Artistry of the Homeric Simile

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Published by Dartmouth College Press

Scott, William C.
Artistry of the Homeric Simile.
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The similes in Homer are treasure troves. They describe scenes of Greek life that are not presented in their simplest form anywhere else: landscapes and seascapes; storms and calm weather; fighting among animals; aspects of civic life such as disputes, athletic contests, horse races, community entertainment, women carrying on their daily lives, and men running their farms and orchards. But the similes also show Homer dealing with his tradition. They are basic paratactic additions to the narrative showing how the Greeks found and developed parallels between two scenes, each of which elucidated and interpreted the other, and then expressed those scenes in effective poetic language.

My earlier book, *The Oral Nature of the Homeric Simile*, identified series of repeated simile topics and common locations in the narrative with the goal of revealing the oral basis for the content of many of the similes as well as their placement. The current book, directed at the aesthetic qualities that Homer sought in forming each simile, represents that work’s other side. The first study focused more on the traditional alternatives that occurred to Homer as he composed; this second study explores the variations and modifications to each of the topics that Homer employs in order to make similes blend expressively with the larger context. The focus moves from compositional modes to aesthetic choices—from the poetic background to the act of creation by the poet and the act of reception by his audience. The major question for the second study is: how does the artist translate his thoughts into his chosen language? He does so through the indispensable participation of a co-creating audience. Thus the two books are meant to be a unified study of Homer’s similes as compositions derived from and dependent on an oral tradition.

The second study is rooted in the mixture of traditional materials present to the poet every time he considers adding a simile to his narrative. No name has been assigned to this conglomerate of topics and scenes, of previously successful placements of similes, of multiple choices available to the poet, of the alternate narrative techniques that poet and audience bring to the moment, and of the highly developed traditional language that was the birthright of every Greek. Poet and audience together used their understanding of
the means of expression and their memory of tales from the past as mutually helpful partners in creating Homer’s old-style “new” poetry.

The similes are not presented sequentially or in their order of appearance in the narrative; rather, they are grouped by books and then analyzed as they fit broad functional categories. The first chapter shows how Homer has used expository digressions widely and effectively in telling his stories and how the similes can be approached as parallel narrative devices. The second chapter will analyze the poet’s and audience’s inheritance from previous performances of epic in order to determine the choices available to Homer in shaping his similes to support the narrative. The next three chapters examine those books in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* that contain the largest numbers of similes—including words, the books where Homer seems to have chosen to give the similes major significance in his design. Finally, the conclusion attempts to imagine how a poet could have juggled all the elements that went into the series of choices that produced the individual simile. Together these chapters demonstrate my major point: the individual simile—even the shortest one—is the result of a complex process that requires the participation of both poet and audience.

The translations are mine; I have everywhere tried to follow the original closely and have not added the Greek text of each simile.

Many friends have aided me in completing this study. E. M. Bradley, E. Bakker, M. Edwards, J. Foley, J. A. W. Heffernan, C. Higbie, E. Minchin, G. Nagy, R. Rabel, H. Tell, W. G. Thalmann, and L. Whaley have been loyal guides as the book took shape. To them and to the many other friends and colleagues who have offered generous criticism, I offer my appreciation.

The publication of this book in its double format has depended on close and friendly cooperation with the Dartmouth College Library and the University Press of New England. I wish to express my thanks for the interest and enthusiasm of Michael P. Burton, the Director of the Press, and Jeffrey L. Horrell, the Librarian of the College, as well as Phyllis Deutsch, William Fontaine, Elizabeth Kirk, and David Seaman.

*Hanover, New Hampshire*

*W.C.S.*
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