs high foam”.

There are a lot of parallels (*veluti* — *velut*; *flamma, aestu* — *ardor*; *magno sonore* — *fremunt*; *latices, aquai, amnis* — *aquas, fluctu, aequor; intus* — *clausum; alte* — *super*),²⁵

¹⁹ As F. Spaltenstein (2004, 369) notes, fires are also called *Vulcania pestis* (*Sil. Pun.* 7, 360) and *Vulcanius ignis* (*Stat. Theb.* 1, 508).

²⁰ Wagner 1805, 145; Gärtner 1994, 329; Nishimura-Jensen 2000, 300.

²¹ Langen 1897, 333; Liberman 2003, 281; Murgatroyd 2009, 328.

²² Picard, Constans 1892, 997–998; 1001–1002; see also Streich 1913, 8–9.

²³ Augoustakis 2014, 45.

²⁴ Hofman Peerlkamp 1843, 41; Spaltenstein 2004, 369–370.

²⁵ Peerlkamp reads *Inde, velut mixtas Vulcanius ardor aenis / Versat aquas...*; in this case there is an additional lexical parallel (*aeni* — *aenis*).

and the *tertia comparationis* are similar, but the contexts differ. W.C. Summers²⁶ argues for *Od.* 12. 237–239, where Odysseus passes through Scylla and Charybdis. Here is the passage *in extenso*, vv. 237–243:

ἦ τοι ὄτ' ἐξεμέσειε, λέβης ὡς ἐν πυρὶ πολλῶ
πᾶσ' ἀναμορμύρεσκε κυκωμένη, ὑπόσε δ' ἄχνη
ἄκροισι σκοπέλοισιν ἐπ' ἀμφοτέροισιν ἔπιπτεν:
ἀλλ' ὄτ' ἀναβρόξειε θαλάσσης ἄλμυρὸν ὕδωρ,
πᾶσ' ἔντοσθε φάνεσκε κυκωμένη, ἀμφὶ δὲ πέτρη
δεινὸν ἐβεβρύχει, ὑπένερθε δὲ γαῖα φάνεσκε
ψάμμω κυανέη...

“When she [sc. Charybdis] spewed out water like a cauldron on a strong fire, she frothed, boiling, and the foam rose to the top of both cliffs. But when she again swallowed the salty water of the sea, the whole seemed to boil inside, the rock roared around terribly, from below the ground seemed black from the sand.”

The correspondence in vocabulary is striking (πυρὶ — *ardor*; κυκωμένη — *verset*; ὑπόσε — *super*; σκοπέλοισιν, πέτρη — *scopulos*; θαλάσσης — *aequor*; ὕδωρ — *aquas*, *fluctu*; ἐβεβρύχει — *fremunt*; ψάμμω — *harenis*), the turbulence and roar are emphasized in Homer and Valerius Flaccus alike. Moreover, the contexts are similar: in both cases the action takes place at sea.

This impressive list of possible sources can be further supplemented by one more passage from the *Aeneid*, 3. 554–557, comparable to the above-cited Homer verses. It depicts the water disturbance off the coast of Sicily:

*tum procul e fluctu Trinacria cernitur Aetna,
et gemitum ingentem pelagi pulsataque saxa
audimus longe fractasque ad litora voces,
exsultantque vada atque aestu miscentur harenae.*

“Then Trinacrian Etna can be seen from the water in the distance, and we hear a strong sound of the sea, hitting the rocks and the sounds [of the waves] crashing against the coast in the distance, the waters are disturbed, and the sands are mixed with the waves.”

Again, there is a number of lexical correspondences (*fluctu*; *gemitum* — *fremunt*; *pelagi*, *vada* — *aquas*, *aequor*; *saxa* — *scopulos*; *miscentur harenae* — *mixtis harenis*). Even though Virgil's text contains no simile, the ideas of noise and waves are accentuated, and the scene, like in Homer, is the sea.

To sum up, the imagery (forge, roaring noise) and a somewhat specific vocabulary link Flaccus' simile to Apollonius; lexical crossings and *tertia comparationis* refer it to *Aeneis* 7; it displays most obvious similarities with the *Odyssey* locus and *Aeneis* 3. Consequently, there is hardly any doubt that Valerius Flaccus, at least in this simile, did not rely on any single model, but creatively used all epic sources at his disposal. The two successive similes analyzed above can be schematically presented in the following pattern (S — tenor, O — vehicle):

²⁶ Summers 1894, 34.

4, 682–685			
S ₁	Juno and Minerva	O ₁	Man
S ₂	Symplegades	O ₂	Bulls

4, 686–688			
S ₂	Symplegades	O ₃	Vulcan's forge

This makes it clear that the second simile is a continuation of the first one, since the water turbulence and the roar are the result of the Symplegades' opposition to the efforts of the goddesses. We can note the semantic variation of the vehicles: in the first simile it is an agricultural image, while in the second it is a mythological one. It is noteworthy that by using vehicles belonging to diverse semantic groups the poet does not emphasize the different qualities of the tenor (as one would expect) but adds artistic diversity to the image of the Symplegades.

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