
Image Creation in Aeneid

An important recurring image throughout Virgil's Aeneid is that of the serpent, which appears both realistically and metaphorically. The serpent icon is a harbinger of death and a symbol of deception. These two elements represented by the snake are important to the whole epic, but even more so to Book II because it describes how the Greeks, in order to finally take Troy, used deception to gain access into the city.

In spite of the mighty Greek heroes like Achilles and Ajax and the sheer numbers in their army and navy, in the end it was the snake-like craftiness of Sinon combined with an omen of death embodied in twin serpents that proved to be the downfall of Troy. Aeneas recounts,

"This fraud of Sinon, his accomplished lying,

Won us over; a tall tale and fake tears

Had captured us, whom neither Diomedes

Nor Larisaeon Achilles overpowered,

Nor ten long years, nor all their thousand ships." (II:268-272)

Virgil does not directly utilize snake imagery with Sinon's character, but he emphasizes the concepts of lies and deception, which are associated with the serpent metaphor. By speaking in lies, Sinon takes on the characteristics of Virgil's serpent images. While Sinon's acting was very convincing in favor of bringing the horse within the city walls, two real snakes from the sea serve to complete the ruse and convince the Trojans to accept the horse.

Even though Laocon was the only man whose insight into the true nature of the horse was correct, the twin snakes kill him and his two sons. "Laocon had paid... For profanation of the sacred hulk." (II:308-310) Since he had flung a spear at the horse in contempt prior to being attacked, the Trojans assumed that the horse was a divine object protected by the gods, and so they felt obligated to pull it into the city. The men become so blinded by Sinon's lies and the deceptive behavior of the serpents, that they do not notice the "four times the arms/ In the belly thrown together made a sound," (II:325-6) each time that the horse halts. Unbeknownst to these men was the fact that these snakes were an omen that represented the utter destruction of their city. In describing the death of Laocon and his sons, Virgil is preparing the reader for the snake that will be the death of Troy itself.

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The serpent that does destroy the city is not an actual snake, but the wooden horse, which Virgil imparts with snake-like qualities. He describes its movement, "Deadly, pregnant with enemies, the horse/ Crawled upward to the breach."(II:317-318) Like a venomous snake laden with deadly offspring, the deceptive contraption moves into the heart of the Trojan City. The horse has taken on the role of the twin serpents, while Troy, whose destruction is imminent, assumes the role of Laocon and his sons.

Virgil uses snake imagery one last time in Book II by giving serpentine qualities to the Danaan Pyrrhus, who appears to Aeneas,

"As a serpent, hidden swollen underground...

Renewed and glossy, rolling slippery coils,

With lifted underbelly rearing sunward

And triple tongue a-flicker."(II:614-619)

This description of Pyrrhus foreshadows death to come as it is this very same Greek who becomes the bane of Priam and his son Polites, "That was the end of Priam's age, the doom that took him off."(II:722-723) Virgil subtly sets the reader up to expect the worse from Pyrrhus' actions because up to that point, every snake image the reader has encountered has been followed by death and destruction.

Sinon's lies, the snakes from the sea, the wooden horse and Pyrrhus all reflect the qualities of death and deception that Virgil associates with the serpent. Throughout the remainder of the epic, the snake image retains these symbolic characteristics. Virgil uses the imagery to bring a lust for war onto Amata and to predict the death of Rome's future enemies.

The fury Allecto, who single-handedly incites war between the Trojans and the Latins, is, by her physical and character description alone, one of Virgil's serpents. She is,

"Grief's drear mistress, with her lust for war,

For angers, ambushes, and crippling crimes.

Even her father Pluto hates this figure...

For her savage looks, her head

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Alive and black with snakes."(VII:445-450)

Allecto's persona reeks of death and she is employed by Juno precisely for this trait, because the goddess knows that this serpentine creature will gladly and effectively stir up war among the Latins and Trojans. Considering the mass amount of tragic deaths that result from the war, Allecto can be classified as a harbinger of death, which her snake-like qualities already suggest.

Allecto uses one of her serpent tresses to fuel the anger already harbored by Amata towards the Trojans to the point of uncontrollable rage. This snake is similar to the wooden horse, because it came upon its victim insidiously and resulted in destruction. While Troy is burned as a result of the horse, Amata's mind is corrupted by the snake to the point of insanity, "The serpent's evil madness circulated... And with insane abandon (she) roamed the city."(VII:517-520) The queen's mind has been destroyed and remains in ruins like the Trojan City.

While the reader witnesses the destruction wrought by Allecto and the other serpent images within the context of the story, Virgil also uses snake imagery to comment on forthcoming events. Aeneas' shield, which is crafted by Vulcan, depicts many accomplishments of the future Roman Empire, not the least of which is the defeat of Marc Antony and Cleopatra. In order to convey the future victory of Rome over the Egyptian Queen to the reader, Virgil uses serpents to represent death once again. He describes Cleopatra as, "Never turning her head as yet to see/ Twin snakes of death behind."(VIII:944-945) The snakes precede other icons of death such as the furies, Mars and Bellona, which demonstrates their importance to Virgil as a true harbinger of death.

The serpent is a necessary element of the Aeneid, because the death and deception that it represents are essential to the events that take place within the epic. If the Greeks had never sacked Troy, Aeneas would never have left, and Rome might not have been founded. Deception is what brought victory to the Greeks and Virgil realizes this fact, so he chooses the snake to represent this concept. By remaining consistent in his use of the image, Virgil helps the reader to identify the presence of deception and looming death.

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