Broken voices on the shore: a note on Aeneid 3.556

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Résumé. — L'expression fractasque ad litora voces dans l'Enéide 3.556 fait allusion à l'absence des voix des Sirènes au moment du récit où le lecteur, qui est au courant de l'imitation virgilienne d'Homère et d'Apollonios de Rhodes, s'attendrait à les trouver, à savoir près de Charybde et Scylla.

Abstract. — The words fractasque ad litora voces at Aeneid 3.556 allude to the absence of the voices of the Sirens at the point in the narrative where the reader who is aware of Vergil's imitation of Homer and Apollonius Rhodius would expect to find them, i.e. near Scylla and Charybdis.

This is Vergil's description of the sights and sounds which confront the Trojans as they sail away from the coast of southern Italy towards Sicily1. In the lines which follow (3.558-60)2, Anchises, recalling the warning of the prophet Helenus concerning the dangers of the passage between Italy and Sicily (3.410-32), associates these phenomena with Scylla and Charybdis. The phrase fractasque ad litora voces, however, has caused difficulty for commentators. The verb frangere is used in Latin both of waves and noises. With the former, the sense is the same as that of waves « breaking » in English. Here, however, we have broken voces, not fluctus or undas3. When applied to noises the verb expresses the idea of intermittent or reverberating sound4 but no exact parallel for Vergil's use of voces in describing the sound of the sea can be found. Nevertheless, it is generally agreed that Vergil is referring to the sound of waves breaking...
on a shoreline. The word *fractas* thus expresses both the breaking of the waves and the noise which results from their breaking and Williams provides a translation which attempts to express this double sense, « — and the voice of the breakers reverberating on the shore ». There remains, however, the problem of the unparalleled use of *voces* to refer to this sound. Various solutions have been proposed.

Williams, noting that this « is a very unusual use of *voces*, more so than in English », explains the usage by pointing to the personification of the sea already in the use of *gemitus* (555) and by noting the fact that musical instruments were said to have a *vox*. Both comments are correct but when taken together they fail to add up to a convincing explanation of Vergil’s choice of phrase. It is difficult to see what musical instruments have to do with waves while the argument for personification of the sea does not account in a sufficiently precise way for Vergil’s choice of the word *voces* at this particular point. It seems reasonable to accept that Vergil presents the turbulent sea as emitting a moaning sound but this neither explains nor exhausts the resonance created by the highly unusual reference to « broken voices ».

La Cerda associates the *voces* emanating from the shore with Circe’s description of Scylla at *Odyssey* 12.85-7:

\[ \text{ένθα δ’ένι Σκύλλη ναίει δεινόν λελακυια·} \\
\text{γίγνεται, αυτὴ δ’ αυτὴ πέλωρ κακόν·} \]

At 3.555-7 Vergil is indeed describing the noise made by the sea and rocks around Scylla and Charybdis but it is most unlikely that he has switched the focus of attention solely onto Scylla’s barking in line 556 when he refers to *gemitum pelagi* in line 555 and *vaia* and *aestu* in 557. It looks very much as if Vergil is here describing the sea and the rocky coast in the vicinity of Scylla and Charybdis rather than the things themselves. Furthermore, the way in which he omits any Homeric-style description of these monstrous phenomena and avoids bringing the Trojans into direct physical contact with them suggests that he would not allude to the yelping of Scylla at this point.

Knauer also looks to the *Odyssey* but to a different beast for an answer. He cites Homer’s description (12.264-6) of the approach of Odysseus towards Thrinakia as one model for the Trojans’ approach towards Sicily, the island identified from an early date with the Homeric Thrinakia:

\[ \text{δη τότ έγών ετι πόντω έών έν νηι μελαίνη} \\
\text{μυκηθμού τ’ ηκουσα βοών αύλιζομενάων} \\
\text{οίων τε βληχήν·} \]

In this view, therefore, Aeneas hears the *voces* at the shore just as Odysseus hears the bleating of the sheep there. Vergil’s techniques of imitation certainly do not exclude such

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7. P. Virgili Maronis Aeneidos libri sex priores argumentis, explicationibus et notis illustrati a Ioanne Ludovico de la Cerda Toletano e societate Iesu (Madrid, 1617) ad loc.
transformations and it is by no means unreasonable to suggest that in describing the Trojans hearing noises from the Sicilian shoreline Vergil is influenced by the fact that Odysseus and his men hear noises from the coast of Thrinakia. But this still does not suffice to explain why the word *voces* is used to refer to these noises.

Knauer\(^\text{10}\) also cites another Homeric model for 3.555f. As Odysseus approaches Scylla and Charybdis we read (Od. 12.201-2):

\begin{quote}
'Αλλ' δτε δη την νήσον έλείπομεν, αύτίκ' έπειτα
καπνόν καί μέγα κύμα ιδον καί δούπον άκουσα·
\end{quote}

By a typical fusion, two comparable Homeric passages, the approach towards Scylla and Charybdis and the approach towards Thrinakia, are imitated in Vergil's description of the approach towards that part of Sicily where Scylla and Charybdis are located. Now in terms of Homeric geography the approach towards Scylla and Charybdis involves the passage past the Sirens. This narrative pattern involving, in order of appearance, the Sirens, Scylla, Charybdis, the Planctae and Thrinakia is borrowed by Apollonius Rhodius in his imitation of *Odyssey* 12 in the fourth book of the *Argonautica* (885-981). There, Jason sails past the Sirens and Scylla and Charybdis, gets safely though the Planctae and skirts Thrinakia, clearly identified as Sicily\(^\text{11}\), in a passage which is closely modelled on Odysseus' account of his adventures\(^\text{12}\). In the corresponding section of the Trojans' voyage Vergil has Scylla and Charybdis and Sicily but no Planctae\(^\text{13}\) and, crucially, no Sirens. It thus seems reasonable to suggest that the choice of the word *voces* to describe the noises coming from the shore should be seen as an allusion to the omission of the Sirens at this point in the Vergilian narrative, the famous voices of the Sirens being hinted at by the voices of the waves. On this reading, Vergil describes the voyage towards Scylla and Charybdis in such a way as to allude to the absence of the Sirens at the point in the story where a reader with a knowledge of Homeric geography and Vergil's epic models would have expected to find them.

By the Augustan age there was already a long tradition of scholarly discussion about the geography of the *Odyssey*. The many places named in Odysseus' account of his wanderings had long been identified with many different locations dotted all around the Mediterranean and beyond. As far as the Sirens were concerned, they were generally located along the western and southern coast of Italy, although in several different places\(^\text{14}\). Vergil duly places them somewhere along the coast to the south of Cumae at the end of the fifth book of the *Aeneid* as the Trojans sail northward from Sicily. Given that he accepts this location for the Sirens in book 5, therefore, Vergil could not also include them in his account of the Trojans' voyage along the southern coast of Italy towards Sicily, Etna and Scylla and Charybdis. Hence they are there replaced by the broken *voces* sounding on the shore in what amounts to a learned footnote for the connoisseur of Homeric geography. Several pieces of evidence can be marshalled in support of this suggestion.

\begin{footnotes}
13. Vergil nowhere mentions the Planctae although he draws attention to this omission; see n. 21 below.
\end{footnotes}
One important argument is provided by the possibility that Vergil is here making use not only of Homer and the study of his geography but also of another tradition of Homeric scholarship. The Odyssean Sirens were subjected to rationalistic explanation and according to one theory their singing was said to be nothing other than the sound of waves breaking on a rocky shore and throwing back an attractive, melodious sound\(^{15}\). By using the striking image of the broken voices on the shore to evoke the sound of breaking waves Vergil shows his knowledge of this method of explaining away the Sirens' mysterious songs and a learned reader, conversant with the traditions of Homeric scholarship\(^{16}\), would have been able to spot the connection.

Nor is this the end of Vergil's learning in the passage under discussion. According to one tradition concerning the Sirens, they lived on the Sicilian coast under Mt. Etna, a version which can be traced back as far as the third century B.C. and so quite possibly known to Vergil\(^{17}\). It is unlikely to be a coincidence, therefore, when Etna is named \(\textit{turn procul e fluctu Trinacria cernitur Aetna}\) just two lines before the mention of the \textit{voces}. Once again, the learned reader who notes the proximity of \textit{Aetna} and \textit{voces} in these two lines and who is aware of the discussion concerning the whereabouts of the home of the Sirens might well remark their absence from this point in the narrative.

When Vergil finally includes the Sirens in his narrative at 5.864-71 he avoids all mention of their song. In doing so he has in mind the tradition by which the Sirens killed themselves after Odysseus succeeded in passing them by\(^{18}\). But there is also an obvious nod in the direction of rationalising exegesis as Vergil, instead of the singing of the Sirens, describes waves beating on a rocky shore\(^{19}\). The relevant verse is 5.866: \textit{tum rauca adsiduo longe sale saxa sonabant}.

The sounding rocks in the distance closely resemble the description of the scene at 3.554-5 where the words \textit{saxa} and \textit{longe} also occur. It is no doubt Vergil's use of these two different traditions concerning the Homeric Sirens which explains the fact that the melodious breaking of waves produced by rationalisation has given way to the \textit{rauca saxa} (5.866), the \textit{gemitus} (3.555) and the broken voices (3.556) left behind after Odysseus' passing\(^{20}\). Given the precedent set by

\(^{15}\) Extant sources for this approach, which include Eustathius, are all post-Vergilian: see \textit{Roscher}, vol. IV (1909-15) col. 615, s.v. \textit{Seiren} and \textit{RE} vol. IIIA,1 (1927) col. 299, s.v. \textit{Siren}, both authors doubting that this approach can be dated back to the Hellenistic period. On rationalising exegesis of the Homeric texts at an early date, however, see now D. \textit{Feeney}, \textit{The Gods in Epic : Poets and Critics of the Classical Tradition}, Oxford, 1991, general index s.v. rationalising interpretations. On Vergil's use of rationalising exegesis in describing Scylla and Charybdis see E. \textit{Kraggerud}, \textit{Aeneisstudier}, Symboles Osloenses Fase. Suppl. 22, Oslo, 1968, p. 160 n. 132.


\(^{20}\) It is worth noting here that at \textit{Juvenal} 2.111 \textit{frustra voce} is used of a shrill effeminate voice: see E. \textit{Courtney}, \textit{A Commentary on the Satires of Juvenal}, London, 1980, ad loc.
Homer and Apollonius who, to repeat, both employ the narrative pattern made up of the Sirens, Scylla, Charybdis, Planctae and Thrinakia, it would be natural for the reader of Aeneid 5 to expect the Planctae and/or Scylla and Charybdis to appear after the Sirens. Instead, Vergil omits these dangers but describes the Sirens in such a way as to recall both the Homeric and Apollonian Planctae, thereby drawing attention to the fact that these dangers are emphatically absent. The technique is exactly the same as that which he had earlier employed in describing Scylla and Charybdis in the third book. Vergil has taken a narrative, common to both Homer and Apollonius, containing the Sirens, Scylla and Charybdis and Thrinakia (= Sicily) and distributed it, in use in both books 3 and 5 of the Aeneid. In the third book he includes Scylla and Charybdis and Sicily, in the fifth book Sicily and the Sirens. In each case he describes the figures he includes in such a way as to bring to mind those he omits. This distribution of the Homeric-Apollonian model narrative is highlighted by a whole series of correspondences and similarities which link the two Vergilian episodes in which Scylla and Charybdis and the Sirens appear.

Leaving Sicily at 5.772ff, after sacrifice to the storm-gods (Tempestatibus, 772) and with Aeneas pouring wine-libations (stans procul in prora, 775), the Trojans sail northward along the coast of Italy. They turn the yard-arms (cornua, 832) from side to side and Palinurus' ship leads the fleet (princeps, 833). As they sail on, after the loss of Palinurus, they drift towards the Sirens' shore where waves beat against rocks in the distance (longe, saxa, 866) and are led to safety away from these scopulos (864) by pater Aeneas (867). Finally, they land at Cumae (Cumaram adlabitur oris, 6.2), the crossing from Sicily to Italy complete. This whole section corresponds to the description in the third book of the voyage along southern Italy towards Sicily. At 3.521ff the Trojans approach the Italian coastline. Anchises (stans celsa inpuppi — , 527) prepares wine-libations (525-6) and prays to the gods tempestatumque potentes (528). At 3.548ff, after the landing at Castrum Minervae, they sail on from Italy towards Sicily, turning the cornua (549).22 Soon they hear the sound of waves beating on a distant shore (saxa, longe, 555-6) as they sail towards Scylla and Charybdis. But with Palinurus leading the way (primus, 561) they are led to safety away from these scopulos (559) by pater Anchises (558). Finally, they arrive in the land of the Cyclopes (Cyclopum adlabimur oris, 569), the journey from Italy to Sicily complete.

These detailed similarities between the two passages show them to be intimately connected in the overall structure of the narrative of the voyage in the first half of the Aeneid.23 Within this web of links and connections, the voces near Scylla and Charybdis can be seen to be in parallel with the Sirens, who in Vergil's account have lost their voices, the only sound being that of waves beating on a lonely shore.


22. The word has this technical nautical sense only twice in the poem, here and at 5. 832.