Similes, the Shield of Achilles, and Other Digressions

Similes are often repeated with very little change, they accumulate when there is no need, and they compare where there is nothing comparable. Great art would consist in making one large and highly appropriate simile. Homer becomes too carried away with his own similes and forgets narrative.

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In the eighteenth book of Homer’s *Iliad* Hephaistos makes a new shield for Achilles. The description of this shield is justly famed as a small masterpiece in its own right as well as being the prototype for later poets and writers who include art objects within their works. The most notable ancient examples are *The Shield of Heracles*, the shields in the central scene of Aeschylus’ *Seven against Thebes*, the cup in Theocritus’ first *Idyll*, the tapestry in Catullus’ *epyllion* on the marriage of Peleus and Thetis (c. 64), and the shield of Aeneas in book 8 of *The Aeneid*. These ekphrases occupy so large a portion of each work that they are necessarily major elements in the overall design.

Homer often describes objects and implements in the course of his narrative, even pausing in the midst of events to present a detailed picture of some article drawn from the background. Book 11 of the *Iliad* contains three examples. The first and second are the descriptions of the breastplate and the shield of Agamemnon embedded in his arming scene (11.19–40); the third is “Nestor’s cup” (11.632–37). The presentation of each object is sufficiently detailed that it has been possible to find fragmentary yet often rather precise remains that parallel the verbal descriptions. These descriptions focus sharply on physical features. While they may interrupt an action, they do so only long enough to permit a listing of the elements that would meet the eye of the observer. Such quick sketches of a person’s possessions, however, strengthen the characterization being developed in the larger passage.
highlighting of Agamemnon’s battle gear introduces the king as a heroic personage and reinforces his status as a major warrior at the moment he begins his aristeia. The ornate cup that Nestor alone can lift endows him with extra strength and stature at the moment when he is going to give crucial advice to Patroclus.

One such piece described in the poems, however, will never be successfully reproduced even with considerable effort and ingenuity, and that is the Shield of Achilles. Special problems abound: the figures are in motion and small vignettes are in the process of evolving; this shield will not hold still for a static modeling session but continues to shift and change before the eyes of the observer. Thus though several commentaries feature a basic drawing of the shield that locates the individual scenes within the surrounding border of the river Ocean, sketches of the events described in each scene are omitted. The conclusion is inevitable: while there may have been shields that resembled the Shield of Achilles in basic shape and complexity, this particular shield never did and never could have actually existed because it is as much a product of the poet’s imagination as the narrative itself. The people on the Shield live and breathe, events develop over time, and there is such a collection of varied subject matter that it probably could never have been arrayed in its entirety on the surface of any one weapon. In addition, the presentation of the Shield is complex. It is not only a verbal description of the contents; it also involves the medium, the process of creation, the maker and his motives, and the interpreter.

Once it is clear that Achilles’ Shield is more a creation of the poet than of the forge, a new set of revealing parallels can be sought. These would be imaginative constructs that interrupt the ongoing narrative in order to introduce a scene developed within its own clearly bounded framework. An obvious example is the tale of Odysseus’ visit to his maternal grandfather, Autolycus, in book 19 of the Odyssey (392–466).

This story falls into three segments: the naming of the baby Odysseus, the reception of the young boy at his grandfather’s palace, and his wounding by the boar. Each confirms an element in Odysseus’ characterization that was present from an early age. Autolycus is known for being a thief and an oath-breaker, talents taught to him by Hermes, the god of thieves himself. This man gives his baby grandson the name “Odysseus” in memory of the pain and anger that he has caused to others. This name is Odysseus’ first gift from his grandfather, a birthright that the Odyssey illustrates in many ways, most
notably in the attack on the Cicones, in the raid on the Cyclops’ cave, and in his continual baiting of the suitors. Later when young Odysseus visits Autolycus’ palace, he receives gifts further identifying him as the heir of this wily and aggressive old man, and he is welcomed as a worthy member of the family at a great banquet. The next day when a boar unexpectedly appears during the hunt, Odysseus is eager to kill it. Although the boar wounds him with his tusk, he kills the animal with a single swift thrust. This small story embodies the basic characteristics of Odysseus: his aggressive nature, his eagerness to lead, his willingness to hurt, and his readiness to accept pain in the pursuit of victory—the very elements that Odysseus will draw upon throughout the second half of the *Odyssey* as he attempts to gain an advantageous position against the suitors. This tale interrupts the narrative at the moment when old Eurycleia is washing Odysseus’ feet and feels the scar. But there is no physical description of the wound or the scar; rather, the incident seems developed in order to provide an early foundation for the consistent behavior of Odysseus as a man of cleverness as he seeks and wins victories even against seemingly superior strength.

The scar is one token in a book of tokens—objects that contain signs portending events to come and therefore requiring interpretation. Book 19 opens with the removal of the arms from the hall. This is a revealing sign, but the suitors fail to understand; they accept the story that the arms are being protected from smoke damage. Telemachus, however, correctly interprets the miraculous light that guides him and Odysseus, and Penelope repeatedly seeks to gather meaning from the clear signs that come to her. Odysseus as the beggar tells her of his cloak, his brooch, and his herald—all signs rich with meaning. Throughout their conversation Penelope questions and probes the beggar so deftly that she shows how deeply she has read and understood tokens which seem innocent on the surface. Although she refuses to hear the encouraging interpretation of her dream offered by Odysseus, the book ends with Penelope arranging the contest of the bow and preparing for a marriage that she and Odysseus hope will restore her to her husband. The beggar contains within him the combination of abilities and the spirit needed to make him the victor in the contest of the bow, but these qualities are evident only to those who know how to read the tokens as Eurycleia does openly—and Penelope does secretly. Thus the story of the scar is formally an interruption in the narrative but, in fact, is another of the many objects in book 19 that call for interpretation to appreciate the strong underlying currents in events.
Similar digressions include the parable of Meleager in book 9 of the *Iliad* (527–605) and Demodocus’ song of Ares and Aphrodite in the *Odyssey* (*Ody*. 8.266–366). The story of Meleager is not just an abbreviated version of an older saga inserted into the *Iliad* as the static physical descriptions cited earlier are; rather, it presents behavior that has been sufficiently acceptable in the past to be cited as a normative story. As such, it is the very kind of argument that can be effectively brought to bear by a trusted old friend like Phoenix. Demodocus’ song could merely be an entertaining tale about the intrigues of the gods, yet the story of Ares and Aphrodite is developed to enhance the audience’s understanding of the differences between the Phaeacians and Odysseus — the very contrast that is the major theme of book 8.

These three passages — the scar, the parable of Meleager, and the song of Ares and Aphrodite, which I will call “expository digressions” — have certain similarities that distinguish them from the usual descriptions of physical objects or implements:

1. They are long digressions.
2. The poet creates a strong break from the locale of the ongoing narrative for digressions that develop their own stories in response to their own motivations.
3. Each digressive interruption is in motion; these tales have a beginning, a middle, and an end.
4. They are not simply enhancements to a feature of an individual scene but, rather, significant parts of each book’s theme.

This list provides critical insights into parallel passages. Homer’s similes are especially open to such analysis — and especially the longest of all similes, the Shield of Achilles.

There seem to be two simultaneous movements organizing the Shield’s structure. In spatial terms the most general picture of the universe is placed in the middle and is surrounded by detailed images of various scenes from human life. At the same time there is a temporal ordering: the Shield centers on the elements that are usually associated with primal creation — earth and heaven (Ouranos and Ge), sea, and day and night — and then opens out through stages of human development from basic communities and agricultural societies to gatherings of people for communal entertainment — art, music, and dance. When all of this is then bounded by the circling river of the Ocean, Homer has framed a view of the world in its full spatial breadth and
temporal development; the Shield presents a complete and unified image of the varieties of life that mankind has developed. Antitheses provide a structure for the Shield—city and country, war and peace, work and festivity; these are basic, opposed forms of human life that are ordered by an inner polarity. As one critic notes, the whole image of the Shield is not intended to move the soul of the audience; it is more a rational construction.19

Book 18 splits easily into two halves: the first (1–367), Achilles’ decision to revenge the death of Patroclus; the second (368–617), the provision and design of his new armor. Though the loss and the resupply of armor seems a relatively minor blockage to Achilles’ decision to embark upon a suicidal death march, the whole scene of the Shield’s manufacture and design is basic to book 18’s larger theme. Achilles and Hephaestus are the dominant figures, each in his half of the book. Yet the differences developed between the two sections are important. The first scene emphasizes Thetis’ concern for her son (382–411); in the second Charis welcomes Thetis graciously and Hephaestus wants to do what he can to repay the goddess’ earlier favor—even expressing his willingness to hide Achilles from death. In the first section Achilles rejects the feelings of his mother, the dysaristotokeia, the woman who bore the best of men to her own sorrow, and thinks only of his wounded honor (18.86–93). In contrast, Hephaestus is a humane and genial host. He presides over a shop that is a veritable amusement park filled with wondrous robots—self-propelled tripods and golden handmaidens:

in whose hearts is understanding, in whom there is speech and strength, and who know crafts by aid of the immortal gods.

(18.419–20)

Under the touch of this divine craftsman machines have been made to act like humans and even have human features and qualities. Achilles is Hephaestus’ antithesis; in the coming battle he will convert men into war machines. In book 19 he will not let the Greek warriors eat before the battle, in book 21 he will reduce Lycaon to food for fish, and in book 22 he will refuse any dealing with Hector as he plays out the end of a grim process. The major creation of Hephaestus is the Shield—another of his devices that make inert metal into a dynamic image of living men; Achilles intends to make men into inert matter.20

In book 18 Homer has juxtaposed two scenes that are otherwise linked only casually. If an audience were to hear a telling of one of these events
without the other, they would find that each makes sense on its own but lacks the full import gained when they are juxtaposed. Only an awareness of the unified whole presents Achilles’ choice in its broadest dimensions. As a result this book in its entirety is the appropriate introduction to the aristeia of Achilles—a campaign successful and sweeping, but also dehumanizing and repellent.

The Shield of Achilles is far more important in the design of the *Iliad* than the mere physical description of an object. It is a product of the poet’s creative imagination; its content gives it a life of its own, and its position allows it to cast a shadow over the heroic code. Against this background it becomes easier to appreciate that by far the most common expository digressive elements in the Homeric epics are the similes.

The Homeric simile is easily recognized. It is based on the juxtaposition of two passages describing objects, persons, or events connected by the words “like” or “as,” in which the subject of the simile may be developed as an independent picture. The similes vary widely in terms of length, form, structure, quantity of repeated phrasing, and the complexity of their relationship to the narrative context. Even the shortest similes reach outside the narrative for objects from a dissimilar area.

There is often development within the simile — the story seems to go back to an earlier moment that is set in motion and then catches up to the present. One example is the lion that started out attacking, but finally must change his direction and slink away:

> like a lion who leaves the farmyard  
> when he is exhausted attacking the dogs and men  
> who do not allow him to carry off the fattest of the cattle,  
> staying awake all night. Craving meat  
> he keeps attacking, but accomplishes nothing. For spears  
> pour constantly from brave hands  
> and lighted torches which he fears even though he is eager.  
> Then at dawn he draws away sullen at heart.  
> Thus did Menelaus, good at the war shout, go from Patroclus. . . .

(*Iliad* 17.657–65)

The narrative frame of this simile does not move while the poet is telling the vignette within the simile:
He [Menelaus] started to go like a lion. . . .

[simile]

Thus did Menelaus, good at the war shout, go from Patroclus. . . .

There are, however, several passages where the simile itself expands so far that it rejoins the narrative at a new point; the movement in the simile is so great that it seems to take the mind of the poet with it. The clearest example is at book 15 of the Iliad (lines 622–38), which would read as follows if the similes were extracted:

The Greeks withstood the Trojans firmly and did not flee, but Hector leaped into the crowd. The hearts of the Achaeans were split in their breasts. Then the Achaeans were powerfully routed by Hector and father Zeus.

There is no doubt that action does develop in these lines, but there are gaps between the three sentences where questions are left unanswered. Hector leapt into the crowd, but why were the Achaeans so afraid? Was it just his reputation? Once Homer fills that gap with a simile, the question disappears:

[Hector] leaped into the crowd as when beneath the clouds a rushing wave churned by the wind falls upon a swift ship. The whole ship is hidden in the spray, and the fearful blowing of the wind roars in the sails; the sailors tremble in their hearts, fearing— for only by a little have they escaped death. So were the hearts of the Achaeans split. . . .

(15.624–28)

Not one blow is struck by Hector, but Homer’s description of the sailors’ fear of the threatening wave makes Hector’s effect on the battle clear — and explains how the hearts of the Achaeans can quite reasonably be divided. In the next sentence the Greeks are already in flight — how did that happen? The simile covers this moment in a different way than a factual report would:

So were the hearts of the Achaeans split in their breasts.

Just as a evil-minded lion comes upon cattle,
that are grazing in countless numbers in the low land in a great marsh.
Among them is a herdsman not yet experienced
in fighting a wild beast over the carcass of a crooked-horned cow;
but he walks with the herd, first in front

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and then behind—while the lion leaping into the middle devours a heifer, and all the rest flee. *Just so were the Achaeans powerfully routed by Hector. . . .*

(15.629–36)

By the time the cattle are fleeing in panic, there is little point in describing the specific deeds of Hector that turned the Greeks to flight. They can be imagined because the simile has already conveyed the nature of their fear so effectively that the poet can easily move on with his story.21

From such analyses it is clear that similes are not mere static descriptions of objects; they are smaller or larger vignettes that were constructed to suit their context so closely that the poet could rejoin the narrative either at the identical spot where he left it, or even slightly later, with no gaps or unexpected inconcinities. As a result similes should be appreciated as being purposefully formulated within the creative mind of the poet to enhance his ongoing narrative. Instead of isolating favorite similes for comment, the whole series of similes within a unified section of the narrative must be coordinated with one another and with the thematic design of the unit; only then is the understanding of any one simile possible. Conversely, because similes have been incorporated by the poet within his story in order to provide support for his larger conception, they offer especially significant clues for the interpretation of longer passages.22

It is important not to overrate the words and phrases that the poet uses in attaching his similes to their narrative contexts (usually “like” or “as”). These words serve as markers to separate the narrative clearly from the simile, but they do not automatically indicate the major parallel joining narrative to simile. If the close conceptual unity between narrative and simile is to be clarified, a critic must be willing to focus on elements where the poet exercises choice in shaping the individual components of the simile, such as the placement of the simile, the choice of subject matter, the length of the simile, and the objects included in the extension of the basic subject. Here the poet could give each simile an individuality that would allow it to complement its context on a variety of levels.

The interpretation of the individual simile requires the constant participation of a co-creating audience, which has heard heroic songs sung in traditional language for generations. For the audience of a simile to participate in such complex communication it must share experiences with the poet. Such
communication can occur between a speaker and an audience that is large or small. The full meaning of any simile can be accessible only to an audience that is intimately involved with the private life of the originator of the simile. A modern example is the simile “bend it like Beckham,” which prior to the 2002 movie was almost unknown to all but devoted soccer fans. However, in the last scene of Aeschylus’ The Libation Bearers, before a large Athenian audience Orestes asks the chorus for a proper definition of the robe and suggests a variety of contexts and experiences that would allow different descriptions depending on his hearers’ familiarity with Agamemnon’s death:

And this thing: what shall I call it and be right, in eloquence? Trap for an animal or winding sheet for a dead man? or bath curtain? Since it is a net, a robe you could call it, to entangle a man’s feet.
Some highwayman might own a thing like this, to catch the wayfarer and rob him of his money and so make a living. With a treacherous thing like this he could take many victims and go warm within.

(Aeschylus, Choephoroi 996–1004)

The phrase “like this” (toiouton) shows that he is listing various similes to describe the robe; the communicative power of the suggested comparisons depends on the audience’s knowledge of the complex background.

The understanding of Homeric similes requires poet and audience to know well the long and deep tradition of oral verse-making, replete with stories, characters, and actions that are familiar by their frequent usage. The contexts in which similes occur have been sufficiently repeated that the audience would recognize junctures where a simile is a possibility and would be aware of the range of subjects which have been used in such a passage before. Further, the repeated recurrence of the same topic at similar narrative junctures implies that the audience should realize that certain contexts are likely to generate specific simile subjects and also should be able to recognize variations within similes of the same family. In suppressing or adjusting the scope of a simile to suit a narrative context, the poet creates the integral unity of each particular passage; the audience must know enough about his usual practice to evaluate the traditional alternatives that he has chosen.

Given an awareness of the resources of the poet, the act of communication does not so much produce continual amazement at the innovative power
of the poet as arouse admiration at the poet’s management of the audience’s expectations. When the audience heard a simile—just as when they heard the presentation of the Shield or the scar—they would know from previous experience how to unify the elements of the full passage in order to derive the poet’s full meaning. It is not difficult for them to realize that the new weapons for Achilles not only signal, but also characterize, his new resolve or that the story of the scar is yet another mode of describing the aggressive and dominating spirit of the returned Odysseus. Likewise, when they heard a warrior described by a lion simile, they would know the possible range of lionlike activities in the traditional simile language and would evaluate appropriately the specific content of the simile as an enhancement to the warrior’s individual actions and spirit.

Similes are so important a device for Homer that it is possible to analyze his compositional technique in corresponding settings. This study will provide constant comparisons of parallel similes, long and short, peaceful or warlike, traditionally placed or seemingly unique in their position, repeated or sole exemplars. In addition, earlier analyses defining the methods of a poet raised in the oral tradition can be applied to the similes. They are not ready-made sparkly sequins to be attached to the narrative when the story slows, nor are they necessarily contemporary scenes from the poet’s own world. The Homeric simile is so limited in its variety of actions and yet repeated sufficiently that it enables one to identify modifications designed by the poet to match different narrative situations. There are enough examples of parallel scenes to establish with some accuracy the poet’s talent in manipulating and adapting Homeric language and structure. A continued awareness of the open communication between poet and audience allows a closer approach to the artistry of Homer himself.

THE USEFULNESS OF BOOK DIVISIONS

In studying the interdependency of the similes and their larger narrative contexts—thus, how a simile fits into its “book”—I have tried to select the books where the number of similes is the greatest. Stanley’s chart shows the density of similes in the books of the Iliad; the highest is in books 2, 3, 4, 5, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 21, and 22.23 I will consider all except books 3, 4, and 15. I omit these because I have organized the discussion of simile-rich books by function:
Chapter 3 (books 2, 11, 21, and 22):
Similes that aid in the delineation of character and plot

Chapter 4 (books 12, 5, Ody. 5, and Ody. 22):
Similes as markers in shifting scenes

Chapter 5 (books 13, 17, and 16):
Problematic books

In addition, I have ordered each chapter to show the clearest examples of the various functions of the simile within the narrative. Thus books 2, 12, and 13 provide the clearest models of similes used to support narrative strategies. In books 3, 4, and 15 the similes do occur in traditional places but do not seem to accompany the development of major themes. An example would be the series of similes in Agamemnon’s review of the Greek troops in book 4. It is common for a character to be given a simile when he is introduced into the narrative. In his march through the troops Agamemnon comes upon some Greeks who are not arming (fawns, 243), Idomeneus (boar, 253), and the Ajaxes and their soldiers (goatherd seeing a coming whirlwind, 275). These similes are placed where the tradition suggests the simile as one among many options and their subjects seem appropriate for the men described. However, they do not relate meaningfully with the earlier similes of the star (Athena, 75), the mother brushing away the fly (Athena, 130), or the woman staining ivory (Menelaus, 141). Because they lack compelling organization I have chosen to omit these books from major discussion because I cannot find narrative strategies that are equally compelling as those in the other simile-rich books.

At this point it is necessary to raise a problem. This study of eleven chosen books depends on demonstrating how closely the design of the similes follows broader thematic developments in each narrative section. For such a discussion it is necessary to identify the major structural units in the Iliad and Odyssey. Book 2 is designed differently than book 1: the locale changes, the entrance of Agamemnon’s dream starts off a new series of actions, the focus shifts from individuals to larger groups, and the number of similes increases markedly. Although such contrasts make it easy to assume that most books contain a separately designed unit, it is impossible simply to accept the current book divisions as precise designators of Homer’s narrative plan. Often the divisions do not seem reliable: some seem arbitrary, yet others clearly represent authentic breaks in the story that the poet has marked as his own.

The division between Iliad 1 and 2 seems to me unquestionably authentic,
while that between *Iliad* 2 and 3 seems a matter of personal judgment. But the situation is even more confusing when one considers the number of books which end with scenes that suggest a natural break, such as “going to bed” and “having a meal”; the book division might occur with equal probability somewhere in the preceding fifty lines or in the following fifty lines in the next book. Such “endings” often seem to depend on an unverifiable feeling that the number of lines is close to what a normal book should have; there is no narrative reason to pick one of these break points over another.

There have been several good suggestions for understanding the traditional book divisions by incorporating them into patterns that reflect larger systems. Stanley analyzes them as signs of a late switch from orality to a written text. Heiden shifts the focus from narrative moments to the completion of a significant structure: “The placement of marked ‘book divisions’ in the *Iliad* follows a consistent pattern. It draws needed attention to scenes of high consequence for the story, as well as to scenes that invite thoughtful retrospection, and it encloses passages of narrative that are fairly coherent, although less so than some modern scholars find satisfying.” Jensen presented her own version of more mechanical factors underlying the division of the poems into books, and her statement was followed by other scholars’ responses.

Rather than trying to settle this problem, I will use the customary book divisions as guides while not insisting that they authoritatively define the beginning and end points of basic narrative units comprising each of the epics. My assumption is that both poems are built from a collection of tales, each of which centers on an individual narrative that tells its story in its own way. In other words, I will use the traditional book numbers as shorthand to identify a particular segment of the narrative while not attempting to justify the precise beginning and ending of that segment. Often adding twenty more lines (or even fifty) to the preceding book or taking twenty lines off the beginning of the book will not appreciably affect the discussion. I will treat the book divisions as suggestions that a unit is beginning somewhere in that area.

Let me illustrate the type of argumentation this compromise facilitates by discussing the difficulty in determining the division between books 5 and 6 of the *Iliad*. The question is clear: does the current book division mark precisely — or even suggest imprecisely — the boundary of two integral units, or does the aristeia of Diomedes continue into book 6 to be joined to the scene where he confronts Glaucus?
I will argue later that book 5 is a carefully constructed book in many ways, including the placement, subject, and extension of the similes. There are 21 similes in the 909 lines of book 5, or an average of one simile in every 43 lines; in book 6 there are 4 similes in 509 lines, or a comparable average of one simile every 127 lines. (If the length of the similes is calculated, 5.8 percent of lines in book 5 are similes vs. 1.7 percent in book 6.) In addition, in the initial 236 lines of the Glaucus-Diomedes scene there are no similes. On this evidence alone there seems a difference in the design of the two books; but the establishment of this difference is not dependent on book 5 ending at line 909, or at book 6.37, or later at 6.66, or at 6.72.\textsuperscript{30} I feel that the contrast in the density of similes reflects a shift in the subject and theme of the two books. Book 5, the aristeia of Diomedes, is centered on his attacks on Aphrodite and Ares; book 6 is one where warriors refuse to fight and instead turn to broader considerations of family and friends;\textsuperscript{31} Diomedes refuses to fight Glaucus, and Hector leaves the battle to visit his mother, sister-in-law, and wife. The book then closes with the return of Hector and Paris to battle. Thus the division between these two books signals a significant change in subject and style, and that change can be analyzed without insisting on the authenticity of the division at precisely 5.909.