

Discussion: The Epic Epithet: Purpose and Effect

Definition: 1 any word or phrase applied to a person or thing to describe an actual or attributed quality. 2 a characterizing word or phrase firmly associated with a person or thing and often occurring in its place, as "man's best friend" for "dog."

The definitions above indicate that epithets serve two major purposes - to *describe* a person (or thing), and to *identify* a person (or thing). Although there is sometimes an overlapping of purpose, most examples of epithets can readily be classified as providing either descriptive or identifying information. Virgil has drawn from his predecessors (particularly Homer) in his use of epithets and has employed the Latin version of many of the stock epithets found in the earlier poems. We shall briefly consider here the *purpose* and the *effect* of Virgil's use of epithets.

First we must note that Virgil chose his epithets carefully, basing their choice on the traditional qualities of the character involved (particularly gods and Greek characters), the relation of the character to the action of the poem, and metrical considerations. We must also note that Virgil, after the manner of Homer, repeats specific personal epithets numerous times.

A prominent type of epithet is one that uses an adjective and the character's name or a noun (used almost as an appositive) and the character's name. Examples include "the great Houdini" (an escape artist), the prophet Isaiah, and, from the *Aeneid*, *pius Aeneas*, *rex Aeolus*, etc.

The first example of an epithet in the *Aeneid* occurs in 1.4 - *saevae Junonis*. The "savage" here is a descriptive epithet, and one that forces the reader to anticipate Juno as a malevolent figure in the plot of the epic. Notice that no information detailing the cause for the "savage" is given until 1.19-28, but the reader is already alert.

Discussion

Think of personal epithets used today (most will refer to historical or political figures, or celebrities) such as The Great Communicator (Ronald Reagan), Der Fuhrer (Hitler), The Perfect 10 (Bo Derek), etc. Although these epithets, and most others you will think of, began as descriptive epithets, as a result of their frequent use, they can be now considered identifying epithets. Does this phenomenon characterize the epithets found in the *Aeneid*?