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# LA PAROLA DEL PASSATO · RIVISTA DI STUDI ANTICHI

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## THE METAPOETICS OF SIMILE IN HELLENISTIC POETRY \*

From the beginning of the remarkable renewal in poetic creation in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, the Alexandrian poets chose to adopt a variety of paradoxical positions. They positioned themselves within literary tradition while trying to anchor themselves in contemporary reality. They imitated their famous models while at the same time transforming them. They established generic categories while simultaneously crossing generic boundaries. They competed in subtlety almost to the point of obscurity, thus threatening the ‘readability’ of their work. In the case of hexameter poetry, which will be our primary subject here, we encounter the same set of contrary and complex approaches in relation to the main characteristics of this poetic genre.

Leaving aside the thematic choices that allow Alexandrian poets to practice the *arte allusiva* through echo of, and deviation from, the essential models that constitute the Homeric and Hesiodic *corpora*, we may observe a particular feature of those lettered and erudite poets, namely their systematic renunciation of the archaic formulae characteristic of the performance of oral poetry no longer experienced by them. Yet, at the same time, they were careful to preserve as a major generic marker, along with the use of the dactylic hexameter, the use of simile, doubtlessly because this feature allows for a subtler literary construction, the result of both written composition and careful reflection.

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Whatever the exact form that this hexameter poetry assumes, whether extended epic, hymn or *epyllion*, whether in scientific poetry or bucolic *idyll*, the use of simile of a Homeric type is a systematic constant. Indeed, this comparative practice is not exactly the same as in Homer, and one might rightly observe that in the case of Apollonius, thematic coherence between *comparanda* as well as between comparison and context is stronger than what can be seen in Homer.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, on a formal level, the simile is a stylistic ornament that marks a direct continuity between Archaic and Hellenistic poetry.

This explains, in part, why there is a substantial body of scholarship on the intertextuality in the similes of Alexandrian poetry.<sup>2</sup> For the similes constitute a textual space that is especially propitious for intertextual development. In addition to being a generic marker of hexameter poetry, the simile can enclose in itself the essence of epic poetry. By effecting a descriptive pause in the epic narrative or didactic exposition, the simile strongly

<sup>1</sup> Cf. B. EFFE, *The Similes of Apollonius Rhodius. Intertextuality and Epic Innovation*, in *Brill's Companion to Apollonius Rhodius*, ed. by Th.D. Papanghelis & A. Rengakos (Leiden, 2008), pp. 199-220: p. 200f.

<sup>2</sup> See W.D. ANDERSON, *Notes on the Simile in Homer and his Successors*, I. *Homer, Apollonius Rhodius, and Vergil*, and II. *Milton*, «CJ», 53, 1957, pp. 81-87 and 127-133; C.S. BROENIMAN, *Thematic Patterns in the Argonautica of Apollonius Rhodius. A Study in the Imagery of Similes* (Diss., Univ. of Illinois, 1989); J. CLACK, *The Medea similes of Apollonius Rhodius*, «CJ», 68, 1973, pp. 310-315; J. CODERCH SANCHO, *Las comparaciones utilizadas por Apolonio de Rodas (I)*, «Faventia», 16, 1994, 1, pp. 57-64; Id., *Diferencias y similitudes entre las comparaciones utilizadas por Apolonio de Rodas y por Homero (II)*, *ibid.*, 2, pp. 23-32; M. CUYPERS, *Formele aspecten van de vergelijking in Homerus en Apollonius Rhodius* [Formal Aspects of the Simile in Homer and Apollonius Rhodius] (MA Thesis, Univ. of Leiden, 1993); H.-P. DRÖGEMÜLLER, *Die Gleichnisse im hellenistischen Epos* (Diss., Hamburg, 1956); B. EFFE, *Tradition und Innovation. Zur Funktion der Gleichnisse des Apollonios Rhodios*, «Hermes», 124, 1996, pp. 290-312; Id., *The Similes of Apollonius Rhodius. Intertextuality and Epic Innovation*, cit. (n. 1 above); H.F. FAERBER, *Zur dichterischen Kunst in Apollonios Rhodios' Argonautica. Die Gleichnisse* (Diss., Berlin, 1932); G. MATHIEU, *Étude sur les comparaisons d'Apollonius de Rhodes* (Diss., Liège, 1931/32); N. PACE, *La similitudine nel poema epico. Omero, Apollonio Rodio, Virgilio, Ovidio, Lucano, Valerio Flacco, Stazio*, con un saggio di G. Cipriani (Bari, 2003); C. REITZ, *Zur Gleichnistechnik des Apollonios von Rhodos* (Frankfurt a.M., 1996).

introduces into the poetic discourse a particular tonality that allows for a strengthening of poetic expression and in which the surprise of analogic shift lends the way to musing on the text. Seeing that the simile is identified as a textual space with great poetic potential – and this as much as its semantic or syntactic features makes it easy to locate, and thus easy to isolate and extract from the text – it is hardly surprising that the simile becomes a privileged terrain for the exercise of literary imitation and variation.

This aspect of simile is not however the subject of my attention today. For, if intertextuality is effectively strongly present in simile composition, this, in itself, seems to me to be a more large-scale demonstration of the poetic force of similes, i.e. of the attention that the poet himself consciously brings to this poetic phenomenon. One might rightly ask oneself whether similes are not themselves equally places where the poet reveals something of his conception of poetry. We are not proposing the creation of a metapoetic reading of all the similes of hexameter poetry: this would be of course excessive. Yet we can rightly ask, given that we know that the poet accords a special attention to this poetic space as the intertextuality therein demonstrates, whether the poet does not equally use the simile to show to his reader what the poetry he composes means to him, or rather how he conceives poetry.

This metapoetic dimension is perhaps clearest in scientific poetry, in that often the simile appears to offer a real window onto another type of discourse and another reality than the one described in the poem, and to explicate scientific principle through this discourse. In contrast to epic poetry, scientific poetry is essentially descriptive and the simile does not shed *a priori* a different light on the narrative, and it suggests nothing in a proleptic way about the characters, nor does it recall through analeptic digression mythological details previous to the narrative of the text. In scientific poetic discourse, there is rather a concurrence of two descriptive types of discourse, and the poet here is not content to use similes as simple stylistic ornaments, which would be of only modest interest through the introduction of pure digressions.

Rather, the poet uses the simile to introduce, in a detached way, a second discourse that, thanks to the distraction that an opening on another reality or another imaginary realm produces, insinuates as well the sense of detachment in relation to the scientific discourse – a perspective cast on the poetry, which is, nonetheless, set in motion by the poet in the interest of his technical or scientific discourse.

I take for my first example a passage from Nicander's *Alexipharmaca*. In the first note of his treatise on poison, concerning aconite, the poet concludes with a simile, the first in the poem, evoking the poisoning symptoms this plant provokes (ls 30-35):<sup>3</sup>

ὥς δ' ὀπότε ἄγριόεσσαν ὑποθλίψαντες ὀπώρην  
 Σιληνοὶ κεραοῖο Διωνύσοιο τιθηνοὶ  
 πρῶτον ἐπαφρίζοντι ποτῶ φρένα θωρηχθέντες  
 ὄμμασι δινήθησαν ἐπισφαλεροῖσι δὲ κώλοις  
 Νυσαίην ἀνά κλιτὸν ἐπέδραμον ἀφραίνοντες,  
 ὥς οἷγε σκοτόωσι κακῇ βεβαρηότες ἄτη.

'And as when the Silenoi, the nurses of horned Dionysus, crushed the wild grapes and, having for the first time fortified their spirits with the foaming drink, were confused in their sight and on reeling feet rushed madly about the hill of Nysa, even so is the sight of these men darkened beneath the weight of evil doom'.

This simile of Nicander's is especially polished and economical, lending itself to be perfectly integrated into the scientific discourse and highlighting the characteristic symptom of this poison, feebleness in the muscles of the lower limbs that begin to wobble under the poison's effect. The poisoned victim suffers a heaviness of the head (l. 27), his vision is that of a drunkard, and this theme of drunkenness allows the introduction of the quoted image of the Silenoi, which then adds a further symptom.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Text from J.-M. JACQUES, *Nicandre. Œuvres*, III. *Les Alexipharmacaques* (Paris, 2007); trans. adapted from A.S.F. GOW & A.F. SCHOFIELD, *Nicander, The Poems and Poetical Fragments* (Cambridge, 1953).

<sup>4</sup> As JACQUES, *Nicandre*, III, cit., p. 67, observes, this is a 'perfect appropriateness' resulting from the comparison of the two *comparanda*: the behaviour of

I would rather argue that the purpose of this simile seems to extend beyond its integration into the surrounding scientific discourse. The simile first of all effectively offers the poet distended poetic space, one that is freer, where he can multiply the poetic effects allowing him to enhance the poetic treatment of his subject. Reference to the *Silenoι* here fulfils this function perfectly: verse 31 Σιληνοί κεραοῖο Διωνύσοιο τιθηνοί, with its chiasmic structure, gives a double effect of internal assonance between Σιληνοί and τιθηνοί, which enclose the verse, and κεραοῖο and Διωνύσοιο at its centre. This regularity of sound suggests a solemn tone that contrasts with the accidental drunkenness of the Silenoι and recurs in the two participles describing the behaviour of drunkards, θωρηχθέντες and ἀφραίνοντες, which produce the spondaic hexameters: this heightened frequency of spondaic verses at the heart of the simile should be understood as a cue for the reader's attention.

If the simile gives free rein to the poetic ornamentation to evolve, there is another feature of this ornamentation that merits our attention. The simile opens the technical subject to the mythological universe, which allows the poet to establish close links between scientific and epic poetry. Further, in choosing as his first comparison the figure of Dionysus to illustrate the experience of vertigo, Nicander surely is not doing so by coincidence: this is possibly a way in which he can indirectly place his own poem under the influence of the god who also favours poetic drunkenness. The Silenoι are the nurse figures of the god while at the same time they are nourished by the god's drink: they can thus be seen as representing poetry, which functions in the same way in the Homeric tradition with which Nicander identifies himself elsewhere.

In the same poem by Nicander, the second simile is also very revealing for its multiple poetic possibilities. The poet's subject here is the white lead of women's cosmetics that can be poisonous if ingested. To emphasize its characteristic white colour, the poet

the Silenoι when drunk is identical to that of the poison's victim and betrays an identical symptom (ἐπισφαλεροῖσι δὲ κώλοις).

turns to a simile, placed at the beginning of the observation on the poison (ls 74-77):

Δεύτερα δ' αἰγλήεντος ἐπιφράζευ πόσιν ἐχθρήν  
 κιρναμένην ὄλοοῦ ψιμυθίου ἢ τε γάλακτι  
 πάντοθεν ἀφρίζοντι νέην εἰδήνατο χροίην  
 πελλίσιν ἐν γρόνησιν ὄτ' εἴαρι πῖον ἀμέλξαις.

'In the second place consider the hateful brew compounded with gleaming, deadly white lead, whose fresh color is like milk that foams all over when you milk it rich in the springtime into the deep pails'.

The simile transports the subject at hand into the bucolic world, quite unexpectedly given the technical context of the poem. The simile only briefly brushes upon this rustic world, but nothing is missing, neither details of that material life, nor seasonal details, nor genuine effect. All of these bucolic details suggest a kind of innocence that is perfectly antithetical to the poison's nefarious nature. The simile has thus a significance that is both insidious and illuminating, as, by placing white lead in a context with a harmless drink like milk, it indicates the dangerous character of this poison that at first glance seems harmless.

Yet the simile at the same time takes on a poetic stature in that it is itself the occasion of inserting into the didactic discourse a very different poetic stream: the simile is a valuable poetic tool that, thanks to its analogic principle, allows experimentation *in concreto* with the porous nature of 'genres' and the traversing of generic boundaries. The simile thus takes on a far more aesthetic than technical dimension. This aesthetic dimension cannot be reduced to a question of literary genre. It should be underlined that it is an issue of colour that first evokes the image: here the issue is composed of both the pictorial and the appearance. Yet the colour (χροίην), because of the period of spring milking, is qualified by the adjective νέην, which is effectively here a *hypallage*. For it is not the colour that is 'young' or 'new', but the freshly drawn milk. This small displacement calls attention to other values that such an adjective can take here, hardly without parallels in

Alexandrian poetry.<sup>5</sup> One might also suggest that this adjective has a metapoetic value, indicating that the subject Nicander is taking on here is in some way new and that the treatment he gives it is also something of a novelty for him. The white colour of milk might thus reveal the novelty of Nicander's scientific poetry, or the novelty of his treatment that allows the use of poetic simile in a scientific treatise.

To finish here on scientific poetry, it is useful to turn also to the new Hesiod of the Hellenistic era, namely Aratus. Here I mention briefly the first simile – on Cassiopeia – that occurs in the *Phaenomena*, at ls 192-195:<sup>6</sup>

Οἷη δὲ κληῖδι θύρην ἔντοσθ' ἀραρυῖαν  
 δικλίδ' ἐπιπλήσσοντες ἀνακρούουσιν ὄχῆας,  
 τοῖοι οἱ μουνᾶξ ὑποκείμενοι ἰνδάλλονται  
 ἀστέρες.

'Like a key with which men attacking a double door barred on the inside knock back the bolts, such is the appearance of the individual stars that together comprise her'.

It is surely not coincidental that the referent in this image, which echoes a simile from *Od.* 21 (l. 47),<sup>7</sup> is a way of locking a door: the key that locks the door here might also be understood as that which opens the poetry of Aratus, founded on an invention anchored in the epic tradition of Hesiod and Homer, to which the intertext precisely points.

And, if Aratus takes care to develop this simile, it is surely to rival Homer, but also for what the simile brings to the description of the constellation. And as Aratus first notes, the light of Cassiopeia 'on the night of the full moon, only a few zigzagging stars

<sup>5</sup> See the cup Theocritus describes in *Idyll.* 1, which, reflecting its bucolic setting, is depicted as νεοτυχῆς (l. 27).

<sup>6</sup> Text from J. MARTIN, *Aratos, Phénomènes* (Paris, 1998), II, p. 242f.; trans. adapted from D. KIDD, *Aratus, Phaenomena* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 87.

<sup>7</sup> See KIDD, *Aratus*, cit., p. 253f.; MARTIN, *Aratos*, cit., II, p. 240ff.; C. CUSSET, *La Muse dans la bibliothèque: réécriture et intertextualité dans la poésie alexandrine* (Paris, 1999), p. 247f.

adorn her' (ls 188-189).<sup>8</sup> Aratus chooses this moment, hardly a favourable one, with the full moon (νυκτὶ ... παμμήνηδι, l. 189) to show his reader that Cassiopeia is barely visible, and it is this disadvantageous situation that he artificially sets up that itself allows him to introduce a developed simile to the end of compensating the faint resplendence of the constellation with the lights of poetry. The simile introduces rather more from its poetic dimension: Cassiopeia can become, thanks to a word play, a symbol of Aratus' scientific poetry. For just as Cassiopeia is in part marked by her faint light, so astronomical poetry remains a poetic form that is little practiced and little known, especially when juxtaposed with great epic poetry. Cassiopeia might well have appeared to Aratus as the 'sister of *epos*' (κάσις, ἔπος), as the near relation of epic poetry.<sup>9</sup> The poet would thus find in the very object of his description the means of justifying his own poetic practice, and we know that Aratus does not avoid allusions to such questions in his poem.<sup>10</sup> The way of reading outlined here would allow one to give to the key simile a supplementary hermeneutic dimension, just as the visible stars of Cassiopeia resemble a key that opens a door, this is perhaps because the figure of Cassiopeia, to which Aratus accords so careful a treatment, reveals to us the mysteries of astronomical poetry.

Thus we observe that in scientific poetry similes often have a

<sup>8</sup> Some readers of Aratus in Antiquity criticized this reference to the feeble light of the constellation: this is true of Hipparchus and of Germanicus who, in his Latin translation (ls 193-195), takes Hipparchus' criticism into account when he modifies the description's main outlines. This reading is doubtless erroneous as far as Aratus' description is concerned, for the feeble light is observed only on nights when the moon is full. See on this problem of interpretation MARTIN, *Aratos*, cit., II, p. 238f.

<sup>9</sup> Cassiopeia's name was variously interpreted in Antiquity: as, e.g., an equivalent of *καλλονή* due to her luminous appearance, or from the name of the sanctuary of Zeus Casius. Cf. W. PAPE & B. BENSELER, *Wörterb. d. griech. Eigennamen* (Braunschweig, 1911; repr. Graz, 1959), p. 633.

<sup>10</sup> See esp. J.-M. JACQUES, *Sur un acrostique d'Arate* (Phénomènes 783-7), «REA», 62, 1960, pp. 48-61; C. CUSSET, *Exercices rhétoriques d'Aratos autour du terme ἡχή*, «RPh», 69, 1995, pp. 245-248; J. DANIELEWICZ, *Further Hellenistic Acrostics: Aratus and Others*, «Mnemosyne», 58, 2005, pp. 321-334.

particular status in that they lead very clearly onto another type of poetic discourse, one that is not scientific, even if it serves the poet's didactic purpose. The similes in this type of poem are clearly a poetic opening in a double way: they introduce the picturesque aspect of a scene that enlivens the dryness of scientific discourse and at the same time they invite reflection on poetry itself, especially as they are the privileged space of a poet's most careful work. In these similes, analogy does not thus function only between *comparanda*, but also between a poetic discourse that is read and a metapoetic discourse that must be reconstructed.

In the narrative hexameter poetry of the epic, this double reading of analogical phenomena through simile is also present, even if it is perhaps less frequent, and less perceptible. In epic narrative, even though they introduce a pause – a descriptive pause in narrative discourse – similes have multiple functions at the heart of the narrative: e.g., they enhance understanding of the psychology of individual characters, they create links between different episodes or figures, they anticipate the future. All of these important functions, that clearly show that similes are not mere ornamentations or useless interludes in the narrative, have perhaps the effect of overshadowing the metapoetic dimension that is of interest here. We might try to consider a few non-restrictive examples taken first from the *Argonautica* of Apollonius of Rhodes who, in many respects, raises the question of what an epic narrative should be. The narrative of the trial that Aeetes imposes on Jason at the end of the bk. 3 seems to me to provide several occasions for potential reflection on epic discourse through certain similes.

At the trial's beginning, Jason must face bulls forged by Hephaestus: here the main danger is that they breathe fire. It is precisely this danger that the comparison of ls 1299-1305 develops:<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Text from F. VIAN, *Apollonios de Rhodes, Argonautiques*, III (Paris, 1980); trans. from W.H. RACE, *Apollonius Rhodius, Argonautica* (Cambridge, MA, 2008). Instead of ἀναγορμύρουσι, Fränkel has the hapax ἀναμαρμαίρουσιν: 'they make the fire shine as they revive it'. De la Ville de Mirmont understands this differently: 'they are illuminated by the fire's reflections'.

ὥς δ' ὅτ' ἐνὶ τρητοῖσιν ἐύρρινοι χοάνοισιν  
 φῦσαι χαλκῆων ὅτε μὲν τ' ἀναμαμαίρουσιν  
 πῦρ ὀλοὸν πιμπρᾶσαι, ὅτ' αὖ λήγουσιν ἀντηῆς,  
 δεινὸς δ' ἐξ αὐτῶν πέλεται βρόμος, ὀππότη' αἴξιη  
 νειόθεν· ὧς ἄρα τάγε θοῆν φλόγα φυσιόωντες  
 ἐκ στομάτων ὀμάδευν, τὸν δ' ἄμφεπε δῆιον αἴθος  
 βάλλε θ' ἅ τε στεροπή· κούρης δέ ἐ φάρμακ' ἔρυτο.

'And as when in the holes of a furnace strong leather bellows of bronze-smiths at times cause ravening fire to burn and blaze up, but then, when they cease their blowing, a terrible roar arises from the fire when it springs up from below – thus indeed the two oxen roared as they breathed forth the darting flame from their mouths, and the searing heat enveloped him, striking like lightning, but the girl's drugs protected him'.

This image is particularly interesting in that it already contains an effect of reflexivity. To illustrate the bulls' fiery power, the analogy calls on the world of the forge, the world of which the bulls themselves are a result, as they are the work of Hephaestus. The compared figures function not only by play of analogy, but also by relation of cause and effect. The final product is described in terms of its place of origin, even if the forge described here is not explicitly that of the forge-god: the technical precision of the simile's forge, borrowed by Apollonius from the description of the forge of Hephaestus in *Iliad* 18 (ls 468-472),<sup>12</sup> when the god prepares to make Achilles' new armour, encourages this association of texts (and forges),<sup>13</sup> and also impacts the object of the comparison, whose nature as forged bulls is thus underlined. The image's effect *might* be to amplify apparently the terrorizing effect of the bulls, and so to enhance Jason's heroism. But, as we are reminded here by the sole reference in the narrative to the effects of Medea's drugs, Jason's heroism is none other than the result of magic: a young girl's magic (κούρης ... φάρμακα) actually serves to decon-

<sup>12</sup> Cf. CUSSET, *La Muse dans la Bibliothèque*, cit., p. 242s.

<sup>13</sup> This association is re-enforced at the same level of Homeric hypotext in another simile at ls 141-147 of Callimachus' *Hymn to Delos*, which also precisely evokes Hephaestus' forge.

struct the idea of heroism and at the same time the simile's stylistic unity. There is therefore a truly parodic dimension in this creation of an adversary rendered awesome by the emphasis on Homeric heroic typology. As when from the perspective of traditional heroic narrative such an image would function to emphasize the hero's valour, here, while imitating this traditional device,<sup>14</sup> the simile's effect is annihilated by the narrative, and this can topple heroism in the direction of poetic humour, or at least a distancing from epic composition that invited the reader to reflect on the nature of an epic poem.

The metapoetic approach to this simile can be taken a step further: the double reference to infernal fire (πῦρ ὀλοόν) rising from the depth of the furnace (νειόθεν) and to the flame the bulls exhale (θοῆν φλόγα) recalls another, symbolic flame that appears at the opening of bk. 3, when Eros strikes Medea in the heart with his arrow (νέρθεν ὑπὸ κραδίη), similar to a flame (φλογι εἵκελον, l. 287),<sup>15</sup> and a little further Medea's nascent passion is the occasion for an elaborate simile that also evokes the imagery of the flame (ls 291-297):

ὥς δὲ γυνὴ μαλερῶ περι κάρφεια χεῦατο δαλῶ  
 χερνήτις, τῆπερ ταλασήια ἔργα μέμηλεν,  
 ὥς κεν ὑπὸ ρόφιον νύκτωρ σέλας ἐντύναιτο,  
 ἄγχι μάλ' ἐγρομένη· τὸ δ' ἀθέσφατον ἐξ ὀλίγοιο  
 δαλοῦ ἀνεγρόμενον σὺν κάρφεια πάντ' ἀμαθύνει  
 τοῖος ὑπὸ κραδίη εἰλυμένος αἴθετο λάθρη  
 οὔλος ἔρωος·

'And as when a woman piles twigs around a flaming brand, a working woman whose task is wool-spinning, so as to furnish light under her roof at night as she sits close by, and the flame rises prodigiously from the small brand and consumes all the twigs

<sup>14</sup> This image remains, despite everything, a way of re-introducing a form of heroism into the narrative.

<sup>15</sup> We should remember here that the arousal brought about by the god Eros is compared to that of an ox stung by a gadfly at ls 276-277, a sort of inverse figure of love juxtaposed with a bovine image.

together – such was the destructive love that curled beneath her heart and burned in secret’.

The light of the flame, qualified as ἀθέσφατον, seems disproportionate given the intimate context and seems rather to prefigure the bulls’ flaming breath. Moreover οὔλος ἔρωσ seems clearly also to evoke the deadly flame of the forge (πῦρ ὀλοόν) in a relationship that is etymologically perhaps uncertain, but semantically strong. In fact, in the forge simile, the fire by *hypallage* receives this qualification from that to which it is compared. It seems to me that, through these two comparative scenes, an interesting parallelism arises between one flame (powerful, hellish, produced by Hephaestus, Aphrodite’s husband) and another flame (more insidious, more resplendent, but also divine as it is the product of Eros, son of Aphrodite), and between the interior trial Medea suffers and the apparently heroic trial Jason endures, a trial which is, in fact, empty as it is effected by Medea’s magic. Thus traditional heroism to which, at the same time, the bulls, the world of Aeetes and the brutal force of Hephaestus all belong, finds itself annihilated by the heroism of eroticism or the feminine. Now it is certainly the goal of *Argonautica* 3 to sing of Jason’s exploit, due to Medea’s love, as the opening invocation to the Muse indicates. This triumph of Love is none other than an expression of a new kind of epic poetry to which Apollonius lays claim, and the similes allow a demonstration of all of the Alexandrian poet’s aesthetic development.

One might add briefly a like example, still situated in the heroic trial accomplished by Jason and presented as a *ponos*.<sup>16</sup> Often poetic composition is also assimilated to a *ponos*.<sup>17</sup> The activity of Jason’s labour consists of marking a furrow in the ground, as the poet traces his lines on the page. Now, by way of comparison, Jason traces furrows not only in the soil, but also in the sky, until he dashes against the earth-born giants (ls 1377-81):

<sup>16</sup> Cf. the use of the verb πονέοντο at l. 1339, to characterize the work the bulls accomplish under Jason’s direction.

<sup>17</sup> See Theocr., *Idyll*. 1.

οἶος δ' οὐρανόθεν πυρόεις ἀναπάλλεται ἀστήρ  
 ὄλκον ὑπαυγάζων, τέρας ἀνδράσιν οἷ μιν ἴδονται  
 μαρμαρυγῇ σκοτίοιο δι' ἠέρος αἴξαντα·  
 τοῖος ἄρ' Αἴσονος υἱὸς ἐπέσσυτο γηγενέεσσιν,  
 γυμνὸν δ' ἐκ κολλεοῖο φέρεν ξίφος.

'And as when a fiery star springs forth from heaven bearing a trail of light, an omen for men who see it darting with a gleam through the dark sky – such indeed was Jason as he rushed upon the earthborn men'.

Jason is effectively similar to the resplendent star that traces a furrow in the sky (ὄλκον). This star produces a prodigy for men: τέρας ἀνδράσιν, just as Jason produces miracles on the field of Ares.<sup>18</sup> Whether he traces a celestial furrow or a terrestrial one, Jason (or the star that represents him, in the type of catasterism the simile evokes) makes a show of himself. A legitimate question is whether Jason does not in a way represent here the work of the Alexandrian poet, who also makes a new show, a new kind of epic poetry, to counterbalance the traditional manner of epic (figured here by the world of Aetes) with another form of epic (represented by Medea's drugs and in which Eros occupies a central place). Thus it is not so much heroism that is here at issue – in the sense that it is not the hero *per se* that is of interest to Apollonius – as traditional epic discourse. In mastering the bulls of Hephaestus with Medea's magic, Jason does not imperil heroism, but shows that a new and refined technique (under the sign of Aphrodite, Eros and Erato) can dominate a more archaic one (under the sign of Hephaestus). Faced with earth-born giants, themselves a sign of an archaic and primitive generation, that brings light to the world, in the same time that he re-plays in his turn the arrival of Eros in the world at the opening of bk. 3: he descends as a star from the sky as Eros himself takes a 'route that descends from the sky' (καταιβάτις ἐστὶ κέλευθος | οὐρανίη, ls 160-161). As to the naked sword Jason brandishes here, this

<sup>18</sup> Cf. the Colchians cry and the silence of Aetes, which are the direct consequences, at ls 1370-73.

could also be an expression of Jason's desire: for the combat in which Jason engages is none other than the response to Medea's passion and the consequence of that passion. Jason is thus less a warrior worthy of Homer than a suitor of Medea's love, even (or especially) as he confronts the danger of the trail. The simile of the star, in that it draws notable lines with the figure of Eros, allows the poet to take an aesthetic position on what Hellenistic epic should be.

In concluding this discussion, I do not wish to suggest that all similes can be read from a metapoetic perspective. This would be excessive, and it is clear even from this reading of a few examples that such an approach can entail much that is subjective and uncertain. Nonetheless, it seems to me important to point out that the simile is not only an intertextual space, but also often, through intertextuality, certain indications can slip in that improve our understanding of what – in the absence of any theoretical treatise on the subject – poetry could represent of the Alexandrians. As a feature of choice in hexameter poetry, the simile can be an opportune moment for aesthetics.

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RÉSUMÉ. – À partir du constat de l'importance de l'intertextualité dans les comparaisons de la poésie hellénistique, l'article ci-dessus essaie de montrer que cet espace textuel que représente la comparaison est un lieu particulièrement soigné par les poètes et qu'il est donc susceptible d'accueillir aussi des réflexions de type métapoétique. Les poètes prennent en effet soin de laisser entendre à leur lecteur quelle peut être leur conception de la poésie, ou de certaines données poétiques. On prend d'abord quelques exemples dans la poésie didactique (Nicandre et Aratos) où le rôle purement poétique de la comparaison est peut-être encore plus évident, mais aussi dans les *Argonautiques* d'Apollonios de Rhodes.

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