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*Mark W. Edwards*

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# Homer

Poet of the *Iliad*



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## Similes

Homer uses two kinds of simile. One is the short simile of two or three words: "like a god," "like a lion," "like a storm-wind," "like man-slaying Ares." These are common both in Homer and in some other kinds of epic poetry, and often they seem to be used with no more special effect than a standard epithet. They add emphasis, but usually little or no significant description.

Very different are the second kind, the long similes, which are almost unknown in other early epics. These presumably developed from the short simile, for one common type uses a short simile as jumping-off point. At 21.29 the Trojans are frightened "like fawns"; whereas at 4.243-45 the Greeks are said to be frightened "like fawns, / which weary of running over the wide plain / stand still, and there is no courage in their hearts." "Like a lion," which often occurs alone, is continued at 20.165-73 into a nine-verse picture of a wounded and furious beast attacking the hunters, at 5.137-42 into a description of the lion's slaughter of the sheep of a frightened shepherd, and at 17.133-36 into an account of the animal protecting his cubs against hunters. There are many other such cases.

Often, however, there is a different form of the long simile, which begins as a separate entity in a new verse; after the picture is completed, a final verse rounds off the simile and returns to the narrative. For instance: the Greeks march silently into battle, and "As the south wind spreads the mist on the mountain-peaks, / no friend to the shepherd, but better than night for the thief, / and one can see only a stone's-throw ahead, / so the dust arose in clouds under their feet as they marched" (3.10-14). Both these forms are usually self-contained, in the sense that they can be removed from the text without interrupting the continuity.

Though there are some two hundred of these long similes in the *Iliad* and about forty in the *Odyssey*, all but six in the *Iliad* and two in the *Odyssey* are unique in wording. This variety contrasts sharply with the repeated phraseology that often occurs in the commoner type-scenes, and with the usual verbatim repetition of a message. Besides being different in wording, a great

number of them are unique in content, too, sometimes appearing to be drawn from something the poet has just seen or thought of. These indications of originality are confirmed by the language, which is often untraditional and closer than usual to the language Homer himself spoke. It is hard not to think that in these long similes one can see the personal eye and thought of the poet.

The world depicted in the similes is different from that of the heroic narrative. The time is the present, not the legendary past; the place is not the battlefield before Troy but the Greek home or countryside, occasionally recognizable as that of Ionia, not the Greek mainland (for example, at 2.460-61 waterfowl cluster "in the *Asian* meadow beside the river Caÿster," and at 9.5 the *west* wind comes from Thrace); the people are ordinary men and women, not heroes, kings and deities, and the way of life is familiar, everyday, and humble. Warriors attack not like gods or giants (with one exception, 13.298ff.), but like lions or wolves falling on a sheepfold, or (more humbly still) like wasps or persistent flies. A mass charge is like a windstorm, or the rolling sea, the picture sometimes including (like a Japanese painting) a tiny, powerless human figure (the moon, stars, and hills dwarf the shepherd, 8.555ff.). The setting is the universal one of hills, sea, stars, rivers, storms, fires, and wild animals, and against it the lives of shepherds, plowmen, woodcutters, craftsmen, harvesters, donkeys, oxen, housewives, mothers, and children go on as they always have. Once there is a powerful vision of the punishment of Zeus for mankind's wickedness (16.384-93), a conception strange to the heroic *Iliad* but much like that of the everyday Hesiod. In the rest of the *Iliad* bronze is the heroic metal, but in the world of the similes, the world the poet lived in, iron is familiar for felling trees (4.485) and the hardening of it in water is used as a comparison for the sizzling of the Cyclops's eye as the heated stake is thrust into it (*Odyssey* 9.393). Perhaps one of the reasons there are fewer similes in the *Odyssey* is that its setting is closer to this everyday life than that of the *Iliad* and similes afford less contrast.

The observant reader will find his own favorites among these vivid, homely pictures, gleaming out from the tragic narrative of the heroic past. Apollo, at the head of the Trojans, overturns the Greek rampart like a boy kicking over a sandcastle (15.362ff.); the hands of weaving and spinning women flutter like the leaves of a poplar tree (*Odyssey* 7.106); the weeping Patroclus looks imploringly at his leader, Achilles, like a little girl tugging at her



mother's skirt and begging to be picked up (16.7ff.); the sleepless Odysseus twists and turns like a great sausage cooking over a fire (*Odyssey* 20.25ff.); Hera travels from Mount Ida to Olympus as swiftly as a much-traveled man recalls one place or another in his thoughts (15.80ff.); Iris plummets through the sea to visit Thetis like the lead sinker of a fisherman (24.80ff.); Athena brushes Pandarus's arrow away from Menelaus (4.130ff.) as easily as a mother brushes away a fly from her sleeping child (an ancient critic commented, "The mother indicates Athene's favor towards Menelaus, the fly suggests the ease with which it is swatted away and darts to another place, the child's sleep shows Menelaus being caught off guard and the weakness of the blow"; quoted by Richardson 1980.279); the Trojans plunge into the river to escape Achilles as locusts swarm into the air to escape a fire (21.12ff.); Euphorbus of the beautifully dressed hair falls to earth beneath Menelaus's spear like a carefully watered olive sapling that bears its pale blossoms and then is blown to the ground by a tempest (17.53ff.); Menelaus stands guard over the body of Patroclus as a mother cow stands over her first calf (17.4ff.); the battle is as evenly balanced as the scales a poor widow uses to weigh out the wool she spins to support her children (12.433ff.); Ajax leaps from ship to ship to defend them from the Trojan attack as a skilled rider jumps from one horse to another as they gallop (15.679ff.).

But Homer's art works at several different levels, and we miss much if we simply note the beauty of the little picture and pass on. Often there is a deeper poetic meaning beneath the surface, bringing added intensity or pathos to the narrative. Some of the most interesting examples follow, grouped according to features they share.

In many similes the obvious point of comparison overlies a deeper and more significant, unstated meaning. As Achilles charges toward Troy, Priam sees his divinely made armor glittering like the brightest of all stars, Orion's dog Sirius; but that star (the simile continues) brings great evil for mortals, and we know Achilles will do the same for Priam and Troy (22.26ff.). Odysseus weeps as he hears the tale of the wooden horse and the fall of Troy, and his weeping is said to be like that of a woman over the body of her husband, slain fighting for his city, as the victors drive her away to a life of slavery; Odysseus's grief is thus likened to that of a victim of his prowess (*Odyssey* 8.523ff.). Patroclus's immortal horses stand motionless in the midst of the battle, mourning their dead driver; their stillness is likened to

that of a monument set over the tomb of a hero, which in fact they *are* at that moment (17.434ff.). After his battle with the sea, the naked, weary Odysseus, ignorant of where he is and totally alone, heaps leaves over himself for warmth as a man in the remote countryside preserves the spark of fire—or the spark of Odysseus's life. Achilles, returning to battle after the loss of Patroclus, is like a lion that at first ignores the hunters, but when wounded by one of them attacks them all in a fury—a neat summary of the present action (20.164ff.). The round dance of men and girls on the rim of Achilles' shield runs as lightly as a potter's wheel, and one thinks of the friezes of figures around a Geometric-style pot, which must have given the poet the idea of placing such a dance on Hephaestus's artifact (18.600ff.).

Eumaeus the swineherd welcomes Telemachus home as a father welcomes his only son when he (the father) returns from ten years in a distant country; of course the simile both suggests Eumaeus's surrogate fatherhood and foreshadows the coming reunion with Odysseus (*Odyssey* 16.17ff.). Immediately after the suitors depart to ambush Telemachus on his return voyage, Penelope wonders whether he will escape them, as a lion trapped by a crowd of men "in a treacherous circle" ponders in fear (*Odyssey* 4.791ff.). Perhaps the most evocative of all are the instances where the disguised Odysseus praises his wife Penelope to her face for being as famous as the good king who rules his country prosperously (*Odyssey* 19.109ff.), and where Penelope welcomes her husband as a shipwrecked voyager (which Odysseus was in Book 5) welcomes the sight of land (*Odyssey* 23.233ff.); in both cases the lives and identities of husband and wife seem to be intentionally intertwined, and in the latter the simile in fact first appears to be describing the joy of Odysseus rather than that of Penelope. Both have been lost at sea, both now sight land.

The poet may use a simile as one means of foreshadowing the future and so increasing the tension and emotion. In his first lament over Patroclus, Achilles is compared to a lion whose cubs have been stolen by a hunter and who sets off angrily in pursuit, as will Achilles himself (18.318ff.). The doomed Hector and the doomed Patroclus are both compared to a lion that turns at bay and refuses to run, and "it is his own courage which kills him" (12.41ff.; 16.752ff.). Sarpedon is likened to a hungry lion that attacks a well-defended sheepfold and "either seizes a sheep, or is himself wounded by a spear from a swift hand" (12.299ff.); one suspects that the poet already has in mind Zeus's dilemma



whether to save his son or let him die beneath Patroclus's spear (16.431ff.). When Athena rouses Achilles to send his terrifying cry against the Trojans who are fighting round the body of Patroclus, two similes within a few verses tell of beleaguered cities, one sending up a blazing signal fire for help, the other hearing the trumpet call of its attackers (18.207ff., 219ff.). As the Trojans see the body of Hector dragging behind Achilles' chariot, a wailing arises as if all Troy were burning, which it soon will be now that their main champion is gone (22.410ff.); similarly Achilles inflicts upon the fleeing Trojans a sorrow like that which arises from a city burning because of the gods' anger, which again befits Troy (21.522ff.). Achilles mourns Patroclus as a father mourns his son, "who dying grieved his unhappy parents" (23.222-25), and one thinks of the grief of Priam and Hecuba for Hector and that of old Peleus for Achilles. On a lighter note, Nausicaa leads her maidens in the dance as Artemis leads the nymphs, and not many lines later Odysseus will ask her ingratiatingly if she is Artemis (*Odyssey* 6.102ff., 151ff.).

The picture developed in long similes often has its own action, which is sometimes carried through until its relevance to the point illustrated disappears. Hector charges at Achilles like an eagle that dives to carry off a lamb or hare; but unlike these helpless victims, Achilles charges in return (22.308ff.). Menelaus hunts for his friend and ally, Antilochus, as an eagle looks for a hare cowering in the undergrowth; but Antilochus is not cowering harelike, he is "encouraging his companions and urging them into the fighting" (17.674ff.). Achilles' Myrmidons, preparing to follow Patroclus into battle, are like wolves full of battle fury, but these wolves have just killed a stag and with full bellies are drinking at a spring, which hardly fits Achilles' battle-starved followers (16.156ff.).

In cases like these it has been thought that the poet has pursued the simile at the expense of the main narrative. This may sometimes be the case. But occasionally it seems that a simile that does not parallel the narrative intentionally develops a strong contrast with it, attracting the audience's attention by a kind of shock effect. In the longest of all the similes, a snow-storm picture is introduced for a comparison between the number of stones hurled at the Greek wall and the innumerable snowflakes that fall in a storm, but the simile passes on into a long description of a quiet snowy landscape, and the silence of the muffling snow contrasts sharply with the thundering din of the flying stones when we return to the narrative (12.278ff.; see

Damon 1961.262ff.). The Greeks stand fast, like clouds that hover motionless above mountaintops when the winds are asleep—but the Trojans are not asleep, they are vigorously pressing their attack (5.522ff.). There is a similar kind of shock effect in the reversal of roles when Priam enters Achilles' shelter and kisses the "murderous" hands of the hero, "like a disaster-stricken man who has *murdered* another man in his own country" (24.480ff.). In many other cases the poet seems to dwell on the peaceful aspects of his picture before returning to the savagery of the battlefield; but, since similes are a typical means of describing a general battle scene, it would be going too far to say that they occur primarily to give a relief from battle.

Sometimes the poet develops the picture within the simile and then turns some feature of it to good advantage when the narrative resumes; the independent life of the simile contributes a new idea to the vividness and color of the main tale. Agamemnon sees the Ajaxes and their "cloud" of troops as a goatherd watches a black storm cloud move over the sea before the wind, and a few lines later the blackness of the cloud is repeated in the description of the close ranks of soldiers (4.275ff.). The two Lapiths lead the attack on the Greek gates like two wild boars who tear up trees at the roots with a great *crashing* of their tusks; such was the *crashing* of the weapons hurled at the bronze breastplates of the two heroes (12.146-52). Ajax is immovable as a donkey in a cornfield, though the children *break many sticks* beating him; and then the narrative returns to the Trojans *stabbing vainly with their spears* against Ajax (11.555-65). Hector leads a Trojan charge like a huge boulder rolling down a rock face, thundering down through the forest, and finally stopping in the plain; a few lines later Hector's charge is stopped, too (13.137ff.). A second point of comparison may be brought out more fully than the first; Paris runs swiftly as a stallion that glories in its strength and beauty, and it is the beauty of Paris in his glittering armor that matters, not his speed (6.506ff.). A lion kills a deer's young and the mother dashes away in fear, and similarly Agamemnon kills two sons of Priam and the rest of the Trojans flee (11.113ff.). As men pursuing a stag or goat turn in flight when a lion suddenly appears, so the Greeks give up their pursuit when Hector is seen (15.271ff.).

Sometimes this close association of the simile with the narrative is taken even further, and an idea or action is developed in the simile and then transferred back to the main narrative, so that if the simile were to be removed there would be a break in



the thread of the narrative. These cases are a particularly interesting and sophisticated development in artistic technique. The Trojans rush against the Greeks like dogs attacking a wounded boar, but the boar turns on them and they scatter; so the Trojans gave ground before the two Ajaxes (17.725ff.). In two successive similes at 15.524ff., Hector charges the steadfast Greeks as a storm wave falls upon a ship, and the hearts of the seamen are frightened; so the Greeks are frightened. Then his attack is compared to that of a lion on cattle under a nervous herdsman, which stampede as he kills one of them; and so the Greeks take to flight, except for the one Hector kills. Here the whole weight of the narrative of the battle turning is carried by the movement of the two similes. Diomedes charges like a storm-swollen river that crumbles its banks and the vineyard ditches; and so the Trojans broke before him (5.87ff.). The Trojans follow Aeneas as sheep follow the ram who leads them to drink, and the shepherd's heart rejoices; so Aeneas' heart was gladdened as he saw them follow him (13.492ff.).

Finally, there are two ways in which the actual language of a simile merges with that of the narrative, forming an unusually close bond. The ancient critics perceived this occasional exchange of terminology between narrative and simile, and it has been the subject of a recent book (Silk 1974). When the contingents of Greeks coming to assembly are likened to swarms of bees, the collective noun *ethnea*, "companies," is used both for the bees and for the Greeks (2.87ff.). In a few cases a metaphor cues a simile. A "cloud" of soldiers is compared to a storm cloud over the sea (4.274ff.); Achilles' "brazen" voice blares out like a trumpet (18.219ff.); a wave to which the Greeks troops are being compared "helmets" (*korusetai*) itself into a crest (4.422ff.); and Penelope's cheeks "melt" into tears like melting snow (*Odyssey* 19.205ff.).

The interconnection between simile and narrative can be so close that it is impossible to be sure if what is being described is a simile or a metamorphosis. Humans are often straightforwardly compared to birds, especially the eagle; but sometimes when a deity is so compared it is unclear whether the proper translation should be "like a bird" or "as a bird." Poseidon, disguised as Calchas, reinvigorates the two Ajaxes, and then departs like a hawk pursuing another bird, and as he does this he is recognized by his feet and so cannot actually be in bird shape. But when Athena leaves Telemachus "like a soaring bird" (*Odyssey* 1.320), the meaning is not clear; not is it when she leaves

Nestor's palace "like a vulture," astonishing the beholders (*Odyssey* 3.372ff.). Athena descends to the Trojan plain with the speed of a meteor, but the spectators are as amazed as if they have actually *seen* such a portent (4.75ff.). Another time she comes like a rainbow, sent by Zeus as a sign of war or storm, but the phrasing "so, wrapping herself in a bright colorful cloud she mingled with the tribes of Greeks" (17.547ff.) suggests that she actually takes the form of the gloomy portent. Thetis, coming to visit the sorrowing Achilles, emerges from the sea like a mist from the gray water (1.359), and this too seems more than just a simile. It has been thought (for example by Bowra 1930.115) that these ambiguous, evocative cases were the origin of the simile; it could also be argued, on the other hand, that they are a very sophisticated artistic development of it.

What prompts the poet to introduce a simile? Ancient critics said that similes were used for amplification, vividness, clarity, and variety. A modern scholar (Coffey 1957) has summarized their functions as illustration of movement (especially mass movement), sudden appearance of a character or thing, noise, measurement of time, space and number, various narrative situations, and inward feelings. Fundamentally, a simile, like a detailed description of an artifact or of an artifact's history, is a technique of expansion, a means of creating a pause in the forward movement of the narrative. The action is held still for a moment and the focus of attention changed, and new thoughts or contrasting emotions can be added. For example, Hector's flight before Achilles (22.136ff.) is interrupted by a number of similes and also by the description of the washing pools where the Trojan women gathered together in the old days of peace. After these and the other expansions in that episode, our attention returns to the two heroes and we find them still racing over the plain, the situation unchanged, and so the long duration of the pursuit is brought out again and again. Similes regularly occur in passages describing general movements, where other elaborating techniques would be difficult to use, and to call attention to the sudden appearance of a new hero, who needs to catch our eye immediately. It is the presence of these techniques, not boredom of poet or audience, that accounts for the large number of similes in battle scenes.

Similes often occur in pairs, illustrating or contrasting complementary aspects of a scene. A famous example is the comparison of Ajax to a baffled lion for fury and courage, and to a donkey for obstinate resistance (11.545ff.). The poet is not afraid



of overusing the technique; indeed, for very special emphasis, massed similes are used, to herald the display of forces and the beginning of the great catalogues in Book 2, to introduce the major and successful attack of Hector (15.592–637), and to describe the agonized struggle of the Greeks over the body of Patroclus (17.722–61). The effect is impressive and adds much to the visual color of the scenes as well as their emotional impact.

A long simile, by its very presence, shows that the poet wishes to attract notice to something; attention to its content adds much to the pleasure and involvement of the audience, filling in a good deal of the background of ordinary life that cannot otherwise appear in the heroic narrative. A close study of them makes possible an appreciation of the poet's eye for a striking scene and for a comparison, and also of his skill in welding the simile to the narrative and exploiting the possible interactions between the two. One may doubt if any predecessor developed the device so effectively; and few would claim that any successor has.

#### *Further Reading*

Fränkel 1921 is still the most detailed examination of the content of the similes. Coffey 1957 discusses their purposes and effects. W. C. Scott 1974 categorizes similes by content, type, and placement within the narrative. Moulton 1977 finds a building up of effect in sequences of similes (see also Moulton 1974). Damon 1961.261–71 has a good chapter on the kind of simile that seems to stray from the narrative. Mueller 1984 has a sound general chapter. Bowra 1930.114–28 has some good points, but a view that would now be thought rather superficial. Shipp 1972 finds linguistic lateness in the language of the similes.

## Metaphors

Homeric language is full of metaphors. Many are obviously traditional and probably retain little effective meaning; a few are probably original coinages; and between these limits there are a host of others whose metaphorical force it is hard to assess. Doubtless the effect of a metaphor on members of Homer's first audiences varied, just as nowadays no group of people could agree which are the really "dead" metaphors in speech or literature. Much must therefore be left to the taste of the individual reader of the poems. Some of the commoner examples and commoner sources of metaphor are indicated here and a few of the most striking occurrences discussed.

Some of the commonest formulaic expressions in Homer include a metaphor, which may have retained little real meaning for poet and audience except perhaps an air of dignified archaism; "shepherd of the people," "winged words," "the barrier of the teeth," and the obscure "bridges of war" catch our attention because of their strangeness, but Homer's original audience would hardly have found them strange. Probably many of the metaphorical uses of "iron" and "bronze" (discussed below) were the standard fare of epic battles and had lost a good deal of their force. Perhaps that was also the case in the many instances of personification of a weapon, when a spear (for instance) "longs to glut its taste for men's flesh"; but since the same words for "eagerly" and "attacked, pressed on" are used both of men and of weapons (so Griffin 1980.34), something at least of the vividness of metaphor may have survived.

On the other hand, the "stone tunic" (stoning) that Hector says should have been Paris's fate (3.56–57) must have had a powerful impact; was it perhaps a picturesque popular expression in common speech, like "he ought to be strung up"? A little less vividly, Achilles calls Agamemnon, "You there dressed in shamelessness!" (1.149). Heracles "widowed" the streets of Troy (5.642), and the word retains its literal meaning elsewhere for a young wife whose husband has been killed. The earth "laughs" at the glitter of armed men (19.362), and there is certainly a striking effect, though the expression recurs in the *Hymn to Demeter* 14 (earth